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LAKOTA RELIGION AND TRAGEDY: 
THE THEOLOGY OF BLACK ELK SPEAKS

CLYDE HOLLER

John G. Neihardt’s *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (1932) is a literary work with considerable significance for the study of native American religion and culture. Black Elk (1863–1950) was a Lakota holy man (*wicasa wakan*) who matured in the twilight of the plains Indian culture, witnessed the events leading to the denouement of the Indian Wars at Wounded Knee in December 1890, and participated in the Ghost Dance, the great revitalization movement that swept the plains tribes in the last decade of the century. The historical and religious significance of *Black Elk Speaks* is thus considerable, for Black Elk provided Neihardt with a full account of his power vision and with firsthand information on Lakota religion and culture during an important period in Lakota history.

Yet major difficulties attend the appropriation of Neihardt’s narrative for scholarly purposes. Neihardt was a literary artist, not an ethnologist or comparative religionist, and *Black Elk Speaks* is not a work of scholarship. The work’s artistic virtues and its scholarly shortcomings are opposite sides of the same coin; each is a necessary function of the other. On the one hand, Neihardt created a genuine literary work of art that has had much wider circulation than any work of ethnography or religious scholarship and has done much to increase understanding and appreciation of traditional Lakota religion and culture. As a literary artist, Neihardt was able to present Black Elk’s story in the context of a sympathetic and gripping portrait of Black Elk himself and the traditional culture that nurtured him. This artful combination of authentic information, deep human interest, and literary quality has made the work a widely used classic in courses in literature, anthropology, and religion.

On the other hand, Neihardt’s literary reshaping of the Black Elk interviews raises important questions. In order to create a work of literature from the materials of the interviews, Neihardt necessarily sacrificed

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strict fidelity to the chronology and actual wording of the interviews (McCluskey: 238–39). But Neihardt made more substantial changes as well. A comparison of the transcript of the interviews with the finished work reveals that Neihardt omitted certain aspects of Black Elk’s vision that concerned military conquest and destruction (Castro: 123–25). This sort of change is no longer merely stylistic in nature and clearly reveals the problematic dimension of *Black Elk Speaks*. In this particular case, Neihardt’s omission of an important element of Black Elk’s power vision affects not only our understanding of Black Elk, but also our understanding of the role of the *wicaša wakan* in Lakota religion. And Neihardt’s creative and editorial changes are more extensive than previous studies suggest. This paper will show that Neihardt sacrificed strict reporting of Black Elk’s theological convictions in order to express his own. There is thus a significant difference between the theology of Black Elk and the theology attributed to him in *Black Elk Speaks*. The ultimate message of the book, not merely its details, is Neihardt’s, not Black Elk’s.

Americanists need to know what was said by Black Elk and what was added by Neihardt. This can be determined in part by comparison of the unpublished transcripts of the Black Elk interviews with the final text of *Black Elk Speaks*. But the transcript itself, as a written document, is already at one remove from Black Elk and the traditional Lakota world. In a real sense it is a product of the collaboration between Neihardt and Black Elk: it is already a coauthored document. Before turning to the transcript, then, it is necessary to look behind it to its context in the Lakota world, and especially to Black Elk’s reason for collaborating with Neihardt in the first place. This purpose is expressed in the various rituals that Black Elk performed in the process of accepting Neihardt as a disciple and transmitting his sacred knowledge and power to him. The critical task thus begins, not with the transcript, but with the initial meeting between Neihardt and Black Elk at which the collaboration was contracted. The ritual context of the interviews themselves must also be considered, since Black Elk’s theology is expressed as much in ritual as in the words contained in the transcript. The significant differences between Neihardt’s and Black Elk’s theology can then be further established through direct comparison of the transcript with *Black Elk Speaks*. Since the purpose of this paper is to evaluate the importance of Neihardt’s creative and editorial changes for the study of Lakota religion, the critical task culminates in a reconsideration of the place of *Black Elk Speaks* in the study of native American religion.

I

In order to delineate the nature of each man’s contribution to *Black Elk Speaks*, it is necessary to describe fully the way in which the work
came into being. John G. Neihardt (1881–1973) was an epic poet and short-story writer whose subject was America during the period of Western expansion. Neihardt did not intend to write Black Elk Speaks when he first contacted Black Elk in August 1930, but was instead collecting material for his poetic magnum opus, A Cycle of the West. He had already published three of the eventual five books of the cycle and was working on The Song of the Messiah, which describes the effect of the Ghost Dance on the Sioux and the events at Wounded Knee in 1890. The poet and his son went to Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in the hopes of finding an old medicine man who might be willing to talk about the Ghost Dance (1979:xv). Neihardt learned of Black Elk from the agent-in-charge at Pine Ridge, who told him that Black Elk had been important in the Ghost Dance. Neihardt found a translator, Flying Hawk, and the group set off to try their luck with Black Elk. The poet was aware that he would need luck, for the knowledge of a holy man was traditionally considered sacred, and not shared with outsiders.

The significant cross-cultural aspects of the collaboration between Neihardt and Black Elk that produced Black Elk Speaks are immediately evident in Neihardt’s accounts of his initial meeting with Black Elk. To begin with, Black Elk impressed his visitors by appearing to be expecting them. This and similar experiences convinced Neihardt that Black Elk had “supernormal powers” (1979:xvii).¹ Neihardt was conversant enough with Sioux culture to have brought cigarettes, and the group smoked together, thus establishing the appropriate context for the meeting. According to Neihardt, Black Elk announced that he could feel in Neihardt a strong will to know the things of the other world and that a spirit standing behind Neihardt had compelled him to come so that Black Elk could teach him (1930:95). Since Neihardt had thus been sent by the spirits, Black Elk was willing to instruct him despite the traditional taboo. Black Elk then presented Neihardt with a representation of the morning star, the symbol of the wisdom and sacred knowledge of the Lakotas: “Here you see the Morning Star. Who sees the Morning Star shall see more, for he shall be wise” (1979:xvii). After explaining the symbolism of this sacred ornament, which he had worn while officiating at the Sun Dance, Black Elk began to speak of his power vision, deflecting Neihardt’s questions about the original subject of his visit, Sioux history (1930:96, 1979:xvii–xviii). Finally Black Elk announced that Neihardt had been sent to save his sacred knowledge for men, and asked

¹ The substitution of “supernatural” for “supernormal” in the Pocket Books edition (1972) is evidently a misprint, since the other editions mentioning this episode (1961a, 1979) have “supernormal,” as does the reprint of the Pocket Books Introduction in Western American Literature 6/4:227–30. Special thanks are due Hilda Neihardt Petrie for permission to quote from the Neihardt Papers.
Neihardt to return in the spring, which was the appropriate time to receive his instruction (1979:xvii).

Black Elk’s words and actions seem so odd from the point of view of European culture that one scholar has suggested that Neihardt simply invented the account of his initial meeting with Black Elk in order to serve his own literary ends (Brumble, 1981:28–29). But it is important to realize that Neihardt’s visit to Black Elk set in motion a ritual process that must be interpreted with due sensitivity to Lakota cultural conventions. Neihardt approached Black Elk for help in the traditional way a Lakota holy man is approached, with the offer of tobacco (opagi). By smoking with Neihardt, Black Elk accepted the commission Neihardt brought him. Within this ritual context, Black Elk’s style of speaking is natural and appropriate, for, in the context of Lakota culture, Black Elk’s words and actions convey specific ritual messages. William K. Powers’s ethnographic narrative, Yuwipi, gives an account of the dialogue between Plenty Wolf, a modern Lakota holy man, and Wayne Runs Again, a person seeking Plenty Wolf’s services for the healing ritual called Yuwipi. Powers makes it clear that Plenty Wolf does not know Wayne Runs Again is coming, and, because of failing eyesight, even has to ask his wife who is at the gate. Yet, in a striking parallel to Neihardt’s account, when Wayne greets Plenty Wolf with a ritual greeting (Hau Tunkašila, Hau Grandfather) instead of the conventional one (Hau kola, Hau friend), Plenty Wolf too acts as if he knew Wayne was coming, and speaks of spirit presences:

Wayne came closer so he could be recognized, and the old man greeted him with “Hau Takoja,” Hau Grandson, the appropriate ritual response. “They said you would come,” he said in Lakota, and this astonished Wayne. “The spirits,” Plenty Wolf added in English, and laughed a “he-he-he” not in keeping with the dignity of his vocation. . . . Wayne was flustered because the old man had expected him, and he tried to explain his reason in Lakota but faltered. . . . Plenty Wolf was patient. He said,

2 Brumble’s larger position is that accounts like Neihardt’s are essentially rationalizations for the use or exploitation of Indian sacred materials in literature, and are hence always suspect (1980). This position leads Brumble to deny that Black Elk took the initiative in the initial meeting with Neihardt, and ultimately to imply that Black Elk did not take an active role in the collaboration at all (1981:29). I argue instead that Neihardt’s account in itself is plausible, when considered in the context of Lakota cultural conventions, and that Black Elk indeed had a genuine and comprehensible theological motive for collaborating with Neihardt and was not merely a passive “informant.”

3 Opagi (he fills the pipe) refers to the custom of commissioning a ritual by taking a filled pipe (or, in modern times, a cigarette) to the holy man. The smoking of the pipe by the holy man is a binding contract to perform the service requested (Twiss: 15; Kemnitzer, 1970:51). Walker (1979:63) describes this use of the pipe to obtain a mentor for the Sun Dance, indicating that the pipe was probably used to contract master/disciple relationships of the sort that pertained between Black Elk and Neihardt.
"Smoke first. Cannunpa." . . . After they had smoked Plenty Wolf asked the boy what was troubling him.\(^{(38)}\)

It is important to realize that Plenty Wolf is not necessarily claiming literal precognition, but is instead continuing the traditional dialogue initiated by the proper ritual greetings. The intention of this dialogue, and indeed the intention of the entire Yuwipi ritual, is to relate the client's actions to the traditional values of Lakota religion.\(^{4}\) This ritual dialogue thus serves both to establish and to confirm the proper relationship of the holy man to the person seeking his services and to the powers of the other world. As Harold H. Oliver's studies in the hermeneutic of myth have shown, the intention of mythical speech is "relational," not "referential" (1980, 1981:182–84).\(^{5}\) Thus understood, Plenty Wolf's speech does not mean "there exist spirits who informed me of your arrival" (referential), but rather "your coming is appropriate" (relational). Since right relationship is perhaps the central principle of native American, and especially Sioux, religion (Brown: 32), it is not surprising that the Lakota holy man speaks in such a way as to place his transaction with his client, the person seeking his aid or instruction, in a relational (sacred) context, by relating their actions to the other world of the spirits.

Powers's modern ethnography thus confirms several significant aspects of Neihardt's account of his initial meeting with Black Elk. Both holy men "seem to know" that their visitors are coming and both speak of spirit presences—one with a laugh that acknowledges the referential absurdity of such speech.\(^{6}\) In both cases, cigarettes are smoked before serious discussion begins, to establish right relationship through ritual. Since Powers is reporting on the contracting of a Yuwipi ritual, and not a master/disciple relationship, the parallels between Plenty Wolf's and Black Elk's actions end at this point. But these parallels indicate that Neihardt's reports are ethnographically credible, making his unfortunately fragmentary accounts of his initiation one of the best available

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\(^{4}\) For anthropological interpretations of the intention of Yuwipi, see Powers (1982:5–19) and Kemnitzer (1976).

\(^{5}\) "The world of myth is pre-subjective/objective . . . the most accurate descriptive term to characterize it is 'relational.' That is to say: its message is not that the beings of the narrative exist, or existed, independently of each other, whether men or gods; it is rather that their existence was a co-existence. The beings, human and divine, are 'character-izations' in a relational drama" (1981:183). I have here extended Oliver's insight that myths and statements of belief based on them intend to "image reality as relatedness" (1980:78) as applying to the intentionality of religious ritual as well.

\(^{6}\) Feraca (35) reports that the assistant at a Yuwipi he attended joked afterwards that the spirits who (supposedly) had untied the Yuwipi man placed the thongs in his pocket. Accounts of Yuwipi rituals regularly mention joking about the actions of the spirits (Kemnitzer, 1976:270), indicating that a referential or literal view of the spirits is not held by all Sioux who attend these rituals.
descriptions of the master/disciple relationship in traditional Lakota culture. It is important to note that if there is a charge of dissembling for effect to be made here, it must be laid at Black Elk's door, and not Neihardt's, though Neihardt encourages this charge by his referential misinterpretation of Black Elk's speech and action as evidence of his possession of supernormal powers. But the appearance of dishonesty is dispelled by the realization that Black Elk's speech reflects traditional ritual formulas that are still in use today, and by the realization that the intention of ritual speech is relational and not referential.

In any case, Neihardt's account of the initial meeting calls attention to the important cross-cultural aspects of the ensuing collaboration between Black Elk and Neihardt. In accord with their different cultural backgrounds, each man conceived the project differently. Black Elk agreed to give Neihardt sacred instruction; Neihardt proposed to write a book. The collaborators thus understood each other's viewpoint only to a certain extent, although it would be incorrect to assume that Black Elk did not understand the basic nature and function of literature. This was 1930, not 1860, and Black Elk's son, Ben Black Elk, the translator for the project, had been to the Carlisle Indian School and was thus in a position to explain Neihardt's intentions to Black Elk. But the idea of writing Black Elk's life story was certainly Neihardt's, as is indicated by a transcript of stenographic notes for a letter from Neihardt to Black Elk of 6 November 1931:

After talking with you four and a half hours and thinking over many things you told me, I feel that the whole story of your life ought to be written truthfully by somebody with the right feeling and understanding of your people and of their great history. My idea is to come back to the reservation next spring, probably in April, and have a number of meetings with you and your old friends. . . .

I would want you to tell the story of your life beginning at the beginning and going straight through to Wounded Knee. . . . This would make a complete story of your people since your childhood.

So, you see, this book would be not only the story of your life, but the story of the life of your people. The fact that you have been both a warrior and a medicine man would be of great help in writing the book, because both religion and war are of great importance in history. (1979:277–78)

7 J. R. Walker's account of his initiation as a medicine man and holy man supplements Neihardt's account (1980:46–9).
8 Neihardt's biographer reports that he had a continuing interest in psychic phenomena, and regularly visited mediums, despite some skepticism (Aly: 169).
9 Brumble, reading the phrase "my idea" as referring both to the timing of the visit and to the idea of writing Black Elk Speaks, takes this transcript as proof that Neihardt's account of his initial meeting with Black Elk was fabricated (1981:29). I take Neihardt's
Neihardt’s idea was thus to tell the history of the Sioux to Wounded Knee through Black Elk’s own life story. Black Elk evidently accepted this proposal, although, as his actions at the initial meeting show, his intention was actually to initiate Neihardt into the sacred knowledge that was his as a holy man. In fact, by revealing his power vision to Neihardt, Black Elk was in a traditional sense giving his actual power to Neihardt.\(^\text{10}\) In sharing his vision with Neihardt, Black Elk was doing something new and purposive. According to Charles Alexander Eastman, “sometimes an old man, standing upon the brink of eternity, might reveal to a chosen few the oracle of his long-past youth” (1980:9). But Black Elk was revealing his vision to another entire culture, not to a chosen few. Even J. R. Walker’s informants did not choose to go this far (Walker, 1980:67). In order to understand Black Elk’s motives and theological intention in allowing Neihardt to transform his sacred instruction into a book, it is necessary to consider the rituals Black Elk performed in the process of transmitting his power vision to Neihardt.

II

The interviews on which *Black Elk Speaks* is based took place from 10 May to 28 May 1931 (Fink). In accord with the traditional understanding of the project as the initiation of Neihardt into knowledge sacred to the Lakotas, Black Elk had made ritual preparations for Neihardt’s visit, including the erecting of a ceremonial tipi decorated with sacred symbols, and the planting of a ring of pine trees around Black Elk’s cabin (1979:xix). Like J. R. Walker (1980:68), Neihardt was required to give a feast, which included kill talks, a speech by Black Elk, and various dances. The sacred pipe was smoked. Since Black Elk’s instruction could not be given to outsiders, Neihardt and his two daughters, Enid and Hilda, were adopted into the tribe and given Lakota names. Neihardt’s name was Flaming Rainbow (*Peyta-Wigmou-Ge*), after the rainbow door to the Grandfathers in Black Elk’s great vision.

\(^{10}\) “At various times Black Elk began melancholy over the thought that at last we had given away his great feast, and once exceeding to me ‘Now I have given you my vision that I have never given to anyone before and with out I have given you my power. I have no power now, but you can take it and perhaps the with you can make the tree bloom again, at least for my children and for yours’” (Letter to Morrow, 21 June 1931). I have not attempted to emend the texts of this and other letters transcribed in 1980 from stenographic notes by Enid Volnia Neihardt Fink.
This name thus symbolized the role Neihardt was to play in writing *Black Elk Speaks*, which Black Elk hoped would be a doorway to his great vision and thus to the wisdom of the Grandfathers. Black Elk also presented Neihardt with a representation of the sacred hoop of the world\(^\text{11}\) and a sacred pipe that had been passed from father to son in his family, symbolizing his adoption of Neihardt as his spiritual son or nephew (Castro: 118).

The interviews, like the initial meeting, thus took place in a traditional ritual context. Black Elk’s instruction of Neihardt was a matter of public concern to the tribe, and the feast served to set the interviews in the context of the community, with the active presence and support of distinguished elders, some of whom (Fire Thunder, Standing Bear, Iron Hawk) assisted Black Elk in providing additional information during the interviews. It is important to realize that this indicates that while Neihardt was acting as a private individual, Black Elk acted as the representative of his tribe in instructing Neihardt in Lakota sacred knowledge. This is the key to understanding the collaboration from Black Elk’s perspective. Black Elk hoped that his people as a whole would benefit from Neihardt’s book, which would increase understanding of traditional Lakota religion and lifeways, symbolized by the flowering tree in the center of the Sun Dance circle.\(^\text{12}\) By instructing Neihardt, Black Elk understands himself to be carrying on his vision-given role as the intercessor for his people, whose responsibility it is to make the tree flower for the people.\(^\text{13}\) This is made clear in an important ritual (omitted in

\(^\text{11}\) Kemnitzer (1970:59–60) describes these hoops, which were associated with the Sun Dance and Ghost Dance, as well as having many other ritual uses. Neihardt (1979:288) prints a picture of Black Elk, Neihardt, Hilda Neihardt, and Chase in the Morning outfitted to play hoop and spear, a game associated with the Ghost Dance as well as with revival of Indian ways (Mooney: 310,399,245).

\(^\text{12}\) Black Elk explains the symbolism of the flowering stick thus in the transcript: “This stick will take care of the people and at the same time it will multiply. We live under it like chickens under the wing. They live under their flowering stick like under the wing of a hen. Depending on the sacred stick we shall walk and it will be with them always. From this they will raise their children and under the flowering stick they will communicate with their relatives—beast and bird—as one people. This is the center of the life of the nation. The sacred stick is the cottonwood tree. . . . The nation represents this tree. This tree never had a chance to bloom, because the white man came” (1931:Folder NR20, 18).

\(^\text{13}\) Black Elk explains his role as intercessor thus in the transcript: “I had been appointed by my vision to be an intercessor of my people with the Spirit powers and concerning that I had decided that sometime in the future I’d bring my people out of the Black Road into the Red Road. . . . I am just telling you this, Mr. Neihardt, you know how I felt and what I really wanted to do, is for us to make that tree bloom. On this tree we shall prosper. Therefore my children and his are relative like and therefore we shall go back into the hoop and here we’ll cooperate and stand as one. This is why I want to go to Harney Peak, because here I will send the voices to the six grandfathers” (1931:Folder NR27, 116–17). See also Fools Crow’s discussion of his role as intercessor in the Sun Dance (Mails: 118–38).
Black Elk Speaks) that clearly expresses the communal nature of Black Elk’s intention in collaborating with Neihardt. This ceremony both reveals Black Elk’s deeper motives for collaborating on the book and indicates that he held high hopes for its success. The group was looking across the Badlands toward the Black Hills when Black Elk expressed the hope that the book would cause the sacred tree of his vision to flower for both the Lakotas and the whites:

The more I talk about these things the more I think of old times and it makes me feel sad, but I hope that we can make the tree bloom for your children and for mine. We know each other now and from now on we will be like relatives and we have been that sofar, but we will think of that deeply and set that remembrance down deep in our hearts not just thinly, but deeply in our hearts it should be marked. From here we can see the Black Hills and the high peak to which I was taken to see the whole world and showed me the good things and when I think of that, it was hopeless it seems before I saw you, but here you came. Somehow the spirits have made you come to revive the tree that never bloomed. We see here the strange lands of the world and on this side you see the greenness of the world and down there the wide-ness of the world. The colors of the earth. And you will set them in your mind. This is my land. Someday we’ll be here again; thus I will do a little prayer before we go home and you will have that down in your heart that you will make a success out of this. (Neihardt, 1931: Folder NR26, 96)

Black Elk goes on to say that he will name this section of land “Remem-brance Butte” so that these things will be remembered when the land is given to his children. Neihardt and his daughters then stood on one side and Ben Black Elk on the other, to represent the transmission of Black Elk’s vision and sacred knowledge from the Lakota world to the white world. Black Elk then prayed for the success of the book and for peace and understanding between the Lakotas and the whites:

Hey-a-a-hey. Hey-a-a-hey. Hey-a-a-hey. Hey-a-a-hey. Grandfa-ther, the Great Spirit, behold us on earth, the two-leggeds. The flowering stick that you have given to me has not bloomed and my people are in despair. To where the sun goes down to the six grandfathers where you have placed them, thus guarding the whole universe and the guidance of all beings. And to the center of the earth you have set a sacred stick that should bloom, but it failed. But, nevertheless, grandfathers, behold it and guide us, you have beheld us. I, myself, Black Elk and my nephew, Mr. Neihardt. Thus the tree may bloom. Oh, hear me, Grandfathers, and help us, that our generation in the future will live and walk the Good Road with the flowering stick to success. Also, the pipe of peace we will offer it as we walk the Good Road to success. Hear me, and hear our plea. (1931: Folder NR26, 97).

Black Elk expressed the same wish in his final ritual on Harney Peak.
After beseeching the Grandfathers to hear his voice and make the sacred tree flower, Black Elk offered the pipe in behalf of both Lakotas and whites: "Grandfathers, behold this pipe. In behalf of my children and also my nephews' children I offer this pipe, that we may see many happy days" (1931: Folder NR26, 100).

These rituals, in addition to expressing Black Elk's hope that his teaching would help the Lakotas and whites walk the Good Road of peace together, express the great responsibility now devolving on Neihardt. Black Elk hoped that by giving his power vision to Neihardt, the traditional religion and lifeways of the Lakotas would be respected by all people, and the sacred tree would thus flower in the new context of the world in which both Lakotas and whites must live together. These rituals thus reflect the way in which traditional societies control the use of sacred knowledge, by restricting its use to responsible parties bound by ties of kinship, discipleship, and religious obligation. In addition to the information he had come to gain, Neihardt had new ties of kinship to the Oglalas, of discipleship to Black Elk, and of religious obligation to the Grandfathers, all binding him to a sensitive and appropriate use of Lakota sacred materials.

But what was the proper use of this material in the very different cultural context of English literature? Black Elk could tell Neihardt of his hopes for the book, but he could not tell him how to realize them in the different context of literate expression. Enid Neihardt had taken extensive shorthand notes of the interviews, and she quickly provided Neihardt with a typescript (1931). Neihardt thus had an accurate record of Black Elk's words, as translated by Ben Black Elk. The major decision Neihardt had to make was how to shape this material most effectively. Neihardt could have published the transcript more or less verbatim, in the manner of ethnographic interviews, but as a literary man, Neihardt was not sympathetic with ethnography. So his first decision was tacit: Black Elk Speaks would be literature, not ethnography. Neihardt could have chosen to cast the work in the form of either biography or autobiography, since he wished to set Black Elk's life story in the context of the

14 J. R. Walker comments, "When it was deemed that I was sufficiently instructed relative to the customs, usages, and ceremonies of the Oglalas I was required to dance the Holy Dance with the holy men. This was considered as obligating me to hold as sacred the mystic lore of the holy men and then they taught it to me" (1980:48).

15 Neihardt refers to Mooney's work on the Ghost Dance negatively, saying that Wovoka's story was "numerically investigated for the Government and care as much as a pulpy option investigator could be expected" and that "if I do not write the story of Wovoka it will never be known truthfully, and I think the truth should be told about this man" (Letter to Putnam, 13 August 1935). At another point, Neihardt says, in reference to Black Elk's vision, "it is a faction that none of the ethnologists know anything about this Indian masterpiece" (Letter to Morrow, 21 June 1931).
Indian Wars. Neihardt’s decision to write in the first person, to tell Black Elk’s life story as autobiography, is responsible for much of the power of the book. But this decision also introduced another cross-cultural factor, since autobiography, unlike biography, clearly implies that the point of view on the life being told is that of the speaker (Black Elk), not the collaborator.\footnote{For the problems associated with “Indian autobiography,” see Brumble (1981) and O’Brien.} The reader of Black Elk Speaks is thus dependent on Neihardt’s integrity and cross-cultural sensitivity, for Black Elk was not in a position to read and correct the manuscript before publication, as is usual in “as told to” autobiography. Neihardt was aware of these problems, but he was clearly confident that he understood Black Elk’s intentions and faithfully mediated them to the white reader, despite the creative function he necessarily performed in the collaboration:

*Black Elk Speaks* is a work of art with two collaborators, the chief one being Black Elk. My function was both creative and editorial. I think he knew the kind of person I was when I came to see him—I am referring to the mystical strain in me and all my work... And I think he knew I was the tool—no, the medium—he needed for what he wanted to get said. And my attitude toward what he has said to me is one of religious obligation.

But it is absurd to suppose that the use of the first person singular is not a literary device, by which I mean that Black Elk did not sit and tell me his story in chronological order. At times considerable editing was necessary, but it was always worth the editing. The beginning and the ending are mine; they are what he would have said if he had been able. At times I changed a word, a sentence, sometimes created a paragraph. And the translation—or rather the *transformation*—of what was given me was expressed so that it could be understood by the white world. (McCluskey: 238–39)

Neihardt also expressed this confidence in a striking way by changing, in 1961, the author’s credit from “as told to John G. Neihardt” to “as told through John G. Neihardt.”

The extent to which Neihardt’s confidence in his transformation of Black Elk’s words from their Lakota context to the context of English literature is justified can be judged by comparison of *Black Elk Speaks* to Enid Neihardt’s transcript of the actual interviews, which now exists in two versions.\footnote{The first transcription (1931) is the one Neihardt used to make the rough draft of *Black Elk Speaks*. The second transcription (1980) is a retranscription by Enid Volnia Neihardt Fink of her original stenographic notes. The nature of shorthand transcription is such that many errors have crept into (1980), so that (1981) must be considered authoritative with respect to actual wording. The 1980 transcript contains some additional material and is useful in reconstructing the chronology of the interviews, since the 1931 transcript has been arranged in the order Neihardt chose to use in *Black Elk Speaks*.} The first point to emerge from examination of the
transcripts is that Black Elk’s words have at this point already begun to be divorced from their ritual context, which can be reconstructed only partially from Enid Neihardt’s diary (Fink), occasional indications in the transcripts, various letters, and Neihardt’s fragmentary statements about the collaboration. The severing of Black Elk’s words from their ritual context is the first giant step away from the Lakota world in which Black Elk’s instruction took place. The loss of the full ritual context of the interviews is the greatest loss attributable to Neihardt’s lack of anthropological training. It evidently did not occur to him that ritual description was relevant, and his cross-cultural sensitivity seems to fail him to a certain extent with respect to ritual.18 (The portions of the transcript covering the feast are especially disappointing and fragmentary.) To the extent that Black Elk’s words are divorced in the transcript from their communal ritual context, Black Elk has already become the subject of a modern autobiography, a (European) “I.”

As far as Neihardt’s actual editing of the words preserved in the transcripts is concerned, it is worth noting that Neihardt utilized most of the material in the transcript, though he did omit certain portions likely to interfere with the favorable reception of the book by its intended audience. Thus he omits the part of Black Elk’s account of the giving of the sacred pipe to the Lakotas that describes the birth of an old woman from a buffalo, some of the kill talks, a story of a priest who died soon after interfering with a traditional ritual, a portion of Black Elk’s account of his vision dealing with a “soldier weed” to be used to wipe out the whites, and Black Elk’s mention of his Catholicism.19 The chronological organization of the transcript, as judged by comparison of the 1980 to the 1931 transcript (which is in the order used in Black Elk Speaks) reveals that Neihardt reorganized the transcript for greatest

18 “Black Elk’s great vision is truly a masterpiece of art. Unfortunately for us, can closure the Sioux never past the stage of times ritual in expression. They never developed literature in our sense and the only property made for expressing this great vision which is a thing of beauty and is though will be in the times” (Letter to Morrow, 21 June 1931). “As you know, Indian culture did not develop beyond the dance and the litigation and what we have here something 10th behind of his in culture evaluation, but in no way behind us as to a pity and meaning” (Letter to House, n.d.).

19 Steinmetz refers to Black Elk as one of the “great Catholic catechists on the Pine Ridge Reservation” (20), and Fools Crow reports that Black Elk spent hours talking to the priests about Catholicism, finally deciding that the Sioux religious way of life and the Christian religion were compatible (Mails: 45). Schwarz is thus in error in concluding that since Black Elk “does not appear to have had any significant exposure to White religion” his ideas can be taken without further ado as those of traditional Sioux culture (62). Black Elk’s position with respect to Christianity was that Christianity and traditional Lakota religion are essentially identical, and his discussions of traditional Lakota ritual, which are directed toward demonstrating this assertion, in fact presuppose considerable familiarity with Christian doctrine (Black Elk, 1953:xix–xx).
chronological coherence and dramatic effect. The diction of the transcript is rough in places, as the excerpts above indicate, and Neihardt exercised his literary art in order to create a graceful and dignified English idiom for Black Elk, which, according to McCluskey, echoes the King James Version of the Bible (241). These editorial and stylistic changes account for much of the beauty and power of the book and are enough to establish that Black Elk Speaks is a literary work and not merely a record of Black Elk’s words. But Neihardt’s account of Black Elk’s involvement in the Ghost Dance reveals that his transformation of the Black Elk interviews into a work of literature had an interpretive dimension as well, so that the ultimate message and theology of Black Elk Speaks—and not merely the chronology and diction—are Neihardt’s, not Black Elk’s.

III

The theology of Black Elk Speaks emerges clearly from Neihardt’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance, the great revitalization movement that emanated from a vision of the Paiute Messiah, Wovoka, in 1889 and spread to most of the Western Indian tribes in a remarkably short time. As mentioned above, Neihardt’s original interest in Black Elk was as a possible informant on the Sioux form of the Ghost Dance, which was implicated in the events at Wounded Knee in 1890. Neihardt realized the broad significance of this new religion and at one time even considered doing a life of Wovoka.20 As a new religion, the Ghost Dance emerged in the context of the crushing domination of the Indian by the white man and the consequent loss of Indian autonomy and devaluation of traditional values. The Ghost Dance was nativistic, and its doctrine united many tribes that had previously been hostile or indifferent to one another in a common rite that expressed deep yearning for the traditional lifeways of the Indians. The central doctrine of the Ghost Dance, as reported by its official investigator, was “that the time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease, and misery” (Mooney: 19).21 This was to be hastened by, or at

20 “Last summer while I was living with the Ogalalas, my friend, Jumping Eagle, happen to tell me that Wovoka was still living and that he had friends who were intimate with Wovoka. Those who know the man still insist of that he has uncanny powers and I can tell you that queer things to do seem to happen around a sincerely ‘old man.’ I have wanted very much to tell Wovoka’s story because of the strangeness of it and of the human values involved. If I could get to him, I could win his confidence, unless he is unlike the other Indians’ afternoon for thirty-five years” (Letter to Putnam, 13 August 1935). See also note 15.

21 See Short Bull’s sermon and George Sword’s statement (Mooney: 30–31, 41–42). Mooney’s account can now be supplemented by several statements by Short Bull (Walker,
least anticipated in, the Ghost Dance itself, in which the dancers entered a trance and had visions of their relations already living on the regenerated earth. Wovoka had come under the influence of Christianity, as is indicated both by the pan-Indian nature of the doctrine, and by his ethical teachings, which were similar to those urged upon the Indians by Christian missionaries. Wovoka thus counseled Indians to live in peace with each other and the whites, to work for the white man, to discontinue extravagant mourning for the dead, to do right always, and to tell no lies (Mooney: 23). The question, "What will happen to the whites?" was variously decided. Some apostles taught that the whites would be destroyed, some that they would simply disappear, and some that they would become as Indians, since all race distinctions would disappear with the coming of the new earth. The Ghost Dance religion thus was both an adaptation to the white world and an attempt to revitalize traditional Indian values.

The Sioux sent emissaries to the Messiah in the fall of 1889, including Short Bull and Kicking Bear. The delegates returned in March 1890 with a favorable report (Mooney: 65–69, 80; Walker, 1980:141–43). The Ghost Dance was easily absorbed into the Sioux ritual complex, and in a short time many Sioux were dancing. The ease of acceptance of the Ghost Dance may be attributed to the fact that the Sioux had a recognized mechanism for the reception of new rituals (Black Elk, 1953:67–68, 128) and the Ghost Dance closely met these conditions: it was the product of a vision, it was investigated and validated by the elders, and, most obviously, it was a clear expression of the needs of the community. This last factor accounts for its acceptance despite the irregular circumstances involved. The Ghost Dance took on much of the symbolism of the Sun Dance, including the sacred tree at the center of the circle, clearly indicating the position of importance assigned to it by the tribe's leaders.

The situation worsened when the dancers, driven to desperation by starvation, reacted militantly to orders to stop dancing. The eventual appearance of troops called out to control the disturbances led some 3,000 Lakotas from Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, including Black Elk, to break out and flee to the Badlands. The attempted arrest of Sitting Bull, which led to his being killed while resisting arrest, increased panic among the Sioux. The outbreak was nearly under control, with the Indians who had fled to the Badlands encamped near the Pine Ridge agency, when the attempt to disarm Big Foot's band resulted in the massacre at Wounded Knee that is bitterly remembered by the Sioux today (Mooney: 88–140).

1980:141–44) and by Lame Deer's relational reading of the doctrine of the Ghost Dance (225–35).
Neihardt originally intended to tell the story of Wounded Knee in his epic Cycle of the West, but its writing was interrupted by Black Elk Speaks, which appeared in 1932. In 1935, Neihardt continued the Cycle with The Song of the Messiah, the poem Neihardt was researching when he visited Black Elk in 1930. Black Elk Speaks is thus framed by the epic cycle that led Neihardt to Black Elk, and it is against the backdrop of the Cycle that Neihardt’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance is most clearly seen. The raison d'être of the Cycle was Neihardt’s belief that the Western expansion and the Indian Wars formed an epic period in the life of the nation. In his introduction to the completed Cycle, Neihardt says that it was written “to celebrate the great mood of courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the nineteenth century” (1961b:v) and explains his use of the term “epic” to describe the westward movement of the whites:

The period with which the Cycle deals was one of discovery, exploration and settlement—a genuine epic period, differing in no essential from the other great epic periods that marked the advance of the Indo-European peoples out of Asia and across Europe. It was a time of intense individualism, a time when society was cut loose from its roots, a time when an old culture was being overcome by that of a powerful people driven by the ancient needs and greeds. For this reason only, the word “epic” has been used in connection with the Cycle; it is properly descriptive of the mood and meaning of the time and of the material with which I have worked. (1961b:v–vi)

The Cycle thus celebrates the winning of the West as an epic advance in human history: “Again the bugles of the Race blew west / That once the Tigris and Euphrates heard. / In unsuspected deeps of being stirred / The ancient and compelling Aryan urge” (1961b:2). But Neihardt also saw that this epic grandeur had a tragic side. The defeat of the Indians and the destruction of their culture was also part of the story. The Song of the Messiah tells this story by telling of the Sioux Ghost Dance and the events at Wounded Knee, which, taken together, symbolize for Neihardt the desperate resistance of the Indians to the tragic inevitability of the destruction of their traditional culture. The future of the Indians seemed to lie with assimilation. The tragedy of the Ghost Dance, as it is told in the Cycle, is that the Messiah’s original pacific teaching was perverted by the desperate and hard-pressed Sioux into a military uprising that led directly to Wounded Knee. What had been an approach to Christianity and an adaptation to the reality of white dominance became its violent rejection.

This interpretation is worked out in ways that take considerable liberties with the historical record. In The Song of the Messiah, Black Elk speaks for Neihardt by warning of the dangers of interpreting the
Ghost Dance visions as a promise of military victory, praying to the Great Spirit to give the lost ones eyes to see the truth (1961b:58). The real Black Elk, as Neihardt’s own account in *Black Elk Speaks* shows, did no such thing (1979:239–47). This is made clear when, after being warned of plans for his arrest, Black Elk makes a speech urging the Brulé not to give up the Ghost Dance, saying, “If they want to they may fight us, and if they fight us, if we are going to we will win; so have in your minds a strong desire and take courage” (1931:Folder NR28, 140–41, 1979:251–52). Since this is for Neihardt the tragic mistake, it is understandable that he wishes to dissociate Black Elk from it in *The Song of the Messiah*, attributing it instead to the people as a whole, who react militantly to the agent’s demand to stop dancing (1961b:57–58).

That this tragic mistake is a product of the blindness of the old savage religion is revealed by a Messiah vision that Neihardt provides Big Foot immediately before the massacre: “It is getting dim; / But still I see we feared and hated Him, / My children. In this blindness of the sun / Are many shadows, but the Light is one; / And even if the soldiers come to kill / The Spirit says that we must love them still, / For they are brothers” (1961b:101).

The inadequacy of the Sun Dance religion, its blindness that made the Indians fear and hate the Christ, is its warlike nature and denial of the Christian ideal of love of one’s enemies, which Neihardt here identifies with the true essence of the Ghost Dance. In Neihardt’s account of the final massacre at Wounded Knee, the death of Big Foot recalls the crucifixion, for Big Foot loves even the soldier that murders him and names him “brother” in the instant of his death (1961b:109). Again in parallel to the crucifixion, the soldiers are defeated by this Christian sacrifice, despite their apparent victory. They march away, triumphant in defeat, leaving the bloody field, on which is concealed the “Everlasting Word” of true religion (1961b:110). This word is, of course, the Word of the Gospel, “Love thine enemies,” the true message of the Messiah that Neihardt’s Black Elk and Big Foot strove in vain to inculcate. The triumph in the tragedy of Wounded Knee is that, through this tragedy, the blindness of savage religion is revealed and replaced by the message of the Christ. This exalted reading of the massacre at Wounded Knee, in which Big Foot is crucified by the militarism of Sioux culture and not by the soldiers, clearly implies that the Indian future does not lie with the revitalization of the traditional religion and values, which were discredited at Wounded Knee, but with assimilation and conversion.

In the light of Neihardt’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance in the *Cycle* as the tragic mistake of the Sioux people, it is understandable that in *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk seems clearly to repudiate the Messiah and the Ghost Dance:
We danced [the Ghost Dance] there, and another vision came to me. I saw a Flaming Rainbow, like the one I had seen in my first great vision. Below the rainbow was a tepee made of cloud. Over me there was a spotted eagle soaring, and he said to me: "Remember this." That was all I saw and heard.

I have thought much about this since, and I have thought that this was where I made my great mistake. I had had a very great vision, and I should have depended only upon that to guide me to the good. But I followed the lesser visions that had come to me while dancing on Wounded Knee Creek. The vision of the Flaming Rainbow was to warn me, maybe; and I did not understand. I did not depend upon the great vision as I should have done; I depended upon the two sticks that I had seen in the lesser vision. It is hard to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows. Among those shadows men get lost. (1979:249–50)

This is Neihardt's own interpretation of Black Elk's great and tragic mistake as his participation in the Ghost Dance outbreak that led to Wounded Knee. What Black Elk really said was quite different:

The last vision I had was in a ghost dance again. I was back here again. The only thing I saw was towards the west I saw a flaming rainbow that I had seen in the first vision. On either side of this rainbow was a cloud and right above me there was an eagle soaring, and he said to me: "Behold them, the thunderbeing nation, you are relative-like to them. Hence, remember this." During the war I was supposed to use this rainbow and the thunderbeings but I did not do it. I only depended on the two sticks that I had gotten from the vision. I used the red stick.

It seems to me on thinking it over that I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself. All through this I depended on my Messiah vision whereas perhaps I should have depended on my first great vision which had more power and this might have been where I made my great mistake. (1931: Folder NR28, 138–39).

Neihardt's Black Elk regrets joining the Ghost Dance; the real Black Elk regrets not using a more powerful vision against the whites. Neihardt's omission of the phrase "I have seen the son of the Great Spirit himself" (the Messiah) is consistent with Neihardt's omission of Black Elk's explicit claim to have invented the ghost shirt ("So I started the ghost shirt") and to have been the chief ghost dancer (1931:Folder NR28, 134, 139). It is, of course, unlikely that Black Elk would have mentioned or invented these details if he had in fact repudiated the Messiah, and Black Elk nowhere indicates that he is ashamed of the militant role that he actually played in the Ghost Dance disturbances. Neihardt is able to

22 Neither Lame Deer's account (231) nor the documents collected by Mooney (179) attribute the invention of the ghost shirt to Black Elk. In view of the events at Wounded Knee, it is remarkable that Black Elk claimed responsibility for the ghost shirt.
imply that Black Elk was unfaithful to the original vision by converting to the Ghost Dance only because he has already omitted the warlike and destructive aspects of the great vision itself, with its “soldier weed” that Black Elk was to use to wipe out the whites (Castro: 123–25). The great vision was, if anything, more militant than the Messiah vision. In both these instances, Neihardt omits or alters statements that indicate that Black Elk was affected by the blindness Neihardt discerns in traditional Lakota religion.

The literary strategy of *Black Elk Speaks* becomes clear when considered in the light of Neihardt’s belief that the militant perversion of the Ghost Dance was the tragic mistake of the Sioux people. As Neihardt’s letter of 6 November 1930 shows, it was his intention to use the Black Elk interviews to tell the story of the Sioux people, and *Black Elk Speaks* thus takes Black Elk’s life to be symbolic of the life of the entire Sioux nation. The literary means to this end was Neihardt’s creation of a beginning and ending for the book setting Black Elk’s life in the larger context of Sioux history, thus establishing the symbolic interpretation of Black Elk’s life as the life of the Sioux. In the beginning of the book, Black Elk is made to say, “My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow?” (1979:1). The ending Neihardt devised for *Black Elk Speaks* carries this theme further, by tying together Black Elk’s personal life, the Ghost Dance, and the final death of the old Sioux religion at Wounded Knee:

And so it was all over.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation’s hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead. (1979:270)

These are the most quoted words in *Black Elk Speaks*, although most commentators have not been aware that Black Elk never spoke them. This ending to Black Elk’s life story shows that the book has as much

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23 Neihardt moved Black Elk’s account of the giving of the sacred pipe from its place in the transcript in Black Elk’s account of his vision to the opening chapter, and the prayer he places in Black Elk’s mouth here is identified in the transcript as Standing Bear’s rendition of a prayer “used before Black Elk was ever born” (1931:Folder NR20, 1).
affinity with the genre of tragedy as it does with autobiography. "As literature, it is tragedy in the greatest sense—a moving human story of declining fortune and ultimate fall from power, but one with a transcendent vision which inspires and uplifts all those who read it with understanding" (Castro: 116). The extent of this tragedy is expressed in Neihardt’s decision to end Black Elk’s life story at Wounded Knee, despite the fact that Black Elk was only twenty-seven in 1890 and had lived another forty years when Neihardt interviewed him in 1931. It is as if Black Elk died at Wounded Knee, and in the literary structure of *Black Elk Speaks*, Wounded Knee is the entire Sioux culture’s symbolic death. Not only is Neihardt’s Black Elk a pitiful old man who has done nothing, but his people’s dream is dead, “the nation’s hoop is broken”; “there is no center . . . and the sacred tree is dead.”

*Black Elk Speaks* is thus a literary work that interprets Black Elk’s life as a tragedy that symbolizes the larger tragedy of the American Indian. The autobiographical form of Neihardt’s tragedy implies that Black Elk himself shared Neihardt’s interpretation of the Ghost Dance and of his own life, and Neihardt explicitly claims this when he says that the final three paragraphs are what Black Elk “would have said if he had been able” (McCluskey: 239). But as the foregoing has shown, there are significant discrepancies between Black Elk’s actual statements and Neihardt’s interpretation of them in *Black Elk Speaks*. For Neihardt, the essential theological point is that the traditional Lakota religion and culture are dead. But as we have seen, it is precisely Black Elk’s intention in collaborating with Neihardt to revive the traditional wisdom and values of the Lakotas, to “make the tree flower” even in the hostile context of the white world.

IV

The immediate theological context of the collaboration for Black Elk was reservation life in the 1930s, exceptionally hard years for the Sioux. Frank Fools Crow calls the decade “the worst ten years I know” and, like Black Elk, he felt deeply the decade’s crisis of traditional values and religion (Mails: 148). In these years, Sioux leaders and spokesmen like Black Elk and Fools Crow were faced with the task of responding to the government’s efforts to destroy the traditional culture of the Indians, and they had to confront the fact that traditional religious and cultural values seemed irrelevant in these hard years of famine as well as cultural pressure. On a vision quest during this period, Fools Crow decided against those who, like Neihardt, believed that conversion and assimilation were the proper courses of action, and decided instead that traditional religious and cultural values were the only source of strength for his people (149–50). Black Elk’s radical step of collaborating with
Neihardt must be seen in this context, as a response to these critical conditions.

Neihardt’s persistent focus on the past in *Black Elk Speaks* obscures the fact that, for Black Elk, the real context of the interviews was the problems faced by the Sioux in the 1930s, not the problems of the previous century. From Black Elk’s side, the book is a creative response by an eminent Lakota *wicaša wakan* to the religious crisis of his times. But the only part of *Black Elk Speaks* dealing explicitly with Black Elk’s life and thought as a holy man after Wounded Knee is the postscript, which reports Black Elk’s ritual on Harney Peak in the third person. The focus in even this contemporary segment is on the past, for the postscript carries the tragic motif further, omitting any reference to Black Elk’s present hopes for the book. The postscript strives to create the impression of Black Elk as a broken and hopeless man after the events of Wounded Knee. The comparison of Black Elk’s prayer in the transcript with the version in Neihardt’s postscript reveals that Neihardt’s editing at this point was extensive. Neihardt added the following phrases to Black Elk’s prayer, which is much abridged: “lean to hear my feeble voice,” “I may never call again,” and, most significantly, “when I was still young and could hope” (1931: Folder NR26, 97–100, 1979:272–74). Neihardt also omits or alters phrases that indicate that Black Elk is doing the ritual because his people are in despair and without hope, not because he is personally in despair and without hope. The following passage from the transcript, for instance, is omitted in Neihardt’s postscript:

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Thus I will recall my vision when they have given me all the powers and made me intercessor and then sent me to the center of the earth. And here at the center of the earth I am now the same place that you have taken me and showed me all the good things of the earth that was to be my people’s, the four leggeds and the wings of the air. Through them, relative-like we should be and through them we should send up our voices to thee, O, Great Spirit! In setting me at the center of the earth and showing me all the good things that were to be my people’s and now my people are in despair and I will thus send a voice again. (1931: Folder NR26, 98–99)
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The repeated “thus” shows that Black Elk has continued confidence in the ritual process and continued hope and trust in the traditional values of Lakota religion. In this ritual, Black Elk is continuing his vision-given

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24 As Schwarz points out, in the Lakota tradition, the *wicaša wakan* was the person most suited to respond to theological crisis: “The holy man has a ‘vision’ of the world—its nature, its history, and its destiny—and a sense of humanity’s place within that scheme. Through that vision, the holy man can hope to solve problems for which the tradition offers no ready-made solutions. The *wicaša wakan* is thus the theoretician—the theologian—of the Plains religion” (53).
role as intercessor for the people. In the postscript, Neihardt emphasizes Black Elk’s personal sense of failure and responsibility for his people’s misfortune. The full version of the prayer in the transcript shows that Black Elk was still a Lakota *wicaṣa wakan*, performing rituals on behalf of the people.

Neihardt also omits from the prayer a passage that shows that Black Elk emphatically does not agree that the dream of the Ghost Dance has died: “Hear me O, Great Spirit. That my people will get back into the sacred hoop and that the tree may bloom and that my people will live the ways you have set for them and if they live they may see the happy days and the happy promised land that you have promised” (1931: Folder NR26, 99). Black Elk evidently does not agree with Neihardt that the attempted revival of the old values symbolized by the Ghost Dance and its “happy promised land” is doomed to failure.

The transcript records Black Elk performing his role as intercessor on Harney Peak, recalling his vision, praying for his people to get back into the hoop, and calling on the Grandfathers to make the dream live. Neihardt could hardly have let him appear thus in the postscript to *Black Elk Speaks*, for Black Elk would then have failed to speak the message that is placed in his mouth at the end of the book: the dream is dead. It is essential to recall that Black Elk’s entire intention in collaborating with Neihardt was “to make the tree flower.” The tree, which is the Sun Dance and/or Ghost Dance pole, symbolizes the traditional religion and values. Black Elk’s intention in collaborating with Neihardt is thus to create a “new” world, a world in which the wisdom of the Grandfathers flowers for both whites and Lakotas. This hope for a new world is in essential continuity with the doctrine of the Ghost Dance, as is shown by the following passage from a contemporary Lakota holy man, Lame Deer, for whom the dream also has not died:

I am trying to bring the ghost dance back, but interpret it in a new way. I think it has been misunderstood, but after eighty years I believe that more and more people are sensing what we meant when we prayed for a new earth and that now not only the Indians but everybody has become an “endangered species.” So let the Indians help you bring on a new earth without pollution or war. Let’s roll up the world. It needs it. (235)

There is thus a unanimity of purpose in the four Lakota holy men mentioned in this paper—Black Elk, Plenty Wolf, Fools Crow, and Lame Deer—that indicates that the traditional Lakota religious values are not dead, but in fact have outlived the massacre at Wounded Knee where Neihardt thinks they died.25

25 It is well to remember that the Ghost Dance did not die an entirely natural death, but was in fact repressed. The report of the Rosebud Agency on 10 September 1892 shows
Conclusion

The comparison of the transcript of the Black Elk interviews with the final text shows that the theology of *Black Elk Speaks* is Neihardt’s, not Black Elk’s. It remains to consider the significance of this conclusion for the study of native American religion. Vine Deloria, Jr., argues that “Neihardt’s literary intrusions into Black Elk’s system of beliefs” do not matter because “the very nature of great religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed” (Neihardt, 1979:xiv). This ironic view is tempered by Deloria’s belief that Black Elk’s works will become the canon or the core of a North American Indian theological canon that will eventually challenge both the Eastern and Western traditions (1979:xiii–xiv). Deloria’s remarks call to mind the analogy between *Black Elk Speaks* and the synoptic Gospels. John Neihardt, like John Mark, transformed the oral teachings of a great religious master into a narrative work of literature that preserved those teachings for a dominant culture based on literature, not on story and parable. And, as Deloria implies, scholarly research in both cases leads to the conclusion that the theology of the master and the theology of the disciple are not necessarily identical. But Deloria urges scholars and native American theologians not to make an effort parallel to that of New Testament scholars to distinguish the theology of the master from that of the evangelists: “That [*Black Elk Speaks*] speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the best that dwells within us is sufficient” (1979:xiv).

There is no doubt that this is sufficient to ensure that *Black Elk Speaks* will retain a permanent place in the canon of American literature. But there is good reason to doubt that it is sufficient to satisfy the demands of a pan-Indian theological canon. It is not only that Neihardt disagrees with Black Elk on the interpretation of the Ghost Dance or on the viability of the traditional Lakota lifeways, for Neihardt’s negative judgment on these aspects of Black Elk’s faith may well be shared by future native American theologians. The deeper discontinuity between Neihardt and Black Elk is expressed in their disparate attitudes toward ritual. As this paper has shown, Black Elk’s theology is expressed in ritual, while Neihardt’s is expressed in the medium of literary symbolism that the Ghost Dance was not entirely forgotten at that time: “The evidence of the existence of the ghost dance and its results has entirely disappeared, although in a few instances, early last spring, it was discovered that ghost shirts were being made and wild talk was indulged in by a few ‘brave medicine men.’ Prompt action, however, with solitary confinement and compulsory work for a short time, effectively checked any movements in that direction” (United States Bureau of Indian Affairs: 460).
and narrative. Neihardt found it possible to accept that Black Elk possessed supernormal power, but he found it impossible to accept that Black Elk's rituals had power, for the relational meaning of ritual, and its transforming power, was largely lost on Neihardt. The intention of Black Elk's ritual giving of his vision to Neihardt was to "make the tree flower." The message of Black Elk Speaks, on the other hand, is that the tree is dead. The deepest and most essential changes Neihardt made in the editing of the transcript express this conviction and suppress Black Elk's continued faith in the efficacy of Lakota ritual. This fact reveals the essential difference between the Gospels and Black Elk Speaks that renders the parallel between them invalid. The Gospels express the conviction of the Christian community that though the master is dead, his teaching and real presence are alive in the ritual process of the community of faith. In Black Elk Speaks, the master lives on, but the ritual process is dead. Neihardt is thus not Black Elk's evangelist, but his tragic poet, and the tragic poet of Indian religion and culture.

Black Elk Speaks is a great work of American literature and a classic interpretation of the plight of the American Indian. But it is well to recognize that it is an interpretation. In using Black Elk Speaks in the study of Lakota history, culture, and religion, we must distinguish between the information it gives us on the religion of the Lakotas, and Neihardt's own judgment on the validity and viability of this religion. To understand these matters from the inside, Americanists need to turn to the original Black Elk interviews, to The Sacred Pipe, to the documents collected by J. R. Walker (1980), and to the work of contemporary Lakota holy men, such as Lame Deer, Plenty Wolf, and Fools Crow. But doing so does not mean that Black Elk Speaks does not retain an important place in the study of native American religion. As a work of art, the book is a valuable portrait of an eminent Lakota wicaša wakan and a record of the effect his teaching had on an eminent American poet. J. R. Walker's infinitely more careful and scientific questioning of his informants does not reveal their personalities, or the effect of their beliefs on his own life and thought. The aims of art are not the aims of science. In order to affirm Neihardt's achievement, it is not necessary to subscribe to a theory of "transcendent truth" that makes it superfluous to come to grips with the theological differences between Black Elk and Neihardt. It is only necessary to see that Black Elk Speaks is a work of art, not a work of ethnography or religious scholarship, and that as such, in addition to its intrinsic merit, it provides us with a unique and personal perspective on Black Elk and native American religion that supplements the information available from more scholarly reports.
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