Black Elk Speaks as Epic and Ritual Attempt to Reverse History

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CONVENTIONAL CRITICISM of the epic in the Western world has described it as a mixed fiction in which the actions of the gods are to be read as allegory and the actions of the hero as history which teaches by example.¹ The actions of the gods are not seen as “events” that occurred in the sky, outside the historical world; they are, rather, metaphors for forces operating in, or ideas giving meaning to, the history. Achilles, Aeneas, and Odysseus are said to have actually walked the earth and done the deeds recounted when they appear in household or battle contexts; but the Venus who appears as messenger, goddess, temple figure, and guide is described as the planet, the force of passion, or the love that binds the elements. The juxtaposition of men and gods, of human actions and allegorical commentary, is important in that the epic commonly deals with a period of disintegration and reintegration in the history of an area and its peoples. The history reveals what heroic activity is required to stop disintegration and sustain reintegration; the allegory tells what forces the hero must lay hold on.

A comparable distinction appears in Winnebago culture in the difference between waika and worak. Waika stories show what might have been or the sacred meanings of things; they generally end happily. Worak stories describe what is or
the patterns of things as they are; like most things in this life, they generally end with mixed results. Both anthropologists and the Winnebagoes themselves understand the waika stories, especially those concerning sacred beings such as Trickster, Bladder, Hare, and the Twins, as cultural, psychological, or moral allegories.²

Modern Siouan storytellers make the same distinction in speaking of the difference between bedtime and sacred stories. Moreover, Lakota masters of the sacred arts are inveterate constructors of figural or allegorical systems. They interpret, apply, and reapply the iconological resources of their culture through ritual, myth, storytelling, symbolic action, and clothing.

This Sioux symbolic tradition is one context in which John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) must be understood. Conceptualizing it as an epic may assist both Western and non-Western readers to clarify the uses to which a culture's symbol system may be put in mediating conflicting values, especially those deemed significant in times of cultural crisis. Neihardt himself was deeply interested in the epic as a literary form. He conceived of his *Cycle of the West* (1941) as a record of the general period of the last three-quarters of the nineteenth century and developed it as an epic. As Neihardt says:

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 being cut loose from its roots, a time when an old culture was being overcome by that of a powerful people driven by ancient needs and greeds. For this reason only, the word "epic" has been used in connection with the *Cycle*. . . . There has been no thought of synthetic *Iliads* and *Odysseys*.³

The nineteenth century was a period of great movement for the Lakota people as well as the Euro-Americans. Both were threatened by the loss of cultural bonds and by intense individualism. It was a period when an old culture appeared to be dying and a new one was, in Matthew Arnold's phrase,
"Black Elk Speaks"

"powerless to be born." It is possible that Neihardt shaped *Black Elk Speaks* as a kind of epic composed from the Lakota perspective to accompany his *Cycle of the West*, which was written, at least in the initial books, from the perspective of the conqueror. A second, more likely, possibility is that Black Elk, as a religious thinker and master of ritual speech, acted at that moment in the life of the Sioux nation when epic as the meaningful combining of allegory and history, was possible and had a function in assisting the culture to survive.  

Black Elk, like the Homer portrayed in Alfred Lord's *Singer of Tales*, was caught between the recurrent, ritualistic, and formulaic aspects of the old culture, and the record keeping and linear progressions of the new. He chose Neihardt as his scribe just as an oral-formulaic master may have chosen a literate collaborator at some point in the development of the Homeric epic. Neihardt's task was to set down the relationship between the old and the new in Lakota culture. He could communicate Black Elk's vision to others because he was himself a writer for whom the juxtaposition of allegory and historical example which teaches, of religious forces and historic actions, was a possible mode. For him, as for Black Elk, ritual or mystical events do in fact make history outside the events.

For Black Elk, the sacred powers of the directions which he calls "Grandfathers" exist—their powers and cycles are permanent reality, but their capacity to act in the ordinary world which we see has been disrupted by the actions of the white intruders. Black Elk's destiny is not simply that of the common holy man—to keep the cycles alive for a single sick person or for a small group. His burden is to manifest, for his whole exhausted nation, the power of the Grandfathers as they act in the seen world. In representing the sacred harmonies in the dimension of time, he does what every holy man does. But Black Elk's effort to bring the power of the Grandfathers into history and restore history to ritual, to ritual's sacred cycles, takes place on a larger stage than that of any recorded "holy man" in the native tradition of which I have knowledge. His destiny as the bearer of the nation's burden is epic in the traditional sense.
It was fortunate that Black Elk found Neihardt to record his action. Neihardt had schooled himself both in nineteenth-century idealistic philosophy and in the Hindu scriptures. He could understand Black Elk’s world, where the world which is seen and felt is but a shadow of another world full of power. No writer whose epistemology is based on naturalistic assumptions could have done the job. Neihardt’s fidelity to what Black Elk said is attested by Raymond DeMallie who examined Black Elk’s dictations and found only one significant change in the detail of what Black Elk said in Neihardt’s literary version. The “reverence and solemnity” that Neihardt introduces from the transcript reflect Black Elk’s original spirit. Because Neihardt was interpreting the symbolic structures of a culture not his own, he did not always understand everything Black Elk said through him. However, this does not lessen the significance of the recorder’s performance but rather pays tribute to his honesty and fidelity to the material.

The material in *Black Elk Speaks* may be easily divided into the religious-allegorical and the historical. The allegory in the book centers in Black Elk’s great vision, his other minor visions, and the five dances which he performs in the early 1880s to act out his great vision. Black Elk glosses this figurative material in part through his explanations of what religious objects such as the pipe or religious actions such as the dances mean. But this explanation usually requires completion through references to glosses of sacred objects offered by Black Elk in other contexts or offered by other holy men to other field workers.

Clearly the great vision requires explanation. In it, Black Elk is carried by the messengers of the thunder into the sky tepee of the Grandfathers, who represent the sacred powers of the four directions and of earth and sky. He is shown the thunder horses of the four directions and, in the east, the rainbow door to the cloud-tepee. Next he is given the symbols of the directions and explanations of each: the cup and the bow for the west, the herb of power for the north, the eagle peace pipe for the east, and the red stick “tree of life” for the
south. He is shown the eagle power of the sky and the regenerative power of the earth. All of this is relatively clear if one knows Sioux conventional symbolism, but the remainder of what happens is much more enigmatic. Black Elk in vision tries his thunderpower by killing the mysterious blue man who turns into a turtle and is somehow related to drouth. The holy man is then instructed to give his people the sacred emblems of the directions. A great peace reigns until his people are asked to go through four hills or ascents which cut across the great circle (or cloud-teepee ring) on which the four directions are placed. At that point, the holy man appears to witness in vision the stages in some future disintegration of his culture presented in both realistic and symbolic scenes. And finally, at the end of these ascents, for no reason apparent to the Western mind, Black Elk finds himself on his vision stallion again, celebrating the powers of the four directions. The whole restored universe dances, the Grandfathers celebrate the visionary’s triumph, and his spirit, blessing everything as it goes, returns to his body. This ending is clearly designed to stand for a hope which will come at the end of the disasters of the four ascents.

It should be further recalled that each of the five dances performed later in the book acts out a part of this vision and its symbolism. These may assist glossing. Visions and dances then are the central allegory of the book. And these are intimately connected to the allegory of the powers attributed to the directions: to the west, where thunder and rain come from, the power to create and destroy; to the north, with its seasonal cold, the power of purification; to the east, the power of wisdom; and to the south, that of growth.

On the other hand, the narrative history in the book describes the destruction of the self-sufficiency and hope of the Sioux people between 1863 and 1890 and their efforts to find enough strength to withstand cultural disintegration. The story has been told elsewhere, though not with such tenderness, power of language, sense of dignity in suffering, and cadenced drumming of disaster’s slow coming. Black Elk’s rendering of the history orders the events of the period
by making them the objective reenacting of the four stages on
the road to cultural disintegration which he has seen before
in his great vision.

The red road ascents or hills, ascents one and two in the
vision, cut across the hoop of the world from the south of
growth to the north. In ascent one on the red road in the
vision, the land is green, the old men and women raise their
palms forward to the sky, and the sky is filled with clouds of
baby faces (pp. 35–36). In the parallel historical account
given later, the first ascent on the red road clearly includes
the period up to 1873 and runs through the chapter entitled
"High Horse's Courting." In Black Elk's perception, this time
is a precontact period. The elders are respected; children are
born in a comfortable traditional world and are educated to
pursue the old cycles. Courting is controlled by the people,8
and "two-legs" and "four-legs" appear to collaborate in a
harmonious cyclical life.

In ascent two in the vision, the ascent is steeper, the
people are changed to elk, bison, and other animals and fowls,
and Black Elk floats above them as the power-zenith bird, the
spotted eagle (pp. 36–37). The history which is equivalent to
this vision appears to begin with the premonitions of a
steeper path given to Black Elk and Chips through signs and
visions (pp. 77–79); these signs of a white entrance are fol­
lowed by Custer's incursion into the Black Hills in 1874. The
stage runs through the period of the Battle of the Little
Bighorn in 1876 and the destruction of the northern buffalo
herd in 1883. In the vision, at this time the people are trans­
formed into animals, which symbolizes their reintegration
into the cycles of nature, a transformation which also repre­
sents a purification. The historical counterpart of this is the
five great rituals performed (and in part invented) by Black
Elk on the eve of the destruction of the northern herd, rituals
in which the celebrants perform the roles of Great Plains
creatures or use them sacramentally.

When the ascents move from the south-to-north red road
to the east-to-west black road, the sense of disintegration is
greatly heightened (pp. 37–38). In the third ascent, the crea­
tures are running around in a disorganized fashion, each
following its own rules, the four winds are fighting, and ultimately the nation's hoop is broken. The holy tree is near death and all the birds are gone. The historical unfolding of the third ascent does not begin where Neihardt's chapter title places it, just after the killing of Custer (p. 135). It begins, in Black Elk's narrative, after 1883, when the Sioux become fully aware that the constraints and privations of reservation life are permanent. The majority of the people abandon the circular tepee for the square houses of the white man. Black Elk finds that his people's circumstances clearly reflect his vision. They travel a black road of despair while living in individual square houses scattered in isolated settlements. Their accommodation to white culture means a life in which, as Black Elk expresses it, "everybody [is] for himself and with little rules of his own, as in my vision" (p. 219). The hoop, which symbolizes the nation's unity, is broken; and reservation life shatters the circular authority system and replaces it with the fort and the dole. Inevitably, all other circles of power are weakened or broken.

In the fourth ascent, the people are metamorphosed from animal form back to people again, but starving people; the terror is almost unbearable, the holy tree has disappeared; seen from the fourth ascent on the north side of a camp in the third ascent, a sacred red man appears momentarily—to be metamorphosed to a bison and to the daybreak-star herb, which now stands in the place of the sacred tree. This ascent is never seen in the book since the third ascent continues until 1930, when the book was dictated (p. 37). Earlier, in facing the hunger and despair of his people in the 1880s, Black Elk obviously had held briefly to the notion that the fourth ascent, with its vision of a red-painted sacred man, had been reached by the time of the outbreak of the ghost dance and his own lesser, or "two sticks," vision (pp. 254, 250, 251). It is understandable that Black Elk expected the third ascent's end about the time that the ghost dance broke out in 1890, for each of the earlier ascents had lasted about ten years and he calls the ascents "generations." The manner in which the history which unfolds later glosses the vision is not a matter of certain interpretation even to the visionary.
However, since he finally locates the end of the third ascent in 1930, when the book was told, he must have come to expect that, as the fourth ascent came on, matters would get worse for the Sioux people and the world before any such blessing as the dancing of the universe experienced in the vision would occur in history.

The four ascents as emblems of cultural disintegration represent perverse versions of the constructive power of the quadrants through which they pass. They are destructive because they cut across the cycles of nature in an unnatural order rather than following them.

The ascents, as it were, go from the south of summer to the north of winter to the east of spring and the west of autumn. History makes a society evolve in unnatural sequence. The unnatural character of the ascents does not appear in the first ascent, which is portrayed both in the vision and the comparable historical section as Eden-like. However, the second ascent is less promising. It moves through the north, the direction of sterility and of purification in the vision. In the history which unfolds for the time covered by this quadrant (1873–83), the sterilizing incursions of the white soldiers and the destruction of the fertile buffalo occur. These, for the moment, outweigh in power the purifying rituals which Black Elk performs at the same time and which center in the daybreak-star herb healing ceremony and in the bison dance.

The events which occur at the historical beginning of the suffering of the black road should produce some constructive insight for the people. They are located in the “east” spiritually. The direction is variously called the direction of wisdom (p. 2), of “peace,” of the “good red day” (p. 31), the place of the “star of understanding” (p. 180), and the place from which came the messengers who announce the daybreak-star herb part of the great vision (p. 43). East is clearly the place in which visionary insight or intuition is located—the place of new beginnings. Yet the directional power which carries radical strength when a culture is intact also carries the radical possibility for perversion when it is disintegrating. What characterizes the peculiar perversion of the power of
the east (the third ascent) is the breaking of the nation’s hoop through the appearance of a culture in which each person lives the ethos of “everybody for himself and with little rules of his own” (p. 219), in which each person seemed to “have his own little vision that he followed” (p. 37). The perversion of the power of the east, which occurs as the culture comes apart, represents private mysticism, the appearance of vision so personal and private as to destroy the group sense of itself as a group, a disturbance so tearing that it finds its metaphor in what was for the Teton Dakota the ultimate natural disaster: the warring among the winds. The disintegration of collective into private vision, which destroys the nation’s unity, is followed by physical deprivation and the death of the people (“the holy tree”) as a people: the death of the sun dance cottonwood tree, of the connection between sky and earth and among the people and the creatures which sustain the people.

The fourth ascent takes the people from the center to the west on the quadrant and embodies the perversion of the power of the west and its thunder: the power to create and to destroy. This ascent in the vision has no counterpart in the history, but it also is dominated by the destructive rather than the creative:

And when I looked again, I saw that the fourth ascent would be terrible. . . . When the people were getting ready to begin the fourth ascent, the Voice spoke like some one weeping, and it said: “Look there upon your nation.” And when I looked down, the people were all changed back to human, and they were thin, their faces were sharp, for they were starving. Their ponies were only hide and bones, and the holy tree was gone. [P. 38]

The fourth ascent’s destructive aspect is hunger; on the other hand, its creative power is seen only in the ephemeral picture of the sacred man on the north side of the camp who first turned into a bison, then into a sacred herb whose blossoms flashed bright rays. Black Elk thinks for a time that this red man is the messiah whom he sees in his ghost dance vision, but later he regrets that vision “of the two sticks” as he describes it (pp. 251, 254), and in 1930 still places history in the third ascent (p. 37). While the biological path of ascents
one and two from generation to sterility is harsh, it is not "terrible," for the collective group can through ritual turn sterility into purification; but the path of ascents three and four, the path of the spirit into the realms of history, is utterly defeating. It destroys the group's resources by turning ritual into private vision; it is attended by physical degradation and ephemeral, meaningless hope. This is the end of history as Black Elk anticipates it for his people; at the same time, his vision ends hopefully with a restoration of everything, and even at the end of the book, the seer seems to have some hope for his people (pp. 279–80).

The disparity between the actual downward movement of the history recounted and the optimism of the great vision and partial hope of its seer even at the end of the book are explicable if one understands the allegory of the great vision and the dances. The great vision and the accompanying rituals of the hoop (the horse dance), the west (the heyoka ceremony), the north (the daybreak-star herb healing), the east (the buffalo dance), and the south (the elk dance) are sacred devices. As such they are intended, like the actions of the gods in the ancient epic, to reveal the meaning of history as well as to control it. Black Elk performed these ceremonies between 1880 and 1883, years of crucial suffering for the Sioux because their removal from extended family camps to "farms" along the creek bottoms on the Pine Ridge reservation began in 1879 and continued into the 1880s. The sun dance was forbidden in 1881, and the northern herd wiped out two years later.

The "Offering of the Pipe" section of the book sets forth the basic allegory for all sacred actions celebrating the power of the directions. It is a good place at which to begin the discussion of the intended effect of the rituals:

These four ribbons hanging here on the stem are the four quarters of the universe. The black one is for the west where the thunder beings live to send us rain; the white one for the north, whence comes the great white cleansing wind; the red one for
the east, whence springs the light and where the morning star lives to give men wisdom; the yellow for the south, whence comes the summer and the power to grow. [P. 2]

These coordinates are also equated from east to south to west to north with the seasons of the year, beginning with spring, and with the ages of life (babyhood, childhood, adulthood, and old age). The cycles are recurrent and essentially good. Hence, for the Black Elk of The Sacred Pipe, when the ceremony for the releasing of the soul is performed, the token for the soul moves through the hole in the tepee, as if being born out of this world. It goes toward the south into the "childhood" of the next world on the Milky Way road (cf. p. 195). In most Lakota ritual (unlike that of, say, the Omaha), the place of beginning for the ritual is not the spring, the east, or birth and infancy, but the west of autumn and adulthood. This is in nature the time when autumn seeds fall and the most creative destruction forces, seeds and frost, are loosed; in human life, it is the age of responsibility.

Vision controls the culture modifications which Black Elk makes, particularly those in the dances. The first ritual, the horse dance, deviates from the conventional pattern of the dance in a fashion suggested by the great vision. Whereas the medicine of the horse dance generally is designed to tame outlaw horses, cure sick ones, or make all kinds perform better, Black Elk makes the dance a cure for sick people. The changes from the conventional in Black Elk's performance are made up of details pulled together from the great vision: (1) the painting of the emblem of the directions from the great vision on the sacred tepee; (2) the replacement of the four drummers of the directions by the Six Grandfathers and the creation by the Grandfathers in the sacred tepee of the red and black roads and the emblems of the four directions; (3) the presentation of the directional symbols to the virgins; (4) the singing of songs directed to the powers of the quarters; and (5) the substitution by Black Elk of the eagle feather emphasizing prophetic sky power for the buffalo horns on the shaman's mask. Completely conventional, on the other hand, are the painting of the horses and riders, the organizing of participants in the ceremony into direc-
tional groups, the circling of the sacred hoop, the costumes, and the charging of the sacred tepee. Black Elk’s changes, however, make the ritual over from a horse-control ritual to one which does what the recently repressed sun dance did while it was allowed. It celebrates the unbroken hoop of the nation prior to its breaking in history, unites the male and female powers of the four directions, and gives access to the prophetic voice of the Six Grandfathers, which are aspects of the power that moves the world.

The ritual also acts to remind Black Elk and the reader of the uses of ritual based on the notion that the material world is to greater or lesser degrees a shadow of the spiritual:

Then the Grandfathers behind me sang another sacred song from my vision, the one that goes like this:

“At the center of the earth, behold a four-legged. They have said this to me!”

And as they sang, a strange thing happened. My bay pricked up his ears and raised his tail and pawed the earth, neighing long and loud to where the sun goes down. And the four black horses raised their voices, neighing long and loud, and the whites and the sorrels and the buckskins did the same; and all the other horses in the village neighed, and even those out grazing in the valley and on the hill slopes raised their heads and neighed together. Then suddenly, as I sat there looking at the cloud, I saw my vision yonder once again—the tepee built of cloud and sewed with lightning, the flaming rainbow door, and underneath, the Six Grandfathers sitting, and all the horses thronging in their quarters; and also there was I myself upon my bay before the tepee. I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here.

And as I looked, the Six Grandfathers yonder in the cloud and all the riders of the horses, and even I myself upon the bay up there, all held their hands palms outward toward me. [Pp. 172–73]

The function of this ritual for Black Elk is both to permit a glimpse of the pattern and to make history follow it. The
ceremony ends with dancing, with a healing which indicates that it is efficacious, and with a final plunge to the tepee at the center which stands for the Sacred Tree of the collective, a tepee in which the special horses of the spirit world have also been dancing.

The succeeding dances refer more specifically to the history of the period and the history which is to come after 1883. The first, the west or heyoka ceremony, is preceded by Black Elk’s vision in which the Sioux people act the role of butterflies, the white hordes act the role of dogs, and the daybreak-star herb promises to heal all. Because of the vision, the ceremony which follows can use the dog sacramentally to stand for white culture, so that the relief promised by the dance is relief from that culture, not from drought. Black Elk and his colleagues capture the heart and head of the dog while acting the role of the thunders, as the other heyokas crazy-act the roles of drought-relieving rain and growth, and the people gain a sense of strength and relief from despair. Even as plants and rivers need the destructive power of the heyoka man’s thunders to renew the natural order, so the people need to consume the destructive power of the dog, the white man of the vision, to renew their hope and gain relief from bleakness.

The ceremony of the north is the daybreak-star herb healing. In the dog vision, the daybreak-star herb appears juxtaposed against the sickness of the people, apparently to call attention to its northern, or healing, aspect. Normally, a purification rite for the Sioux people would be the sweatlodge ceremony, but Black Elk, on the basis of his dog-butterfly vision, substitutes the daybreak herb healing for “what one might expect to find.” In the great vision, the daybreak-star plant appears as a replacement both for the buffalo and the “savior,” the red holy man of the vision. The Sioux assign tremendous power to vision as a tool in shaping culture and in understanding and using nature. Thus, in his manner of selecting a medicinal herb on the basis of a vision, Black Elk does nothing unusual. For example, the Brule herbal medicine person, Richard Fool Bull, indicated that his father, the holy man Fool Bull, received an understanding of his
unique medicines—water, calamus, and compass plant—from visions.\textsuperscript{19}

A knowledgeable observer of Sioux herbal lore has told me that she believes Black Elk's daybreak herb was perhaps comfrey, a plant which does in fact have the thick root which Black Elk assigns to it and which may have the yellow, red, blue, and white flowers which appear so distinctly as to make it a medicine-wheel plant.\textsuperscript{20} That the plant has a location in vision and a parallel one in the natural world is no more surprising than that this world is the shadow of another. If the decongestant powers of comfrey make the healing through drawing the northern purifying wind through the sick boy seem to have a natural explanation to us, from a Sioux perspective the healing is no more or less supernatural—no more or less a matter of laying hold on the power offered by vision—than would be the healing through water practiced by Fool Bull. But the purification needed here is not the sweat bath, or spiritual cleansing, but plain physical healing. In the journey west through the last two ascents which cut across the hoop, private vision leads to social despair and physical sickness; in the ritual journey around the hoop, the communal vision of the horse dance for the whole hoop leads to two actions contrary to that of the last two ascents: a ceremony which promotes social hope (the heyoka ceremony) and one which creates physical healing (the daybreak-ceremony healing).

The third ceremony in the progress around the hoop, the bison ceremony, acts out the great vision's picture of the power of the east. It tells how "a red man turned into a bison and rolled" (cf. pp. 28 and 209). Black Elk associates the ceremony with finding the good red road again, an association which would appear to project the power of the ceremony far into the future since the people are historically not yet even on the black road in 1883. Historically, they are just about to leave the red road, to endure the black. Yet, the red road is celebrated in the ritual. Since the east is the direction of power, vision, and of community mystical understanding when rightly appropriated and of private vision when
wrongly, one would expect the ceremony of this direction to be a community celebration of vision and illumination such as the sun dance was. But Black Elk performs only a variant of the bison fertility-hunt ceremony. On the surface, it seems to say in addition only that the people and the bison depend on each other. The rite is a curious one to be performing and to regard as a success at the very time when the last of the northern herd was being extinguished. But the statement of the ritual is deeper, as Black Elk warns: at the center of the sacred place Black Elk adds several symbols, as he has in earlier rites—the buffalo-wallow symbol for earth and for the bison-power of earth. Above the circle and wallow he sets the tepee, symbol of sky power. Across this circle, he adds the symbol of the red road followed by tracks symbolic of the power and endurance of the animal. When the symbols of the people walk the bison-red-road, they are portrayed as moving through the wind of purification toward what I would take to be creation or recreation—the water of life symbol wrenched from the west to undo the disintegrative power of the black road, on which the people are about to walk historically. And Black Elk as holy man fuses the bison power of the earth, represented in his being painted red, with the eagle power of the sky, represented by the eagle feather of his right horn; he fuses both powers with that of the new sky-earth symbol represented by the daybreak-star herb on his buffalo’s western horn.

The chant of the Buffalo rite seems to portray the people acquiring the sacred medicine power of the defunct bison, uniting the sky power of the eagle with the earth power of the bison through the action of the recreative daybreak-star herb. This herb, as its symbolism and action suggest, is simultaneously healing and vision, and it both flashes in the sky and grows from the earth (p. 190, pp. 201-2):

  Revealing this, they walk.
  A sacred herb—revealing it, they walk.
  Revealing this, they walk.
  The sacred life of bison—revealing it, they walk.
  Revealing this, they walk.
A sacred eagle feather—revealing it, they walk.
Revealing them, they walk.
The eagle and the bison—like relatives they walk.

Black Elk through the ceremony summarizes the strength of the collective vision of the hoop-defined-east as opposed to the "each one his own little vision" power of the black-road-defined-east in his most explicit comment on the meaning of a ceremony: "It is from understanding [i.e., mystical understanding] that power comes; and the power in the ceremony was in understanding what it meant; for nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves" (p. 212; italics added). Having almost lost the buffalo and being about to lose for a time the sacred vision of the eagle (which I take to stand for the sun dance religion ceremony), Black Elk enacts for his people a vision of harmonious being within the circle of life depending not on the buffalo and the eagle, but on the sacred power behind the bison and the eagle and the world itself ("where you must move in measure like a dancer"). The ritual seems to say that the displacement of the traditional vehicles of the sacred power does not displace the power of the circle-religion, though it may require new symbols or a more direct reliance on the movement of the "Power of the World." Not accidentally, the ceremony of collective vision leads to collective healing (pp. 211–12).

The elk ceremony is the final ceremony to pull the hoop together. As the ceremony of the south, it combines the male and female forces in a sacred unification like that of Okaga, the power of the south, and Wohpe, the white buffalo calf woman, who is the power of the center in the Sioux story of the original creation. The ceremonial march of Black Elk Speaks around the directions from west to north to east to south ending in the center, is recollective of the Sioux sacred creation story of the first laying out of the boundaries of the universe and setting of the directions, which also takes place in the same order.23 Black Elk, faced with the collapse of his culture, had to lay out the paradigm again. Everything in the ceremony stresses the interdependency of the male and the
female, of sky and earth, in the circling of the living seasons. The women have on them colors suggestive of male sky power and have sky luminaries painted on their faces; the males are painted with the colors of the female earth power and wear masks suggestive of the female, "for behind the woman's power of life is hidden the power of man." In developing the ceremony from its traditional form, Black Elk appears to elaborate the symbolism of the four directions and the complementarity of the male/female symbolism, placing sky symbols on the four virgins though they wear earth scarlet colors (pp. 212-13). He places hoop symbols and flowering stick symbols painted earth red on the men though their yellow painting emphasizes "light" or sky colors.

Black Elk also elaborates the return to the tepee of the old elk dance. When the flowering tree is placed at the south of the sacred areas, as in the "Ceremony for the Releasing of the Soul," it stands for the individual; when it is moved to the center it stands for the nation. Thus, Black Elk's movement of the flowering-stick symbols from the south to the center at the end of the ceremony symbolizes the rebirth of the nation as a nation; the placing of the "flowering tree" at the center is a ritualistic putting back of the sun-dance tree or its spiritual equivalent. The "centering" action is a particularly poignant ritualistic action in 1883 in view of the suppression of the sun dance in 1881. The ritual celebrates the completion of the four directions, the circling of men around woman, of sky around earth, and finally moves from the south, the place of fruition and growth, to the center, where the collective is always located.

The south of the red road in the ascent vision, representing a stable state culture, pictures only children and elders blessing the world; the south of the elk dance, representing a recreative process in the life of a nation tormented by starvation, emphasizes sexuality and generation. It should be observed that the symbolism both of the great vision and of the rituals is traditional in almost every detail. Vision-seeing is fundamentally a culture-bound art. We dream and see visions in the emblems which make up our education. But in Black Elk's case the spiritual sight is more impersonal than
usual because his applications of traditional emblems to historic circumstances are almost entirely directed toward the crisis in the nation's life, rather than to the pain of anyone's private circumstances. It is as if the great dream and the rituals which set it out were an answer to the impending emergence of a culture in which each person followed his own little vision and acted "everybody for himself and with little rules of his own." The function of the five rituals is superficially to do what a thunder being, or heyoka, is required to do: to act out the great thunder's vision so that its power will be available to the dreamer and his people.  

In putting on the ceremonies, Black Elk does something altogether usual in using traditional figurative resources and simultaneously something unique in arranging the ceremonies to complete the hoop of the world step by step, so as to make each step apply to an aspect of the way in which history has destroyed, or is about to destroy, the great circling. The roads of cultural disintegration of the ascents proceed from generation (south) to sterility or purification (north) to private vision (east) and ultimately to complete terror and deprivation (west). The road of integration of the rituals moves from the recreation of hope (west) to the recovery of health (north), collective vision (east), and procreative power (south). The rituals are the creative side of the destructive power of the ascents and are creative because they are placed in nature's order. The ritual section ends in the reconstruction of the people—the holy tree at the center of the hoop. These reconstitutive stages are as certain in their order as autumn, winter, spring, and summer, or as the ages in the life of a man or a people.

The power of the first two rituals of the west and north is carried into history. Using the west's ritual perception, Black Elk ventures into the white world and sees its power and limitations in the trip with Buffalo Bill to Europe. He draws on the power of the north when he assumes the role of the goose at Wounded Knee and flies the vision flight to rally his people. It may be that he performs the action of the third stage, the restoration of collective vision, through giving Neihardt (or "Flaming Rainbow" from his vision) his great
vision. He also gave Joseph Epes Brown the rituals of his people so that the iconology and values, the ritual statement, of the great vision of the people would be maintained. But the undoing of the evils of the fourth ascent, the death of the holy tree, in the action of the elk ritual, which iconologically replaces the holy tree, is not completed. That is the import of Black Elk's summary statement and his final prayer:

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. [P. 276]

Here, old, I stand, and the tree is withered, Grandfather, my Grandfather! [P. 279]

Then the old man concedes that the tree may not be dead:

Again, and maybe the last time on this earth, I recall the great vision you sent me. It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds. [P. 279–80]

The old man, Lear-like in his near blindness and seeming impotence, has done nothing and yet he has done everything, for he has kept alive a vision and moved the powers of three of its directions into history. That of the fourth direction can be left to nature's reproductive power. To say that one has done nothing is to be ultimately vulnerable, but it is also to be, paradoxically, completely the vehicle of the "Power that Moves the World."

Conventionally, the Western epic ends with the triumph of the culture which possesses both wisdom and fortitude over the culture which possesses simply violence. The promise of the epic is the promise of an empire which will be above the native peoples and rule them well, teaching them to subdue the beast in themselves and that nature which is around them. It is hard to reckon the influence which two thousand years of schoolboy reading of Virgil may have had on the notions of empire and of manifest providential destiny which our culture has developed. Neihardt's own Cycle of the West is different from the traditional Western epic in that it represents the conquering civilization as destroyed—hollowed
out—by its own materialism and individualism. The normative statement for the Cycle epic is put in the mouth of Sitting Bull, a statement which Neihardt loved to recite in his old age:

Have I not seen the only mother, Earth,
Full-breasted with the mercy of her Springs,
Rejoicing in her multitude of wings
And clinging roots and legs that leaped and ran?
And whether winged or rooted, beast or man,
We all of us were little ones at nurse.
And I have seen her stricken with a curse
Of fools, who build their lodges up so high
They lose their mother, and the father sky
Is hidden in the darkness that they build;
And with their trader’s babble they have killed
The ancient voices that could make them wise.
Their mightiest in trickery and lies
Are chiefs among them.30

The action of Black Elk Speaks is an effort, through Neihardt as “Flaming Rainbow,” to bring into history the ritualistic forces that will stop history itself as the white man has shaped it and restore to the Sioux people the old ritualistic and cyclical year which gave them their strength. Black Elk’s vision is not Quixotic. It was not a Sioux holy man but an adviser to an international group of futurists, computer experts, and economists who observed that a primary defect of the industrial way of life is that it cannot be sustained, and that if we do not choose to change, “the natural system by its internal processes will choose for us.”31 And it was not romanticism but a tough-minded analysis of mankind’s future options that led the British Society for the Survival of Mankind to propose that we examine seriously something like the old Sioux way of relating to the climax ecosystem of the Plains and to the buffalo as a model for the construction of any future society’s relation to nature.32 The same analysis suggests that industrial man has lost his hoop by losing track of his roots, his relation to the natural process, and his former sense of organized, small-group community.

One cannot know whether such a society can be created
apart from the spiritual resources which sustained Sioux civilization. Even from the perspective of Western culture, it may have been something more than superstition which led Black Elk to perform his dream in the world and hope that the power of rituals would force history back into the cyclical and constantly regenerating mold of the seasons. Modern man may also have to learn that "nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves."

NOTES

I am indebted to Elaine Jahner, Frederick Luebke, Leslie Whipp, Joseph Young, and Kay Young for assistance throughout this essay.

1. Paul A. Olson, "Of Noon Scholars and Old Schools," PMLA 31 (1966): 20; the notion of the mixed fiction is treated in commentaries on the epic by Servius, Bernardus Silvestris, Boccaccio, Landino, Harrington, Sidney, Pope, and others.


4. In later versions, the book is said to be "told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)." John G. Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks (1932; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), title page. The text of the 1961 University of Nebraska Press Bison Book edition, now out of print, has identical pagination. All quotations and references are to the Nebraska editions.


7. In *Black Elk Speaks*, as the people begin the first ascent on the red road, the south is a voice behind them (p. 36); the red road ascent also heads north in the bison dance (p. 210). The same directional thrust for the red and black roads is posited by Neihardt in *When the Tree Flowered* (1951; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1970), p. 47.

The red road and the black road are described as follows by Joseph Epes Brown in *The Sacred Pipe* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 7: "The 'red road' is that which runs north and south and is the good or straight way, for to the Sioux the north is purity and the south is the source of life. This 'red road' is thus similar to the Christian 'straight and narrow way'; it is the vertical of the cross, or the *ec-circata el-mustaquium* of the Islamic tradition. On the other hand, there is the 'blue' or 'black road' of the Sioux, which runs east and west and which is the path of error and destruction. He who travels on this path is, Black Elk has said, 'One who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than his people.'"

8. For an account of the disastrous effects on the Teton Sioux of the breakup of their traditional courting patterns, see Gordon Macgregor, *Warriors without Weapons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 111–20. The chapter concerning High Horse’s courting (pp. 67–76), with its innocent picture of the older generation’s control of his clownish courting, is crucial to the first-ascent Edenic picture and also to the understanding of the power that the later elk dance is to restore.


11. For the holy tree as temporarily and literally the sun-dance cottonwood tree, see Brown, "The Sun Dance," in *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 69. Black Elk’s picture of the death of the holy tree may be associated with the actual historical forbidding of the sun dance to the Teton Dakota by the government in 1881.

12. Wallace Black Elk, who is regarded by some as an effective *Wichasha Wakan*, speaks of the Teton people as now being in the
fourth ascent and sees the difficulties for the nation growing worse. Speech at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 1974.

13. Cf. Black Elk Speaks, pp. 203-4; cf. Walker, "The Sun Dance," pp. 159–60; Black Elk also calls the south the quadrant "whence comes the summer" (p. 2).

14. Brown, The Sacred Pipe, p. 29. The hair-lock bundle, which stands for the soul, is passed from the south around the tepee to the north and out the east door (p. 22), and out toward the Milky Way "Spirit Path" (p. 29).


17. Paradoxically, Black Elk's "great vision" is not the product of his vision quest; his "dogs and butterflies" vision is. The heyoka ceremony thus integrates a tribute to the Grandfather of the west, seen in the great vision, with a performing of Black Elk's second "thunder vision," the vision-quest vision of dogs and butterflies. For the accounts of the heyoka ceremony, see Wissler, "Societies and Ceremonial Associations," pp. 82–88; John Fire and Richard Erdoes, Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 242–46. For the meaning of the sacramentalizing of an object, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 233–35.


19. I have these observations from Richard Fool Bull.

20. I initially received this suggestion from Kay Young; subsequently, Larry Webb established that comfrey conformed in all its details to the description of the daybreak-star medicine-wheel herbs. For the standard botanical description of comfrey, see Nathaniel L. Britton et al., An Illustrated Flora of the Northern United States (New York: Botanical Gardens, 1943), p. 92. L. C. Bailey, Manual of Cultivated Plants (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 386, observes that Symphytum officinale, or comfrey, has white, yellowish, and purple or rose flowers. Some herbals note that the Symphytum may bear these various colored flowers on one plant or stem.
21. The bison ceremony was performed in the summer of 1882; Black Elk places the slaughter of the last of the northern herd in the fall of 1883. The last great buffalo hunt was undertaken in 1882.

22. The buffalo-dreamer dance went as follows: "When they had a dance, a shaman would appear in the head and skin of a buffalo. As he ran about the camp, a nude young man stalked him, while the cult followed singing. At the proper time, the hunter discharged an arrow deeply into a spot marked on the buffalo skin. The shaman would then stagger, vomit blood and spit-up an arrow point. The wolf cult would then pursue him. Later another shaman would use medicine, pull the arrow out and at once the wound was healed" (Wissler, "Societies and Ceremonial Associations," pp. 91–92). Members would bellow like buffaloes and stamp a foot on the ground, leaving a buffalo track. Hassrick notes that "the dreamer of the buffalo wearing a buffalo hide with head and horns attached, often painted a circle on his back which served as a target" and a strong dreamer could repel the missile (The Sioux, p. 32). The buffalo wallow which Black Elk incorporates into the iconology of his buffalo dance appears to have been taken over from the buffalo sing menstrual rites (cf. The Sioux, pp. 260–61; The Sacred Pipe, p. 122).

23. The story of Okaga and Wohpe is in the epic of the setting down of the four directions, which is recorded in materials gathered by the physician and anthropologist James R. Walker. Materials in the Walker Collection are being published in several volumes, the first of which has been published as Lakota Belief and Ritual, ed. Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).


25. For example, in the great vision the iconology of the horses (from the horse dance), of the tepee as the sky, of the Six Grandfathers as the four directions and earth and sky, of the living tree, of eagle and buffalo, of the hoop, and of the west, north, and south are completely conventional.

26. Cf. Fire and Erdoes, Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions, pp. 241–42. "What I mean is that a man who has dreamed about thunderbirds ... he has to act out his dream in public" (p. 241). Fire speaks as if the heyoka has to act out his dream in public the very day of the dream; however, no temporal injunctions are attached to Calico’s acting out of his dream save the notion that prior to acting out the dream the dreamer is in danger of being killed by lightning (Wissler, "Societies and Ceremonial Associations," pp. 1–101). Calico says, "After this I realized that I must formally tell in the ceremony exactly what I experienced." Black Elk allows eleven years to go by between the great vision (1872) and the elk ceremony, which completes his performing of all segments of the dream (1883).

27. I once heard Neihardt say that Black Elk had not failed in that his great vision was still efficacious. He then explained the
relationship between the flaming rainbow which appears in the
great vision and his own Indian name, as I have explained it here.
The logic of naming in Sioux culture would suggest the same in-
terpretation. Black Elk did fail to use his anti-white medicine (cf. 
Missouri MSS).


29. Cf. J. W. Mackail, Virgil, and His Meaning to the World of 
Today (New York: Longmans, 1930), p. 111; Alexander G. McKay, 
50-52; Mario A. DiCesare, The Altar and the City: A Reading of 
94-123.

30. Neihardt, The Song of the Messiah, p. 78. See note 3, above; 
the pagination is the same in the Macmillan and the Bison Book 
editions.


32. Edward Goldsmith et al., Blueprint for Survival (Boston: 