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ABSTRACT

An assessment of Black Elk's poetry reveals that Indians' attitudes toward words differ from ours. For example, on certain occasions Indian songs become instruments which bring an influx of energy into a whole society or draw rain or heal sickness. Words which recreate or conjure the agents of the poet's vision are relevant because they uplift the quality of living. Black Elk believes that words "give away his vision," but they are practical because they contain power or influence. Words also have energy and direction, and when they are received in visions as songs, hymns, invocations, prophecies, or conjurations, they are spoken of as "Voices Sent." An unexpressed power, or "The Compelling Fear," motivates Black Elk to perform the Horse Dance ceremony, which consists of vision songs and the conveyance of the content of the vision. Indian poetry is brief and it reveals that colors, lightning, and the sunset are signs of the power of the west. The purpose of the Indian song is to transmit the affective situations of the vision to the beholders of the ceremony, so that they may profit from it psychologically, medically, and practically. (SW)

A Sioux Poem of Power

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A Native American sacred poem has the properties of a seed, bearing in its briefness the secret of its origin and the promise of its future purposes. Its origin is a religious experience; its purposes are practical ones. Since in western culture technology, literature and religion are separate functions, each with its own jargon, we give a partial and distorted impression of an Indian poem when we discuss it from our viewpoint as critics, for example, or as anthropologists. Yet there are Indian poets who have told the story of their poems from a holistic viewpoint. If we have the humility to listen without trying to include what they know within the framework of what we know, we catch a glimpse of an integrated culture, in which poetic language is central.

Black Elk was a Sioux holy man who told the story of his life, and his sacred poems, to the white poet John G. Neihardt, who met him in 1930 while seeking material for his own work. Black Elk sensed his interest in things of "the other world" and made him his spiritual son, to carry the great vision of his youth to the world. A year later Neihardt produced the book Black Elk Speaks,[1] in his words, "a transformation of what was given . . . expressed so that it could be understood by the white world."[2] Although the long conversations were much edited and Neihardt "at times changed a word, a sentence, (and) sometimes created a paragraph," still he remained faithful to the intent of Black Elk's message, for his attitude was "one of religious obligation."[2]

Throughout the narrative are sacred songs, which Black Elk first heard in his visions. Much of what we read as Indian poetry are songs which such visionaries have felt compelled to dictate only when the songs were in danger of loss due to cultural disruption. There are no words for poet or poetry as we understand them in the Siouan languages; Black Elk called Neihardt a "word-sender." It is no wonder that Indian poetry looks very strange to us, and is practically incomprehensible without considerable background. "Word-sending" is a process inextricably connected with religious experience and with practical purposes, as well as music and poetry.

While I was doing research for my dissertation on Black Elk Speaks, I became aware that the Indians have an attitude toward words different from ours. On occasion, songs become instruments which bring an influx of energy into a whole society, or draw rain, or heal sickness. Words do not merely describe things glimpsed in the mind's eye of the poet. They recreate or conjure the agents of his vision and reproduce their effects on earth. Songs have predictable, practical results which are relevant in the basic sense of the term; that is, they uplift the quality of living.

What impressed me most about Black Elk was that he had had a great dream or vision of the "powers of the universe" when he was only nine years old; and even as an old man, telling the vision for the first time, he was doing so with the purpose that the dream be realized on earth. It was not an hallucination nor aesthetic epiphany, not a separate reality

nor great beyond, but the prototype of life to be lived here in everyday reality. Furthermore, the content of the dream, the universal harmonies and tensions of it, reside in the telling as a power which is preserved for mankind.

Black Elk says he has "given away" his vision by telling it. Words not only describe or refer to the vision, but they become its practical equivalent, in that they contain its power or influence. The word has energy and direction; it moves and helps to fulfill the needs of medicine, psychology, and meteorology.

Furthermore, the words received in visions as songs, hymns, invocations, prophecies or conjurations are spoken of as "voices sent." There is no question of poetic craftsmanship, of how to phrase a line. The word is either sent or it is not; it arises from nature and is as definite as any object or process in nature. It is its own reality and is not simply one of alternative ways of referring to reality.

Many of the words so sent have to be passed on for the benefit of the people. The pressure of containing unexpressed power is felt by Black Elk as "The Compelling Fear," and it spurs him to perform his first ritual, the Horse Dance. In this ceremony, vision songs are sung and the content of the vision is partially conveyed into the earthly environment, where it has marked physical and psychological effects. Religious experience, poetry and effective techniques constitute a process, a continuum.

It is understandable that such poetry is judged, not by aesthetic standards, but by reference to its source in the religious experience. The best songs are those which

were "composed in dreams."[3] They are not the product of the individual dreamer, but of the forces which appeared to him in vision. The ultimate effectiveness of a song depends on the nature and intensity of the beings which transmitted it in vision; they are wakan: sacred, mysterious, potent.

To give an example, among the wakan beings which appeared in Black Elk's vision was a magnificent black stallion, and one of the Horse Dance songs was a gift from him. The words to the song go like this:

> "My horses prancing they are coming.
> My horses, neighing they are coming;
> Prancing, they are coming.
> All over the universe they come.
> They will dance; may you behold them. (4 times)
>
> A horse nation, they will dance. May you behold them. (4 times)

The words, like those of several songs quoted by Black Elk, are not peculiar to his vision but are much like those of a traditional song. We would call it derivative; and yet it is not. The significance of the song has nothing to do with originality, only with origin; that is, the moment in which it came spontaneously anew to this visionary's mind. It must be remembered that the song is not valued aesthetically, for its own sake, but as a vehicle of power for practical ends. Since the final result is often an improvement in weather or in the physical or mental health of the people, to be fair we should have physicians, psychologists and meteorologists helping us assess the merits of Indian poetry. We might find significant connections between religious experience, language and practical concerns which in western culture have become unnaturally split.

To return to our example, we can see how the black stallion's song proved effective in ritual, apparently because of its origin: that is, the depth of the vision experience and the type of being which imparted it. If we scrutinize the description of the black stallion he appears extraordinary, even for a vision apparition. He was

> a big, shiny, black stallion with dapples all over him and his mane about him like a cloud. He was chief of all the horses; and when he snorted, it was a flash of lightning and his eyes were like the sunset star.

It is known by the Sioux that the color black, the lightning and the sunset star are signs of the power of the west. So the stallion is a personification of one of the cardinal directions. Yet he is more than that. At this point in the vision he is also "chief of all the horses." This means that he represents here a universal element. He has the catalytic ability to summon influences of all the other directions, as well as the west. As he dashes toward every quarter, there appear all the powers of the universe, in the forms of horses. There are white horses from the north, the cleansing and purifying influence of blizzard and wind; yellow horses of the south with the power to make grow; and the sorrels of the east, red horses of the morning-light color signifying enlightenment, bringing peace:

> horses without number - whites and sorrels and buckskins, fat, shiny, rejoicing in their fleetness and their strength. It was beautiful, but it was also terrible.

After these energies have calmed down, the black stallion stands at their center. Four virgins come carrying the gifts of all four quarters: a wooden cup of water, for the power to make live which comes with the rain from the west; the white wing of the purifying northwind; the hoop, gift of the south, representing the camp circle and the process of growth; and the pipe, the sacramental means to gain peace through communion with the great powers; this is the gift of the east.

It is now, when all the elements of the universe are gathered around him, that the black stallion imparts the sacred poem. And, as Black Elk recalls,

> All the universe was silent, listening;
> and then the great black stallion raised
> his voice and sang.

The depth of the religious experience is suggested by the silence and stillness from which the song issues. The silent center of the universe is the point of utmost potential, the metaphysical source of all physical creation. The stallion's song, departing from these depths, is very subtle and fine, and yet extremely powerful. Black Elk says,

> His voice was not loud, but it went
> all over the universe and filled it.
> There was nothing that did not hear . . .

The voice is so pervasive because the stallion has drawn his words from the still center, which is infinite. An influx from that source is irresistible in all corners. Black Elk describes the effects of the song in the vision:

> It was so beautiful that nothing anywhere
> could keep from dancing. The virgins
> danced, and all the circled horses.

> The leaves on the trees, the grasses on the hills and in the valleys, the waters in the creeks and in the rivers and lakes, the four-legged and the two-legged and the wings of the air - all danced together to the music of the stallion's song.

At this moment a mysterious Voice says to Black Elk: "'All over the universe they have finished a day of happiness. . . Behold this day for it is yours to make.'" The "day" which he is to "make" or reproduce is a state of intense vitality in all created things. The Voice has reminded him that the experience is not an end in itself, but is intended for benefits on earth. The vehicle for reproducing the marvellous effects will be a ceremony, ritual gestures and songs.

So it is that several years later Black Elk feels suddenly the compelling fear, which leads him to perform the Horse Dance ceremony. On that occasion songs of the four quarters are sung and also, between each of these, the black stallion song, which goes like this:

> "A horse nation all over the universe,
> Neighing they come!
> Prancing they come!
> May you behold them."

The "neighing" and "prancing" are not attributes of real horses, but of <u>wakan</u> beings, pervasive forces; so they are the seeds of similar attributes in all species. They are a direct expression of the silent source of physical creation, and of its central purpose, which Black Elk defines as to be happy and to make happy.

In an original Siouan version of the Horse Song,[4] the horses do not specifically "neigh," but "send a voice" - or, more literally, put forth their peculiar cry. The cry of such apparitions may be, more accurately, a wave or vibration, the prototype of voicing. Also, the word translated as "prancing" is actually "dancing." The black stallion, when he sings, applies intelligence or order to energy, to the chaotic herds from the four quarters.

Furthermore, it is as a "nation" that the "horses" - the collective energies of the universe - will come. The Siouan word for nation has as its stem "mouth;" the unifying feature of any nation is its mouthing, its language. When apparitions in vision are referred to as a nation, their "language" may be thought of as their peculiar rate of vibration. The sacred song is a revelation from these nations, and it is a formula to reproduce the enlivening influence which subtle forces can exert on grosser, physical levels of reality.

When a sacred song is given as an example of Indian poetry, it will appear in print in perhaps four lines:

> "A horse nation all over the universe,
> Neighing, they come!
> Prancing, they come!
> May you behold them."

One Indian, when asked why native poetry is so brief, explained, "The song is short because we know so much."[5]

Even if we have the meanings of the four quarters and the "neighing," "prancing" and "nations" well in hand, we as readers will almost certainly miss the main point:

"'May you behold them!'" The purpose of the song is to "make the day," to transmit the affective situation of the vision to the beholders of the ceremony, so they may profit from it psychologically, medically and practically.

In fact, the results of the Horse Dance were remarkable, as anyone knowing its origins might have predicted. Black Elk recalls,

> After the horse dance was over, it seemed that I was above ground and did not touch it when I walked. I felt very happy, for I could see that my people were all happier. Many crowded around me and said that they or their relatives who had been feeling sick were well again, and these gave me many gifts. Even the horses seemed to be healthier and happier after the dance.

I am convinced that we have much to learn from Indians concerning the range of the power of language. For instance, might we not learn more about that extra dimension of language, the level of consciousness from which words originate? As we have seen, songs derived from visions have an influence which those composed in the waking state do not have.

The poetry of Native Americans shows that words or sounds can be instruments to raise one's level of perception and of well-being, and therefore lend themselves to dependable psychological techniques. The vision experience from which such poetry derives reveals a metaphysical stratum of reality which upholds and enlivens the physical world. By saving his vision for mankind, Black Elk gives us not only a thing of beauty to contemplate, but also evidence that metaphysical resources exist and that contact with them is revitalizing.

The Horse Dance song is an example of a vehicle for making contact with these resources, and illustrates the range which the power of language may attain. Black Elk's life story takes place in a world where religious experience, poetry and the sciences form a continuum and a process: where "word-sending" is a vehicle for realizing a religious manifestation in physical reality.

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Notes

[1]Copyright by John G. Neihardt. First published by Wm. Morrow and Co. in 1931. Paperback edition by University of Nebraska Press in 1961, and pocketbook by Simon and Schuster, 1972.

[2]Sally McCluskey, "Black Elk Speaks: and So Does John Neihardt," Western American Literature, Vol. VI, No.4, pp. 238-9.

[3]Frances Densmore, Teton Sioux Music, U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 61 (1918), p.59.

[4]Ibid., p.302.

[5]American Indian Prose and Poetry: The Winged Serpent, Margot Astrov ed. (1946; rpt. New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), p.15.