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The Enduring Significance Of John G. Neihardt's Summons To Spiritual Unison In Cycle Of The West

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THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT'S
SUMMONS TO SPIRITUAL UNISON IN
CYCLE OF THE WEST

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors to the Department of English
at Carroll College, Helena, Montana

by

Matthew F. Heffron

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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of English.

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>THE CASE OF POSTERITY AGAINST JOHN G. NEIHARDT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>THE WORLD-VIEW OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Society</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poetics</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>THE NARRATIVE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART II</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>THE MESSAGE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Natural Order</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Human Order</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Transcendent Order</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

The world is like a garden. Over this garden go his words like rain and where they fall they make it a little greener. And when his words have passed, the memory of them will stand long in the west like a flaming rainbow.--Black Elk

Certain literary works have been able to survive both the relative obscurity which they experienced during the author's lifetime and also the reluctance of contemporary critics to respond favorably to unfashionable works. The authors of such works were later recognized by critics made more objective by time. Herman Melville was one such man of letters; Walt Whitman was another. John G. Neihardt appears to have an outside chance to become, though admittedly to a lesser degree, a third. His masterwork, Cycle of the West, an epic poem completed in 1941 recounting the transformation of the trans-Mississippi West, appears to possess the ingredient necessary for it to emerge from obscurity: that is, it possesses enduring value.

Yet despite the inherent merit of John G. Neihardt's Cycle of the West, for various reasons both the poet and the work remain in relative obscurity. Forthcoming recognition will rely on a reevaluation by future generations. This study is

intended to be a step toward a much-needed critical reappraisal of Neihardt and his Cycle.

This study could not have been completed without the constant assistance and patience of Dr. Jack Semmens. Thanks go also to Dr. Robert Swartout and Mr. Henry Burgess for the aid which they provided in editing the work.
CHAPTER ONE

THE CASE OF POSTERITY AGAINST JOHN G. NEIHRADT

John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) was, unquestionably, a rare individual. He was a mystic, a devoted poet, and an intellectual while competently and contentedly living most of his life amid a prairie society which seldom inspired and never encouraged such impractical pursuits. In addition, he was able to develop a well ordered system of integrated spiritual, social, and literary philosophies during a period of general turbulence.

For his notable achievements, he has gained some recognition over the years. Among those who have expressed admiration for his work, either publicly or through personal letters to the poet, are Edward Arlington Robinson, Carl Jung, George Sterling, George Edward Woodberry, Clarence Darrow, Harry Truman, and John Elaf Boodin. Even an ailing Mark Twain once arranged to meet Neihardt. In 1921, the Nebraska legislature officially proclaimed Neihardt as the Poet Laureate of the state of Nebraska (he was the first poet in America to gain such an honor) and, in 1968, instituted a statewide Neihardt Day.

For years, he was the literary-page editor of, first, the Minneapolis Journal (from his home in Bancroft); next, of the Kansas City Journal; and, later, of the St. Louis
Post-Dispatch. He gained national popularity as a lecturer, a profession which he frequently had to pursue against his desires in order to support his family while dedicating himself to the writing of the Cycles. He lectured and was the guest of honor at the Poetry Society in New York in 1929. In his later years, he spoke frequently at Writers Conference meetings and often at Cornell University. In his eighties, he taped numerous educational lectures at television stations in Nebraska and Missouri. At the age of ninety, he taped an hour-long special interview for The Dick Cavett Show, of which Cavett stated: "His appearance drew the kind of mail I had never received before, nor have I since."1 He was the first civilian member ever admitted to the Order of Indian Wars in the United States (which amended its constitution in order to honor him for his achievements among the Lakotas) and was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1942. Numerous universities and colleges awarded him honorary degrees, and in 1949 he was appointed as Poet in Residence at the University of Missouri. (The courses which he taught there in his later years were reported to be immensely popular on both the graduate and undergraduate levels.2) Both of the last two songs of the Cycle were considered by many experts as the frontrunners for the Pulitzer Prize on the years of their respective completions, although neither work received the award. Although


3Ibid., p. 196.
Neihardt published twenty-three different volumes, his most famous book, Black Elk Speaks, stands as his highest accolade. It is often recognized as the greatest work in Native American literature\(^4\) and has been translated into eight languages.

Shortly after its publication until his death in 1973, Neihardt attempted to gather and burn all the extant copies of his first published work, The Divine Enchantment, which he referred to as "the case of posterity against John G. Neihardt."\(^5\) But even had he been successful in his attempted purge of this immature early work, it appears that forthcoming generations would still have had a case against him. For despite the man’s unique accomplishments, his limited recognition, and the recent surge in the popularity of spirituality, mysticism, and the Native American movement, Neihardt's masterwork, Cycle of the West, remains relatively in oblivion.

Several extrinsic explanations exist for the Cycle's inability to gain critical acclaim. The most notable is the mode of presentation. The development of Neihardt's poetic theory was remarkably inopportune. Iambic pentameter remains unpopular, and the epic is still considered antiquated. Heroic subject matter, conspicuous optimism, and romanticism


have not been in the literary vogue in this century. Furthermore, Blair Whitney states that the New Criticism dominated the literary community of Neihardt's era so thoroughly that it banished many non-conformers to obscurity.\textsuperscript{6} Another significant factor is the provincialism, urbanism, and academic insularity of the critics existing throughout Neihardt's career. Like Robert Frost, Neihardt consciously preferred to isolate himself from all literary cliques, especially those of the eastern seaboard centers clustering around Boston and New York. Not until well after the Cycle was completed did Neihardt affiliate himself with any academic center. (The University of Missouri, however, can hardly be regarded as a hub of the literary world.) Furthermore, he lost a major outlet of recognition by publicly criticizing Harriet Monroe for the liberal policy of publishing experimental verse in her magazine, Poetry: A Magazine of Verse. Monroe, for years the most active force in the promotion of poetry outside the publicity centers of the East and long considered to be the poetic spokeswoman of the Midwest, was greatly offended, and, though she had praised Neihardt's early works, she forever after carried on a personal vendetta against his more mature works.

Probably the major reason for the Cycle's relative obscurity, however, is that most of the work is simply not of the poetic caliber necessary to rank it among the works of his contemporaries, Robinson and Frost, who also rejected many of the tenets of the New Criticism. Throughout the Cycle, disruptive

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{6}Whitney, p. 22.
\end{flushright}
elements are evident, such as Neihardt's frequent use of archaic contractions and inversions, his occasional lapse into grandiose diction (such as describing Mike Fink as a "pantagruelizing wight"), and his occasional juxtaposition of classical and colloquial language. His frequent authorial intrusions have also been criticized. Various passages fail because of the prolix relation of events which are significant neither to his message nor to the tale. Even in thematically significant passages, his description is often excessive. (This is notable in the accounts of the desert crossings in "The Song of Jed Smith.") Finally, in order to call attention to the similarities between his work and epics of the past, he used excessive and inappropriate classical allusions in the initial songs of the work. (As he gained confidence and the songs matured, these unnecessary trappings were gradually discarded altogether.)

In addition, Neihardt's resolute adherence to the historical facts—that is, when the historical facts were available to him—presents obvious difficulties. It must be presumed that, at times, this concern for historical authenticity tended to stifle the natural flow of his creativity. At other points in the narrative, the essential relation of transitional historical facts causes interruption of the poetic continuity and occasionally reduces the work to prosaism. Finally, this

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objective framework requires at least a limited knowledge of
the historical situation on the part of the reader; more
extensive knowledge is even more advantageous for the com-
prehension of the total impact of the work. Thus, at times,
the work is vulnerable to the charge of elitism, which Neihardt
abhorred.\footnote{Neihardt dismissed this problem by emphasizing the priority of the spiritual message of the work: "While it is true that a knowledge of Western history and the topography of the country would be very helpful to the reader of the Cycle, such knowledge is not indispensable. For here are tales of men in struggle, triumph and defeat" (Neihardt, \textit{The Mountain Men}, p. viii).}

Another significant obstacle blocking the critical recogni-
tion of the Cycle is its indivisibility. Because of the
necessary historical continuity in the progression of the story
line, noteworthy passages cannot be easily recognized amid
formidable poetic expanses within the separate songs. The
inferior passages cannot easily be separated from the superior.
To exacerbate the problem, Neihardt seems to have had an uncanny
knack for flawing otherwise exceptional passages by including
an inopportune dismal line or word choice.

Undeniably, then, the poetry of Neihardt's Cycle can slip,
at times, to abysmal depths. At other times, though, it reaches
equally lofty heights which are sometimes remarkably sustained,
particularly in the later songs. A significant factor in
evaluation is the fact that the Cycle of the West constitutes
over sixteen thousand lines (650 pages) of poetry and thirty
years of development—the longest single poetic undertaking in American literature. And while Neihardt's epic reach does not always equal his grasp, the immensity of the undertaking, as well as the process of poetic maturation over such an extended period, must be taken into account in any analysis.

Many of these problems are attributable to Neihardt's mysticism—one of the main factors which makes the Cycle both unique and significant. For, in deference to his firm conviction in the power of "otherness," Neihardt refused to revise his work. He diligently reworked a particular line or passage until it satisfied him, but henceforth would not change it. This, he felt, insured the visionary integrity of the work since the unity of the mystical inspiration could possibly be lost in subsequent revisions. But while he may have retained visionary integrity, he also retained a great many flaws which could have been otherwise eliminated.

This very eccentricity in Neihardt's method, however, contributes to the aspect of the work that he most emphasized. For, although certain passages within it constitute, of themselves, sufficient poetic merit to justify acknowledgement of the Cycle as an impressive work, its true significance lies not in its formal, artistic achievement, but, rather, in the visionary message which it conveys.

Its visionary message, furthermore, is not a proclamation in isolation but, instead, is founded on a highly developed philosophical outlook which gives it credence.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE WORLD VIEW OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT

The preoccupation of John G. Neihardt's intellectual life was the quest for a comprehensive definition, to the extent that it was possible, of the "cosmic man": that is, for a knowledge of the characteristics necessary for a man to live in complete harmony with the cosmos. To this end, he attempted to integrate his system of personal philosophies. The *Cycle of the West*, in turn, is based on the key aspects of Neihardt's world view.

**Spirituality**

The key to the full comprehension of Neihardt's world view is an understanding of his mysticism. The importance which he placed on mystical experiences, particularly dream visions, can be gleaned from each of his major works—from the trance visions of Talbeau, Glass, Evans, the sun dancers, and the ghost dancers in each of the five songs respectively in the *Cycle* to the focal significance placed on Black Elk's dream revelations in Neihardt's most famous work, *Black Elk Speaks*. Neihardt stated unabashedly that he himself had received many visions and mystical experiences, and that his life and works revolved around them.¹ Neihardt's guiding vision, or, as the

Lakota holy man Black Elk termed it, his "one great vision in this world of darkness and many changing shadows,"\(^2\) came to him at the age of eleven in the form of a strange recurring dream. He gradually came to understand the dream as a spiritual instruction for the resolution of the conflict between two human desires: the drive for normal human satisfactions and the drive for less personal, spiritual goals. Furthermore, his ultimate spiritual goal, he believed, was to be poetic revelation, a goal to which he dedicated his life when he was yet in his teens.

The spiritual force in his dream, as well as in many of his other mystical experiences, he eventually came to recognize as the "daemon," the "ghostly brother," or, simply, "otherness." Though this definite sense of otherness did not supersede Neihardt's adamant belief in the significant role of individuality in the creative process, he felt that this vague and often subconscious supernatural assistance had a definite effect on his literary achievements. In a letter to a friend during the time of the creation of "The Song of the Indian Wars," he noted, "Someone else seems to be writing for me most of the time."\(^3\) Because of this, Neihardt attempted to induce a semi-trance state when he wrote in order to tap this source of higher awareness.


This overwhelming sense of "otherness" eventually led Neihardt to accept ideas which, when he adopted them, were quite novel. Concurring with Carl Jung's theory on the collective unconscious, Neihardt felt that Americans had become "hopelessly provincial in the time sense,"⁴ and that contemporary poets were sacrificing their chief source of power by concentrating on purely subjective experiences while ignoring the race memory.

For it is mainly by appealing to memory that poetry works its magic; and the individual memory is too brief, too fragmentary. The racial memory, rich with its distilled experience of countless men and women, is necessary; and racial memory is literary tradition.⁵

Besides his interest in psychology, Neihardt gained a considerable curiosity in the developing study of psychic phenomena. This interest manifested itself in his choice of a conclusion for "The Song of Jed Smith." Because the exact details of Smith's death remain unknown, Neihardt was at liberty to reject the popular legend and choose instead an account related to him by a clairvoyant which seemed more geographically possible to him than the legend. Adopting the Lakota belief in the powerful relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead, Neihardt commented years after Black Elk's death, that


⁵ Ibid. Interestingly, Jung later discovered a copy of Neihardt's Black Elk Speaks in Zurich and used it to support his hypothesis. His efforts to have Black Elk published in German revived publishing interests in America where it has since become a best-seller.
not only had Black Elk taught him years earlier but also, in a sense, was teaching him yet. It should be noted, though, that while Neihardt was interested in certain aspects of psychic phenomena, he was neither a practitioner nor an unquestioning believer. His primary spiritual sources were visions, contemplation, and prayer rather than seances, clairvoyance and similar rituals.

Neihardt's spirituality had a solid foundation in traditional religio-philosophical doctrine. As an agnostic teenager in the rural community of Wayne, Nebraska, in the late nineteenth century, he became interested in the Eastern religions, avidly reading translated sections of the Hindu Upanisads. This interest in Oriental philosophy pervades all of his work and is conspicuously evident in the Cycle. Parts of "The Song of Jed Smith," in fact, seem to be little more than lessons in the higher Vedanta teachings. His beliefs, however, paralleled the Ramanujan interpretation more nearly than the higher form, particularly in the definite separation between individual souls and the Brahman, the exoteric nature of the spiritual message, the personification of the Deity, and the religious explanation of the universe.

Neihardt's spirituality, though, was anything but a pure Hinduism; instead, it was an eclectic philosophy. The foundation for his religious beliefs became Christianity, though he held ritualistic church worship in contempt. As already noted,

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6 Cavett interview.
he also had profound respect for the Native American religions, particularly those of the Siouan peoples, because of their comprehensive correlation between the spiritual and the physical aspects of life. Together with the belief in the relationship with dead ancestors, he also adopted the Native Americans' belief in the necessary unison between man and nature. (Because of Neihardt's firm adherence to this concept, particularly in the Cycle, he is often included in the "organic tradition" of American literature, which includes Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.) Also evident in Neihardt's works are strong smatterings of classical Platonism.

Despite the preponderant transcendental emphasis of Neihardt's spirituality, however, it also celebrated the joys of the flesh and the common life, often in much the same manner as the works of Whitman. Neihardt's first successful book of poetry, in fact (A Bundle of Myrrh, 1907), was a collection of love lyrics which were so frankly exuberant that they were sometimes condemned as eroticism by Victorian critics. Neihardt's celebration of the flesh, however, only extended so far as those pleasures heightened man's appreciation of his unity with nature, with humanity, and, ultimately, with the cosmos. This aspect of his philosophy conspicuously manifests itself in the Cycle in frequent, extensive descriptions of natural surroundings and human relations.

Likewise, he celebrated the dignity and the nobility of the common man's life, as attested to by his selection of common people for the separate songs of the Cycle. Neihardt
believed that his private intellectual and imaginative worlds depended for their validation on his ability to live successfully in the ordinary world of men. Furthermore, he was convinced that unless a man was intimately acquainted with hard work and the struggle of existence he had nothing of significance to reveal to the world.

**Society**

Neihardt's social attitudes were the natural consequence of his spiritual beliefs. Because of his dominant interest in spiritual values, he deplored what he considered to be rampant American materialism and commercialism. This continuing protest served as a conspicuous theme in many of his lectures, essays, and poems. Only when a man liberates himself from the peremptory compulsion of acquisitiveness can he pursue the higher goals. Therefore, Neihardt became a proponent of radical democratic socialism as a means of allowing all men the opportunity to satisfy their physical needs, thereby freeing them to advance to a higher spiritual plane. (In his later years, though, he became disillusioned with the prospect of even socialism's capability to achieve such a liberation.) Neihardt summarized his views on the proper perspective on materialistic drives by stating:

> A certain amount of material goods is necessary to existence; but the needed amount is not great, and what could be less wise than to spend one's life in acquiring the means of life, and neglecting to live.\(^7\)

\(^7\)John G. Neihardt, Laureate Address of John G. Neihardt (Chicago: The Bookfellows, 1921), p. 18.
Consistent with this condemnation of materialism were his humanistic convictions. His hope for a less exploitive society did not rely primarily on sweeping social and economic reforms (although he did support such measures), but, rather, it was to be realized through an inner spiritual revolution in each individual. He believed, furthermore, that all individuals, to varying degrees, were capable of this revolution: that is, his humanism recognized the basic goodness of all men. Like Whitman, he perceived the concept of evil as merely a mistake, as human goodness gone awry. (The focus on evil, a common strain in American literature, is noticeably absent in Neihardt's works.) This exaltation of the essential nobility of man led Neihardt to wholeheartedly embrace the concepts of true democracy. It also led him to the rejection of some of the popular intellectual views of his time: the naturalists' fixed stare at depressing details, the existentialists' undisciplined focus on unrelated and unevaluated experience—"no doubt the way the world looks to a horse," the behaviorists' reduction of man to "thirty feet of guts" and all his high endeavor to "gut squirming."8

It must be noted that Neihardt's rejection of materialism and his exuberant humanism were not born of naivete. Rather, these views gave witness to an idealism applied to practical experience. He defended his views against contemporary attacks by stating:

It may be remarked by some that this is old fashioned Humanism, impractical in the modern world. It is not Humanism that is impractical, but rather the debased ideals of our materialistic society; for what is it that all men seek if it be not happiness? And what is happiness but the spiritual result of harmonious adjustment to the world of men and things? And can one logically hope to achieve that state through a material process?  

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Neihardt was not a detached observer of the human condition. He was born into poverty and lived all his life, other than his last years, under a financial strain. At the age of sixty, having completed his life's masterwork, his eyesight and health failing, his home about to be lost, his prospects of earning a living through lecturing smashed by a world at war, and his existence reduced to wandering the streets of Chicago desperately seeking employment of any kind, he wrote to a friend:

I wonder, when I stop to think about it, why the feeling of blossoming happiness and a sort of thrilled, luminous peace stay with me so steadily. By all the rules, I should be worrying.

Because of both this spiritual serenity and his characteristic celebration of human existence, he rejected the pervading disillusionment of writers such as Eliot and Pound as being misguided and self-pitying. Instead, he concerned himself with the nobility of man, which he gleaned from the midst of suffering:

9 Neihardt, Laureate Address, p. 18.
If at any time, in anything that bears my name, you have felt more keenly than usual how human life, for all the hurt and pity of it, is shot through and through with a justifying glory, then you have met the best of me.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, Neihardt possessed the capability to emphasize ennobling values without retreating from a materialistic society.

\textbf{Poetics}

Neihardt's poetic theories developed over the seventy-five-year period between the publication of his first book and his death. In his early years, he wrote free verse almost exclusively at a time when free verse still existed on the experimental level. (His free verse, it should be noted, was patterned largely after the rhythmic, unrhymed, irregular verse of the Omaha Indian chants.) In fact, his first successful collection of poetry (\textit{A Bundle of Myrrh}) consisted almost entirely of love lyrics in free verse. But, by the time of World War I, Neihardt had discontinued his experiments with it on the grounds that it lacked the discipline necessary for mature poetry.

Instead, he adopted iambic pentameter because it was consistent with his spiritual ideal of self-mastery: that is, he felt that its use imposed the proper discipline. He also was convinced that it requires greater control and literary ability to adhere to such a rule, and that the challenge, therefore, lies in avoiding monotony, in being experimental within the confines of standard forms. While he sympathized

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 128.}
with the impressionist movement's goal to free writers from burdensome authoritarian rules, he objected to the lax discipline which resulted. For this reason, he renounced the Whitman legacy as "without a doubt, the worst influence on modern poetry" because Whitman's followers "imitated his technical carelessness but not his great visioning."\(^{12}\)

Neihardt advocated the use of imagery and subject matter that facilitates rather than impedes comprehension of the poet's message. He decried poetic elitism; his works rarely require explication (although annotations are added to the Cycle at various points to explain historical facts and Native American terminology which might not otherwise be known). Instead, he chose a simple, direct approach. He even utilized direct statement of meaning rather than relying solely on the use of images and symbols as advocated by the Imagist movement that was influential early in his career. His poetic approach, however, did not exclude the use of imagery and symbolism. The symbolic complexities of "Jed Smith" attest to this fact. He merely asserted that the work must be sufficiently direct to allow comprehension by many readers on some level.

Consequently, consistent with his beliefs in democracy and in the basic nobility of mankind, Neihardt believed that poetry should be written to accommodate a large audience. Such poetry necessarily presupposed themes of general interest.

And according to Niehardt, poetry is the supreme mode of expression because it is capable of bridging the gap between the physical world and the spiritual world; a visionary bard is the ultimate poet whose poetry is like a song, a musical utterance teaching the deep spiritual truths of the human heart. Niehardt's poetry, then, was unashamedly didactic. (He felt, though, that the skillful poet must be able to conceal any obvious preaching.)

These poetic theories, together with other significant factors led Niehardt to choose the epic as his mode of revelation in the Cycle of the West. It is notable that the epic, by this time, was not considered as a viable poetic medium. Therefore, the deliberate embrace of an unfashionable poetic form has to be considered a well-calculated risk on Niehardt's part, considering that he knowingly wagered the success of his career on the outcome. The conspicuous explanation of the choice is the magnitude of the task he proposed. For he conceived the idea of the Cycle not as a regional literary work but as a representative epic of the American experience.13

And heightening the magnitude of this already prodigious undertaking, Niehardt considered the conquest of the trans-Mississippi West to be the culmination of all epic periods. Julius T. House characterizes the American westward movement as

> the last lap of the Aryan peoples of Mesopotamia, across the Hellespont, across Europe and America to the Pacific slope, and it has to be noted that each phase of this movement has produced its epic.14

13 Whitney, p. 102.

Neihardt's was to be the final epic of the saga. In addition, the American heritage which he had hoped to celebrate in the *Cycle* could be more amply treated through the use of a long narrative poem, with its potential for exaltation, than by any other medium. Also, the narrative framework essential to the epic provided the objective experience upon which Neihardt insisted. Furthermore, such a poem could encompass the spiritual motif as well—particularly important to Neihardt. Kenneth S. Rothwell stated that the epic mode

is uniquely fitted to sing of that physical frontier which has perennially functioned as a metaphor for the American spiritual frontier.15

Finally, Neihardt's devotion to the classics, whether of the Latin, Greek, or English language and his tendency towards grandiloquence instilled in him a predisposition toward the epic.

A particularly weighty determinant of the choice, however, was the fact that Neihardt had experienced much of the source of his epic material on a first-hand basis. This was essential to him in maintaining his poetic credibility. His family was of pioneer stock, and he himself lived part of his childhood in a sod house and most of his life on the western prairies amid the homesteaders and their descendants.

If I write of hot winds and grasshoppers, of prairie fires and blizzards, of dawns and moons and sunsets and nights, of brooding heat and thunderstorms in vast lands, I knew them early. They were the vital facts of my world, along with the talk of the old-timers who knew such fascinating things to talk about.16

15"In Search of a Western Epic: Neihardt, Sandburg, and Jaffe as Regionalists and 'Astoriadists,'" *Kansas Quarterly* II, No. 2 (Spring, 1970), 54.

That which he had not experienced first-hand he researched so thoroughly that he has frequently been listed as a historical source. Dale L. Morgan, for instance, cited Neihardt as the first biographer of Jedediah Smith and cited his "Song of Jed Smith" as being largely responsible for a revaluation of a neglected American explorer.\(^{17}\) For the background of his songs concerning the fur trade, Neihardt rendezvoused with several old-timers who had traveled with associates of the heroes in the songs, he stomped the trails of these heroes, and he traversed the Missouri River system by canoe.\(^{18}\) He became a personal friend of General Godfrey, who served under Reno at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, and, likewise, of Major H. R. Limley, General Crook's adjutant, who was present at the death of Crazy Horse. He worked as a deckhand for Captain Grant P. Marsh, who commanded the steamboat, Far West, which ferried the survivors of the Battle of the Little Big Horn down the Yellowstone. Becoming friends with Curly, Custer's Crow scout, he later claimed to have proof of being one of the few white journalists to whom Curly ever told the truth concerning the Battle of the Little Big Horn.\(^{19}\)

Neihardt was even more widely known in his later years, though, as being one of the most knowledgeable, if not the

\(^{17}\)Dale L. Morgan, Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 10.

\(^{18}\)Originally commissioned by Outing Magazine in 1908, the adventure on the Missouri eventually resulted in the publication of The River and I, 1910.

\(^{19}\)Cavett interview.
premier, expert on the culture of the Plains Indian. (Dee Brown, for instance, author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, acknowledged him as such.\(^{20}\)) In his early years at Bancroft, he worked among the Omaha Indians for an Indian trader and gained an intimate and melancholy knowledge of their ways.

It is generally conceded about here that I have struck upon the real nature of the Omaha.... I have sat in their lodges and teepees, eaten their meat, drunk their soup, smoked their pipes and coddled their babies.... I cannot bring myself to see fun in them. They have their rude jokes it is true; but to me their laughter is ghastly—they are passing away....\(^{21}\)

He later developed friendships with many of the "longhairs" (old men) of the Lakota tribes, the most notable being the now-famous holy man, Black Elk, who was a cousin of Crazy Horse. These contacts allowed Neihardt to present the drama of the transformation of the West from a perspective which was sympathetic to both sides of the conflict—a truly unique insight which he exploited in the *Cycle*. At the age of sixty-two, Neihardt was appointed as the Director of the Division of Information for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at which he gained a considerable reputation for creativity, common sense, and sensitivity to the plight of the Native Americans. Neihardt's mastery of capturing the Native American idiom was witnessed by the fact that many anthropologists assumed, until Neihardt informed them otherwise, that *Black Elk Speaks* was simply a


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 33.
word-for-word translation of the interview with the old holy man. Finally, his thorough understanding of the Lakota religion enabled him to incorporate aspects of it as a fundamental part of his own mysticism.

This well developed world view, then, is significant because it served as the foundation of Neihardt's visionary message in Cycle of the West. Before this message can be treated, though, it is necessary to become familiarized with the narrative structure of the Cycle, for it is through the framework of characters and events that the message is conveyed.

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22 Whitney, p. 91.
CHAPTER THREE
THE NARRATIVE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT

Neihardt unfolds his message throughout the Cycle, which progresses chronologically through five separate songs that together encompass that transformation of the trans-Mississippi West.

The first song, "The Song of Three Friends" (completed in 1919), relates the friendship of three legendary river-boatmen-turned-trappers--Mike Fink, Will Carpenter, Frank Talbeau--who are members of the first Ashley-Henry trapping expedition to ascend the Missouri River to the rich beaver country. (Neihardt chose the Ashley-Henry expedition as the source for the first two songs representing the epic American experience because "Out of these trapper bands came all the great continental explorers after Lewis and Clark."¹) After months of travel, the three friends accompany a small band of the voyagers to winter with a tribe of Bloods along the Musselshell. Here Fink becomes enamoured of the chief's adopted half-breed daughter. The girl, however, chooses Carpenter who takes her as his wife. After observing Fink's ensuing anger fester all

¹Neihardt, The Mountain Men, p. vi.
winter, Talbeau disastrously attempts to mend the severed friendship by proposing that his comrades perform their accustomed ritual of one shooting the whiskey cup off the other's head. In the following display of trust and marksman-ship, Fink draws the bead and hits dead center--of Carpenter's forehead. With the spring thaw, the remaining two of the trio volunteer to intercept the second Ashley-Henry expedition leaving St. Louis, Talbeau despairing over his lost friend, Fink bemoaning his aim. Following a night of visions in which they see the dead Carpenter, they narrowly escape from a prairie fire that leaves them destitute and horseless. Enraged by his comrade's continued preoccupation with past grief while current woes are at hand, Fink finally admits that he had shot to kill. In the morning, Fink awakens to find that his partner, having confiscated the only gun and the water supply, is bent on punishing him for his crime. So begins Fink's flight through the scorched wasteland, hounded by a relentless Talbeau. Realizing too late that he has usurped the seat of divine judgment, Talbeau at last stumbles upon a dead Fink and wails for him in their common desolation.

The overriding spiritual theme of the song concerns the individual's responsibilities of brotherhood—fidelity and forgiveness. Throughout much of the song, the spiritual theme is overshadowed by Neihardt's preoccupation with story content and epic quality. The predominant spiritual implications of the imagery and action in the final section (Fink's race through hell), however, stress the spiritual orientation of the song.
The second song, "The Song of Hugh Glass," was actually the first completed (1915). Dealing with a relatively familiar and authenticated Western legend, it concerns a grizzled trapper of the original Ashley-Henry force whose sullen existence is brightened by a profound devotion to a lively, capricious youth, Jamie, also with the band. Mauled by a bear while out hunting, Hugh undergoes a lingering struggle with death in the midst of hostile Ree country. The hostility induces Major Henry to move the rest of the expedition on to their destination. He leaves two volunteers--Jamie, motivated by mutually strong devotion to Hugh, and Jules LeBon, motivated by financial inducement--to remain and bury the dying man. As the days progress and Hugh continues to linger at the brink of death, LeBon beguiles Jamie to believe that they are surrounded by hostile Rees, and, that if they remain, they will follow their comrade to a certain grave. With Hugh's equipment and the story that he is dead and buried, they rejoin their band. But Hugh doesn't die. Instead, he regains consciousness and eventually enough strength to move, gradually realizes his abandonment, and, motivated by vengeance, particularly for the betrayer of his love, begins the torturous 250-mile crawl to Fort Kiowa, aided only by luck and primitive perseverance. Upon arriving after tremendous hardship, he sets out immediately in search of his betrayer, Jamie, who, ridden by guilt, has already returned alone to the supposed burial site and, having heard reports of Hugh's survival, is now feverishly hunting for Hugh to plead for forgiveness.
Hugh's rifle blows up in Jamie's face along the way, however, leaving him blind, dying, and desperately hoping for the arrival of a Black Robe to resolve him of his guilt. Hugh finally finds Jamie in the lodge of a friendly Piegan on the upper Milk River and, in the pity of magnanimous love, forgives him.

Again, Neihardt has developed the theme of man thrust into the wilderness and confronted with spiritual conflict beyond the strength of his inadequate spiritual resources. Again also, the concepts of fidelity and forgiveness are explored but on a deeper level, the process of spiritual struggle, and triumph, being delineated with a more detailed focus. Still, however, the spiritual implications are limited in comparison with the remaining three songs.

The third song, "The Song of Jed Smith," was actually completed last (1941) and, though written past the peak of Neihardt's poetic prime, should be studied last for its spiritual significance. For in this song, Neihardt brings to completion many of the spiritual concepts which he had developed in the previous four songs and thirty years. It is a particularly significant song because its extended metaphors (verging on allegory) are used primarily to convey the abstract concepts of Neihardt's transcendent spirituality. "Jed Smith," then, completes the transition, begun in "Three Friends," from an emphasis predominantly on the tale to an almost total spiritual preoccupation, using the story line primarily as a framework.
In this song, Neihardt changes the point of view from third-person authorial omniscience to a first-person relation of events by three narrators. The entire story takes place one spring evening in 1838 at a campsite on Henry's Fork of the Green River, once a site of many wild trapper rendezvous but now deserted except for three mountain men who happen to converge on the site. As the night progresses, their thoughts center on their responses to the exploits of the legendary Jed Smith. Smith embodies Neihardt's closest approach to the definition of the cosmic man, and his memory affects each of the narrators' reflections according to the particular level of spiritual receptiveness of each--Squire being the youngest and basest, Art Black being an older man with spiritual tendencies, and Bob Evans being one whose life has become a tormented quest for spiritual understanding. Within the framework of the three narratives, Jed Smith's chief explorations are chronicled: his leadership of the first band of explorers through South Pass to the Great Salt Lake, of the first Americans to reach Spanish California by an overland trail, and of the first white men to cross the great central desert from the Sierras to Salt Lake. It soon becomes apparent, however, that although Jed Smith functions as the unifying figure of the work, the central character is really Bob Evans, in his continuing spiritual struggle and his ultimate frustration.

The fourth song, "The Song of the Indian Wars" (completed in 1925), deals with the migration of the white race, during the period between the Council of Laramie (1868) and the
assassination of Crazy Horse (1877), into the bison pastures occupied by the Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe people.

(Because of the predominance of the Lakota tribe, "Lakota" will often be used generically for all of these peoples in the remainder of this study.) It encompasses many of the major battles and all of the significant actors in the drama of the Sioux Wars. Dealing entirely with the displacement of one culture by another, it especially relates the trauma and confusion which develops within a race facing its own twilight.

Perhaps of greater significance within the scope of the Cycle, though, it probes into both the causes and the effects of the spiritual desolation of white civilization. (Neihardt's ability to transfer authorial sympathies smoothly and continually from one group to the other enables him to project the interests of the two opposing cultures within the context of this one song.)

The last song, "The Song of the Messiah" (1935), is concerned wholly with an uprooted society, cognizant of its own imminent extinction, whose future seems to rely solely on a futile and pathetic hope to retrieve the past. Wallowing in despair and dissipation ten years after the death of Crazy Horse, the Lakota nation dispatches representatives to gather information concerning the rumored Messianic salvation being preached by the Paiute prophet, Wovoka (who is soon mistaken as the Messiah himself). The envoys return proclaiming to the people the truth of the Messianic redemption which is very near. The Messiah, having been rejected by the whites, has returned
to the Native Americans this time to destroy the whites and their civilization and to establish the millenium for faithful Native Americans, reuniting them with nature as well as their dead ancestors. To demonstrate their faith and to hasten the advent of the Savior, the people are instructed to continuously perform a ritualistic Ghost Dance, which often includes trance-inspired visions. The dances, however, hasten instead the concern of the government agents who use the army to harass and confine the bands who flee their reservations, vainly hoping the Messiah will rescue them. The final results are the assassination of Sitting Bull, the last great inspirational leader of the Lakotas, and, ultimately, the ruthless extermination of Sitanka's pitiable band at Wounded Knee in 1890. Not only are Sitanka's people buried in the ensuing blizzard at Wounded Knee, but so also is their dream of the Messiah.

This song, more than any other, deals with the concept of universal brotherhood. It also conveys certain aspects of Neihardt's transcendent spirituality. Considered by Neihardt to be the best of his five songs, it is certainly the most moving.

Before taking up the message of the Cycle, note must first be taken of the two key symbolic patterns which take on thematic spiritual significance throughout the entirety of the work. The first is the light/sight symbol and its numerous variations. Neihardt uses this symbol consistently to connote some sort of spiritual insight or revelation. Its antithesis,
darkness/blindness, normally connotes spiritual confusion or lack of insight. The other key symbol is water, its most frequent variation being springtime. It nearly always connotes some type of spiritual relief, revival, or sustenance. Its antithesis, of course, is aridity or thirst.

With this, then, the universal significance of the message of John G. Neihardt now unfolds.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE MESSAGE OF JOHN G. NEIHaRDt

The Natural Order

I swear there is no greatness or power that does not emulate those of the earth!
I swear there can be no theory of any account unless it corroborates the theory of the earth!—
Walt Whitman, "Poems of the Sayers of the Words of Earth"

Like Whitman, John Neihardt proposes, in *Cycle of the West*, that Americans must build a new order founded upon nature. Whitman elaborates on his concept of the organic society in "Passage to India," stating that "this cold, impassive, voiceless Earth, shall be completely justified;.../
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more" and intimating that this unison shall be accomplished partially through the exploits of "voyagers,...scientists and inventors."

Unlike Whitman, though, Neihardt believes that the unison of man and nature is to be fulfilled not through conquest and technology but in spite of them. (For the purpose of this analysis, "nature" shall constitute the external world excluding humanity.)
The Message

To Neihardt, harmony between man and nature must be sought because of the obvious, innate unity which exists between the two—both man and nature are animated by the same power source. It is self-evident to Neihardt that the force which makes men breathe also makes the grass grow. Lest this conspicuous, inherent unity be overlooked in the imagery which he uses or in the Native Americans' acknowledgement of it through their lifestyle as presented in the Cycle, Neihardt places the message on the lips of Sitting Bull in his address to the Lakotas and Cheyennes assembled at the Council on the Powder:

"Brothers, you have seen
The way the spring sun makes the prairie green
And wakes new life in animal and seed,
Preparing plenty for the biggest need,
Remembering the little hungers too.
The same mysterious quickening makes new
Men's hearts, for by that power we also live."

The exact constitution of this force is never made explicit by Neihardt. (This is consistent with his belief that language itself can never adequately express spiritual realities, but only through poetry can they be adequately affirmed.) Within the narrative, however, he does refer directly to a monotheistic deity as the source. In "Messiah," Red Cloud declares to his people that "the Light/Is Wakantanka [Lakotan Great Spirit]" ("Messiah," p. 46) and Sitanka's band at Wounded Knee chants,

\[1\] John G. Neihardt, "The Song of the Indian Wars," The Twilight of the Sioux (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), pp. 32-33. (All further page references to either "The Song of the Indian Wars" or to "The Song of the Messiah" are to this edition.)
"Lean Closer, One Who Gives!" (Messiah," p. 105) Surprisingly, in the light of Neihardt's Judeo-Christian beliefs and his monotheistic Ramanujan orientation toward Vedanta philosophy, these are the only explicit confirmations of a deistic source of spiritual power throughout the sixteen thousand lines of the Cycle. (Jed Smith's biblical references and thanksgiving prayers are too intimately linked with Smith's characterization as a Christian contemplative to be considered as unquestionably genuine expressions of Neihardt's own spirituality.) Throughout the work, however, the force is inseparably linked to the same spiritual force which compels men to seek understanding on a higher level. (This transcendent compulsion is explained in the "Transcendent Order" section of this chapter.) The connection between the human and natural animation force and the spiritual force is witnessed in the citation listed above in which Sitting Bull acknowledges the power of the spring sun--which is a source of light and, thus, of spiritual understanding--as the source of revitalization for both man and nature. It is apparent, at any rate, that Neihardt's intention is not to proselytize for monotheism, but, rather, to reveal that the force animating both man and nature has a definite link to the spiritual force and is a power which can only be recognized intuitively.

To enforce this concept of the inherent unity between man and nature, Neihardt makes a symbolic correlation between the actions of the two. Quite often, Neihardt depicts an event in nature obviously through the distorted point of view
of one of his protagonists who interprets it as an intentionally perpetrated act of nature. In other passages, though, Neihardt presents objective correlations between the actions of man and nature, separate from the views of the characters. Frequently, throughout the first part of "Indian Wars," the actions of nature mirror those of the Native Americans. For instance, just as the Lakotas attending the council at Laramie become fully aware of the deceitful intentions of the government agents through the reported approach of Carrington and his army, a powerful driving wind blows down among the Ogalala lodges, interrupting otherwise peaceful weather and matching the sudden mass turbulence of the alarmed Lakotas ("Indian Wars," pp. 18-19). The most obvious use of this symbolic correlation occurs in "Messiah" when both the Lakotas, physically starving and spiritually withered, and their reservation lands, devastated by drought, experience desolation simultaneously. Because the drought and the ensuing famine and pestilence constitute historical fact, Neihardt deliberately attempted to ensure that the symbolic significance of the correlation be not overlooked as coincidence. He does this by figuratively relating the plight of the people to the plight of nature:

The big Cheyenne /River/ lay dying, and the White /River/;
And all the little creeks forgot their goals.
Crows feasted by the dusty water-holes.
Gaunt grew the Niobrara, ribbed with sand.
A wasting fever fed upon the Grand
And with the famishing Moreau it crawled ("Messiah," p. 4).
Likewise, in "Jed Smith" nature is continuously and conspicuously described in images that denote intense suffering: such as, "red-walled canyon wound" and "Tired stars that didn't care" (Jed Smith," p. 76). Neihardt's persistent utilization of this suffering world image heightens reader curiosity, but its significance is not brought to full recognition until near the end of the last song. In order to emphasize the inherent unity between man and nature, Neihardt presents a truly startling symbolic correlation: nature, like man, has arrived at the secret of existence through some sort of suffering. For just at the instant when Evans finishes his vocal musings concerning the "mill of pain" through which man achieves spiritual insight, nature passionately and empathetically concurs:

As though a tortured world
Moaned in its sleep, the distant canyon took
The vast night silence from the nearby brook
And filled it ("Jed Smith," P. 73).

Because of the obvious extravagance of such a conceit, it is doubtful that Neihardt intended any of these correlations to be taken as literal representations of reality. Rather, the use of these devices is merely an imaginative attempt to emphasize the innate unity between man and nature.

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Not only was Neihardt attempting to impress upon his readers this inherent unity, but also, because of it, the proper attitude to assume toward nature. The proper attitude is exemplified in the Cycle primarily by the lives of the Native Americans--those who have not yet been corrupted by the ways of the Wasichus (whites).

The Native Americans of the Cycle view nature not as an alien and hostile environment needing to be subdued but as a home which must be protected. This sentiment is voiced in the speech of Man Afraid to the agents at the Council of Laramie:

"I do not want you in my hunting ground! You scare my bison and my folk must eat. For sweeter than your words are, home is sweet To us, as you; and yonder land is home" ("Indian Wars," p. 10).

The idea is echoed in the death chant of Crazy Horse in "Indian Wars" and frequently in "Messiah" as the Lakotas acknowledge the sacred land, which they have lost, as the basis for their existence.

Because of their intimate contact with and dependence upon nature, the Native Americans in the Cycle have developed a profound love and respect for nature which they express as a filial relationship. Throughout the narrative, Neihardt portrays this feeling through the trite, though effective, Mother Nature image. Red Cloud's address to the people assembled at Laramie summarizes the key aspects of the image as used by Neihardt:
"My brothers, when you see this prairie here,  
You see my mother. Forty snows and four  
Have blown and melted since the son she bore  
First cried at Platte Forks yonder, weak and blind;  
And whether winter stern or summer kind,  
Her ways with me were wise. Her thousand laps  
Have shielded me. Her ever-giving paps  
Have suckled me and made me tall for war.  
What presents shall I trade my mother for?"

(Indian Wars," p. 15)

Always, this maternal image is used to show nature as the great provider for the Lakota needs. She is frequently referred to as the "deep-bosomed mother" ("Indian Wars," p. 6), an image exploited in the first part of "Messiah" as the Lakotas fear that "her breast is bitter dust,/Her thousand laps are empty!" ("Messiah," p. 6). The image is also coupled conspicuously with springtime ("The meadows of Absoraka grew sweet/With nursing June" /"Indian Wars," p. 627), intimating that nature, because of this fundamental link with the water/spring-time image, is also responsible for nurturing the spirits of men.

This idea of the spiritual sustenance provided by nature indicates what is to Neihardt perhaps the most significant aspect of nature's relationship with man--that of the instructor. Like a mother, nature guides her attentive children to the spiritual truths of a higher order. To Neihardt, this function of nature adds an attractive and compelling motive for the necessary struggle to realize unison with nature. For without this diligent observation of nature and her ways, man can never attain the state of serene spiritual understanding.
Neihardt continually tantalizes the reader with recurring hints that nature holds some spiritual message. Throughout "Jed Smith," Evans periodically suspects that his natural surroundings are keepers of the secret which he pursues:

"The tall pines crowding round
Appeared to know, and watched without a sound

Furthermore, nature's secret is not locked away from mankind. Rather, Neihardt portrays nature as the loving, though inarticulate, benefactress who wishes desperately to share her message with men if only they persevere in the search. After the long, painful ordeal of the flight to Wounded Knee, which was accompanied by the revelation of his spirit dream, Sitanka elatedly instructs the people that the cause of their spiritual frustration is the failure to realize comprehensive brotherhood, and proclaims, "This is the secret that the grass has known/Forever, and the Springs have tried to say" ("Messiah," p. 101). That night, after many of Sitanka's band have embraced the revelation, Neihardt reveals:

A holy stillness filled the solitude
That night; and tenderly the stars bent low
To share with men the secret grasses know
And trees are patient with it ("Messiah," p. 102).

The message which nature appears to hold, however, does not come to man through direct revelation. Instead, nature functions primarily as a catalyst in man's spiritual quest. The tutelage of nature, through man's achievement of unison with it, leads man on to spiritual insight through contemplation. Throughout the rendezvous in "Jed Smith," the motive
gradually becomes clear for Neihardt's periodic mention that
"Henry's Fork.../Ran full of distant voices" and

From the canyon of the Green,
Low-toned but mighty in the solitude,

For though these sounds of nature seem to serve merely as the
backdrop for the telling of the tales, their hypnotic effect
eventually induces in the three trappers the silence of con-
templation and ultimately leads them to insights:

The Fork's returning chatter, as they ate,
Made bold against the canyon's phasic moaning--
Time troubling and Eternity intoning
The never and forever that are one.
It grew upon them when the feast was done;
And each sat silent, suddenly alone,
Negotiating as the dog /Evans'/ the bone,
Some all but meatless leaving of the past

Likewise, nature forces the young men of the first Ashley-Henry
expedition to reflect("far stare") on the hardships they face
and leads them to spiritual knowledge as is manifested by their
equanimitly:

Smooth-lipped lads matured
'Twixt moon and moon with all that they endured,
Their faces leathered by the wind and glare,
Their eyes grown ageless with the calm far stare
Of men who know the prairies or the seas ("Three
Friends," p. 8).

Ironically, Evans despairingly and erroneously concludes
his narrative believing that the secrets of nature have eluded
him. For although he has not arrived at the serene spiritual
understanding which he has sought, he has experienced the
benefit which nature has to give: that is, the inspiration
toward profound contemplation on matters of the spirit. On
the other hand, Sitanka's proclamation at Wounded Knee implies that he realizes that he and his people were searching in vain—because they had not turned inward—for complete and direct revelation solely through nature.

The most moving (and extended) example in the Cycle of nature's powers, though, is Hugh Glass' achievement of one of the most notable expressions of love—forgiveness. Although Hugh proclaims his designs for vengeance even after completion of the crawl, it is only during the crawl—only when he is reduced to primitivism and forced by the harshness of nature to turn inward upon his own spirit—that he could have possibly realized the imperfections of his love. For at no point after the conclusion of the crawl does Neihardt disclose any spiritually revealing experiences for Hugh which could have induced in him his ultimate realization. Yet in the closing scene of the tale, Hugh's forgiveness of Jamie is related with such a notable absence of dramatics that it appears to be a foregone conclusion—it was decided earlier. On the other hand, in the midst of some of his most severe trials at the hand of nature during the crawl, Hugh's thirst for vengeance is periodically and dramatically overcome by his love for Jamie:

And then at length, as from the long ago,
Remote beyond the other side of wrong,
The old love came like some remembered song
Whereof the strain is sweet, the burden sad
("Hugh Glass," p. 159).

Therefore, it becomes evident that Hugh's achievement of magnanimous love is accomplished only through intense confrontation with nature which forces him to introspection and, eventually, to insight.
In order to remain receptive to the secrets taught through nature, however, a man must continually maintain a keen sense of wonder and awe in its presence. Especially in the later songs, this idea of the necessity of wonder becomes a recurring theme for Neihardt. In "Jed Smith," it is notable that even Squire, despite his spiritual bankruptcy, was able at one time to acknowledge, because of the inspiration of wonder, the existence of spiritual secrets in nature. Reflecting on the feeling of awe which he experienced upon the sighting of the Great Salt Lake, he declares:

"You fumbled around inside of you to get
A word, and drew a lungful fit to shout it;
But there was nothing you could do about it,
Except to look. Nohow, it couldn't be--
And there it was!...

Still and dim
And big with secrets!" ("Jed Smith," p. 23)

The idea is most eloquently stated by Yellow Breast on his return from the journey to see Wovoka:

"The coming of the grasses in the spring--
Is it not strange so wonderful a tale
Is really true? Did mornings ever fail,
Or sleeping Earth forget the time to grow?
How do the generations come and go?
They are, and are not. I am half afraid
To think of what strange wonders all is made!
And shall I doubt another if I see?" ("Messiah," p. 36)

The necessity of continuing wonder lies in the vitality and openness which it begets. For through this persistent sense of awe, man is open to the new spiritual insights which are gained in the continuing revelation available through nature. This sense of wonder, then, predisposes the wonderers toward the truths of the spirit. Therefore, the most significant line
of Yellow Breast's proclamation is the last. The concept is concisely summated by Bob Evans in his reflection on the spiritual power of Jed Smith: "He had the humble wisdom that is wonder..." ("Jed Smith," p. 19).

Finally, the Cycle projects what is to Neihardt the proper spiritual approach to that ancient metaphysical preoccupation of man—death. (The idea of death and the imagery therein are of key significance throughout the Cycle, the more important ramifications of which will be discussed in the upcoming sections of this chapter. At this point, the concern is only with death's relationship to natural unison.) To Neihardt, death is not to be feared, but, instead, it is to be embraced, when necessary, because of its nobility. Note that Roman Nose is belittled by his braves at the Battle of Beecher Island for failing to enter the fray because of his fear of imminent death. He gains an almost divine nobility, though, for reconsidering and charging, even though he is certain that his spiritual protection has abandoned him, to an apparently senseless death ("Indian Wars," pp. 92-94). Neihardt also frequently projects the glory of the courageous death: "/Ponies/ fit for bearing heroes to the death" ("Indian Wars," p. 62); "the brave companion that was Death" ("Messiah," p. 4).

Death is exalted partially because, to Neihardt, it unites man spiritually, as well as physically, with nature. Not only does Neihardt use the traditional images of the physical union with nature through death ("...the burial squad/tuck close their comrade's coverlet of sod..."/Three
Friends," p. 24), but he also includes unique images which conjure up the idea of spiritual union as well. Yellow Breast tells how he sees the fog embodying the spirit of his dead relatives "rowing from the ground" ("Messiah," p. 38).

Likewise, Hugh Glass, in the midst of traumatic abandonment and pain, vaguely recognizes the spiritual unison with nature which comes through death:

Tucked in beneath yon coverlet of soil,
Turned back for him, how soundly had he slept!
Fool, fool! to struggle when he might have crept
So short a space, yet farther than the flight
Of swiftest dreaming through the longest night,
Into the quiet dreaming through the longest night,
Into the quiet house of no false friend ("Hugh Glass," p. 167).

For this reason--because the spiritual unison with nature is made complete in death--death is not to be feared but, when the time comes, is to be embraced.

The Human Failure

Neihardt, however, is not content to merely paint an idyllic picture conveying the ideal unison between man and nature. In addition, he capitalizes on the opportunity offered by the historical background of his tales, as well as by his own practical experience in human society, to contrast the ideal with the reality of human failure, thus accentuating the significance of a call for inner revolution. Predominantly, his message concerning the human failure to reach the ideal of natural unison is embodied by the Wasichus in the Cycle. Unlike the uncorrupted Native Americans of "Indian Wars," the white race, with few exceptions, has not assumed the proper attitude toward nature.
In contrast to the Lakotan view of nature, the whites perceive it not as a revered home, but, instead, as a strange and hostile environment which must be subdued. In "Three Friends," Neihardt leaves no doubt that the boatmen and tender-foot trappers, as envoys to nature from Wasichu civilization, view the wilderness as an alien world clearly and irreconcilably distinct from their conception of home: "Yes, even now the leaning cordelle crews/ With word from home (so far away, alas!)/ Led north..." ("Three Friends," p. 71). In "Hugh Glass," they traverse "the weird, unfriending barren land" ("Hugh Glass," p. 129) of the Grand River which is, contrarily, considered a home worth dying for by the native Rees.

Since nature does not garner the respect, much less the reverence, generally given a home, the whites treat it with the same hard-heartedness deserving of any other commercial entity. In Custer's promotional hype to enlist support for the official thievery of the Black Hills, his total disregard for the sanctity of nature degenerates to outright contempt for the natural order when that order functions as an obstacle to the satisfaction of human acquisitiveness:

What fertile valleys pining for the plow!
What lofty forests given to the birds,
What luscious cattle pastures to the herds
Of elk and deer! What flower-enchanted parks,
Now lonely with the quails and meadowlarks,
Awaited men beneath the shielding peaks!

("Indian Wars, p. 107).

This cold, insensitivity is condemned as sacrilege by Neihardt. Using the Native Americans as his vocal piece, he describes how the Lakotas
saw with fear
Ancestral pastures gutted by the plow,
The bison harried ceaselessly, and how
They dwindled moon by moon; with pious dread
Beheld the holy places of their dead
The mock of aliens ("Indian Wars," p. 3).

This ravenous exploitation by the white intruders is graphically symbolized through the portentous invasion, immediately preceding the construction of Fort Phil Kearney, of a swarm of locusts which rapidly and quickly devastates the surrounding countryside ("Indian Wars," pp. 37-38).

Holding this outlook concerning nature's value, the white invaders in the narrative cannot be expected to assume any semblance of filial love for Mother Nature. On the contrary, Neihardt vividly and persistently portrays the race with imagery that connotes the abhorrent antithesis of filial tenderness—that is, he portrays the race as the amoral violator of the earth-mother. He describes settlements arising along the Union Pacific Railroad line merely as the progeny of enslaved concubinage. (Note the use of the biblical serpentine image to symbolize unrestrained desire.)

Where the Platte divides,
The metal serpent sped, with league-long strides,
Between two winters. North Platte City sprang
From sage brush where the prairie sirens sang
Of magic bargains in the marts of lust;
A younger Julesburg sprouted from the dust
To howl a season at the panting trains;
Cheyenne begotten of the ravished plains...
("Indian Wars," p. 78).

In "Messiah," the "long-hairs" wail, ".../W/e have sold our
Mother to the lust/ Of strangers..." ("Messiah," p. 6).
The rape of Mother Nature by the Aryan marauders, however, is not an act of incest, for, unlike the Native Americans, the whites are not legitimate children of nature. Rather, they are the offspring of their own demented technology:

... snoring up the Yellowstone,
The medicine-canoes /steamboats/ breathed flame and steam
And, like monsters of an evil dream, Spewed foes—a multitudinary spawn! ("Indian Wars," p. 4)

Nor were they nursed and raised in the benevolent arms of their true mother, nature, but, rather, were suckled by an insidious surrogate—war: "nurtured by a ghastly rain /of the Civil War/ To woeful harvest!" ("Indian Wars," p. 2)

Understandably, the unexpected intrusion of this bastard son upset Mother Nature. Frequently throughout "Indian Wars" and "Messiah," the Lakotas decry the turmoil in nature initiated by the whites' insensitive disruption of the natural order. (Refer, for instance, to Man Afraid's complaint noted on page thirty-six of this section and to the general Native American dismay shown in the citation on page forty-five.) Lest this point be overlooked by the reader, though, Neihardt authorially relates the disruption of nature:

Along the Platte
The troubled myriads pawed the sandy flat
And snorted at the evil men had done,
For there, from morning sun to evening sun,
A strange trail cleft the ancient bison world,
And many-footed monsters whirred and whirled
Upon it; many-eyed they blinked, and screamed;
Tempestuous with speed, the long mane streamed
Behind them; and the breath of them was loud—
A rainless cloud with lightning in the cloud
And alien thunder ("Indian Wars," pp. 77-78).
Because of this perverted view of nature, the whites find themselves in a disconcerting dilemma when they are forced to face nature without the accoutrements of civilization. The hardships of nature, combined with the menace of Native American hostilities, necessitate an equanimity which can only be attained through the proper relationship with nature. But because of their spiritually inadequate orientation, they view nature as the nemesis. For instance, as the fortitude of Hugh Glass is most severely tried by his abandonment into the hands of the natural order, he evaluates nature in general—but particularly the dawn, the harbinger of daylight—as the foe:

Gazing far,
From where the West yet kept a pallid star
To thinner sky where dawn was wearing through,
Hugh shrank with dread, reluctant to renew
The war with that serene antagonist ("Hugh Glass," p. 168).

Likewise, the sundry constituents of the natural order seem to ally to form a vast conspiracy against him:

He gazed about for aught that might deny
Such baseness: saw the non-committal sky,
The prairie apathetic in a shroud,
The bland complacency of a vagrant cloud—
World-wide connivance! Smilingly the sun
Approved a land wherein such deeds were done;
And careless breezes, like a troop of youth,
Unawed before the presence of such truth,
Went scampering amid the tousled brush

In a similar situation, Fort Phil Kearney is besieged by enraged hostiles during its first winter of occupation. As the paranoia of the isolated soldiers increases, even the forces of the weather appear to be martialed against them:
Besieging January made the plain
One vast white camp to reinforce the foe
That watched the fort. Mad cavalries of snow
Assaulted; stubborn infantries of cold
Sat round the walls and waited. Wolves grew bold
To peer by night across the high stockade
Where, built for the Winter's escalade
The hard drifts leaned ("Indian Wars," p. 58).

The most tragic ramification of such an insensitive view
of nature is the inability of the whites to learn the spiritual
secrets available through nature. Neihardt is not at all im-
pressed by the benefits of urban living:

And through the cities went the singing lure,
Where drearily the human welter squirms
Like worms that lick the slime of other worms
That all may flourish ("Indian Wars," p. 107).

City life often debases the human spirit because it makes it
virtually impossible for man to commune with nature and,
thus, to enter into the inspired contemplation which it
induces. The "desecrated solitude" ("Indian Wars," p. 38)
which the whites have wreaked in nature cannot provide the
all-important inspiration to introspection which eventually
leads to insight. Reflecting on the tragedy of the white
civilization after he returns from Europe, Sitting Bull states:

"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"
("Messiah," p. 78).

Henry Nash Smith characterizes this contempt for the accomplish-
ments of civilization, when compared to the glory of nature,
as a common attitude among Western writers:
Civilization is pernicious also because it interposes a veil of artificiality between the individual and the natural objects of experience. The sophisticated art of the cities substitutes a copy for the realities of things 'as they live in their own native magnificence on the eternal mountains, and in the secret untrodden vale.' That other boasted triumph of civilization, science, may point to its shallow successes in the realm of mere physical manipulation of natural forces; but the true savage scorns the aid of such trivial tools, and 'looks through Nature, without the aid of science, up to its cause.'

Neihardt, however, goes one step further. In the light of the encompassing spiritual desolation which he recognizes in his conqueror's frenzied compulsion to subdue the earth, Sitting Bull pronounces a chillingly prophetic judgment on this maddened world unless it returns to its spiritual unison with nature:

"The starving people shall become a beast, Denied the very grasses of the chief. But dreaming each to be the bigger thief They toil and swarm, not knowing how their sweat Shall turn to blood upon them. Who forget Their mother, are forgotten at last. Already I have seen it in the past Of spirit vision"("Messiah," p. 79).

The catalyst for this artificial separation from nature, and from the guiding spiritual insight available therein, is rampant materialism. It is this peremptory quest for the physical which has blinded the whites to the spiritual. In "Indian Wars," Neihardt capitalizes on historical circumstance (Custer's discovery of gold in the Black Hills) to launch into a zestfully sarcastic tirade against greed:

---

And in the creeks—in all the crystal creeks—
The blessed creeks-O wonder to behold!—
Free gold—the god of rabbles—holy gold—
And gold in plenty from the grass-roots down!
The Black Hills Country! Heard in every town,
That incantation of a wizard horn
Wrought madness. Farmers caught it in the corn
To shuck no more. No glory of the sword
Outdazzled yonder epiphanic Lord—
The only revelation that was sure! ("Indian Wars," p. 107)

Nor do the ordinary materialistic desires, when they preclude
spiritual goals, escape Neihardt's wrath:

"Tireless in toil,
These madmen think it good to till the soil,
And love for endless getting marks them fools"
("Indian Wars," p. 33).

He projects the idea a bit more subtly in Mike Fink's flight
from Talbeau through purgatory. Though Fink gradually realizes
some compunction concerning the slaughter of Carpenter, it
becomes apparent when he plans an ingratiating display of grief
designed to gain physical relief that his chief concern is
still his own physical well-being:

Soon his suffering would end.
Talbeau would see him weeping for his friend—
Talbeau had water! ("Three Friends," p. 120)

In the light of this insensitivity to the teachings of
nature, then, it is not surprising that representative whites
of the Cycle are often devoid of the necessary sense of wonder
and awe in the presence of nature. Note that Hugh Glass is
initially described as "Gray-bearded, gray of eye and crowned
with gray/Was Glass. It seemed he never had been young" ("Hugh
Glass," p. 130), grayness connoting a vapid response to the
natural world. In contrast, Squire in "Jed Smith" originally
is awed by the grandeur of nature, but, concomitant with his
failure to progress spiritually, he soon loses the ability to find wonder in his surroundings:

"Seems funny! Only thirteen years ago,
And nary secret hiding anywhere!
You're only here again when you get there,
And then it's there again when you get here!

Finally, many of the whites in the Cycle, though not all, view death merely as the natural end of life without acknowledging any noble or unifying undertones. Note, for instance, Jules LeBon's callous, though practical, outlook on death. Before deserting Hugh, he remembers to confiscate the dying man's accoutrements--"gear of life!/Scarce suited to the customs of the dead!" ("Hugh Glass," p. 153) Likewise, Squire's irreverent toast to death manifests an insensitive disregard for any spiritual significance in it:

"Spooks of long ago,"
He mocked, "here's looking at you! Bye and bye
We'll be dead as you! But now, we're dry,
And men at that! Tough luck to be a ghost!
Old timers, skoal!" ("Jed Smith," p. 7)

To dramatically emphasize the human failure to realize the ideal unison with nature, however, Neihardt also utilizes the example of the Native Americans who, although having known unison with nature, come to abandon it. Confronted with the technologically superior force of an advancing culture, they reject in dismay their former relationship with nature because of nature's apparent impotence as a source of power. In the resulting spiritual void, they grasp at the seemingly superior alternative--the materialism of the invaders. The initiation of this trend is seen early in the narrative as the Rees float
downstream to meet the ascending Ashley-Henry men to eagerly trade for sundry trappings of civilization despite the Ree's evident disdain for the ways of the invading whites:

... now already came
The Indian craft, lured thither by the fame
Of traders building by the mating floods
("Three Friends," p. 28).

Early in "Indian Wars," Red Cloud warns against the insidious lure of materialism:

"Shall all the white man's trinkets and his drink
By which the mind is overcome and drowned,
Be better than our homes and hunting ground,
The guiding wisdom of our old men's words?"("Indian Wars," p. 28)

Fatally ignoring his admonition, however, the Native Americans soon succumb to the materialistic goals of the white world. Finally, in "Messiah," many realize the folly of their abandonment of unison with nature and the old men wail "we have sold our Mother" ("Messiah," p. 6).

In the absence of this unison, the Native Americans fall prey to the same errors as have their white counterparts. Through this occurrence, Neihardt accentuates the universality of his message: all men need the guiding aid of nature; all are prone to the same tragic failings without it.

Especially notable is the fact that, with the transfer of allegiance to materialism, the Native Americans also come to perceive nature as an enemy:

But now the northwind found their solitude
And, like the wolfish spirit of the world
They fled from, all day long it howled and swirled
About their going, loath to let them go... ("Messiah," pp. 90-91).
The twist lies in the Lakotan interpretation of nature's animosity as vengeful retaliation for their act of betrayal. Thus, they view the drought which serves as a backdrop for "Messiah" as a just, intentionally perpetrated act of reprisal: "Earth starved her children still..." ("Messiah," p. 18), and

What matter if the doomed, unfriendly sky,
The loveless grudging Earth, so soon to die,
Ignored the supplication of the lean? ("Messiah," p. 48)

Also like the whites, they have lost their sense of wonder in the presence of nature. This is primarily conveyed by the recurrence of the idea that the Native American people, as a race, have grown old and tired: such as, "Old as the earth, the hearts of men were old/ That year of 'eighty-seven in the spring" ("Messiah," p. 2). However, Neihardt also explicitly depicts the absence of that essential sense of wonder among the Lakotas:

There was no longer magic in the earth;
No mystery was vital in the air;
No spirit in the silence anywhere... ("Messiah," p. 4).

The most gripping treatment of the Native Americans' loss of wonder, though, is presented in the pathetically moving exit of Red Cloud from the drama of the Cycle. The scene, one of the most powerful in the entirety of the Cycle, is at first perplexing. Consecutively, the envoys whom the Lakotas had sent to investigate the rumors of the Messiah elatedly step before the fire to present their findings to the people. After four glowing reports, it appears that the final envoy, Flat Iron, will surely continue the pattern. But instead, out of the darkness moves Red Cloud to the fire. Not only is the appearance
of Red Cloud startling because of the interruption of the expected order but also because he has been conspicuously absent from the narrative since his defiant and inspiring prominence at the Wagon Box Fight in the first part of "Indian Wars."

Neihardt masterfully utilizes Red Cloud's sudden reappearance to dramatically emphasize the effect of the loss of wonder. The Red Cloud who now steps before the fire is clearly a different Red Cloud than the vibrant leader at Laramie. It is also clear that more than just age has transformed him:

The groundward gaze, incuriously dim;
The once compelling upward thrust of him,
In shrinking shoulder-droop and sagging girth
Now yielding slowly to the woman Earth
The man that was--half woman at the last ("Messiah," p. 45).

In despair over the failure of his noble dream, he has lost his youthful sense of wonder and with it the vitality and insight of nature:

"For to be young is to believe and do,
As rooted things must blossom and be green.
But when the eyes grow weary, having seen,
And flesh begins remembering the ground"("Messiah," p. 46).

Though his final message to his people is generally one of the wisdom gained from many years of intimacy with nature, he realizes that, because his contact with nature has been severed by his loss of wonder, he no longer has sufficient insight to lead his people. Pathetically, Red Cloud, once the personification of strength for his people, fades into the past:
With gray head bowed,
He stood awhile in silence, and the crowd
Was still as he.
At length he stole away,

Like Red Cloud, so it is also with the Native American
race as a whole. Because of their alienation from nature,
they are no longer receptive to the wisdom to be gained through
it.

And the message which eludes them is powerful indeed.

The Human Order

Whatever stayed him or derided him,
His way was even as ours;
And we, with all our wounds and all our powers
Must each await alone at his own height
Another darkness or another light...
--E. A. Robinson, "Man Against the Sky"

It has already been noted that Edward Arlington Robinson
admired the work of his contemporary, John G. Neihardt. It
is probable that the admiration was reciprocated, especially
considering that their theories on poetic technique were almost
identical. Likewise, it is probable that Neihardt sympathized
with many of the sentiments contained in the passage listed
above, particularly such ideas as the universal relationship
between men and the necessity of suffering, sacrifice, and
confusion to man's development. Neihardt, however, undoubtedly
did not concur with his contemporary's profound sense of pessi-
mism and isolation. Rather, he sought to indicate in his
works, particularly in the Cycle, that man is able to transcend
the pain of his existence and that he is able to do so especially
through his contacts with other human beings.
The Message

Neihardt's hope for universal harmony is essentially based on the age-old concept of love—a concept to which he takes new approaches through his unique orientation both to his world and to the West. For the sake of analysis, his ideas, as manifested in the Cycle, on ideal human brotherhood can be viewed from three interlocking perspectives: the interpersonal, the communal, and the universal bases.

Neihardt believed that brotherhood is an essential means by which to define existence. It is not a nebulous abstraction but, instead, is an almost tangible experience which verifies reality. Note, for instance, that through his confrontation with the starkly physical elements of nature, Hugh Glass discovers magnanimous love, a non-physical entity which is, nevertheless, more intensely experienced than are the extreme hardships of nature. In "Jed Smith," the torture of crossing a mountain range along a narrow precipice in a blizzard is conveyed by Neihardt in images which suggest a bizarre, disarranged world:

"Above the howling smother,
I heard old Silas, saw the stumbling critter
He guided, scramble in the pebble skitter
To get its footing. Then it disappeared
Hoofs up. The next two horses screamed and reared
Against the mule ahead of me. I guess
'Twas over in the telling time or less;
And there was Silas staring back at me
Mouth open. There was nothing else to see
But empty ledge, between, and flying snow!"

("Jed Smith," p. 66)
In juxtaposition to this confusion in the tangible world are Jed's subsequent display of concern for the safety of his companions and Jed's gentle smile of relief, which become for Evans a memory of vivid reality ("I can see him now" ["Jed Smith," p. 66]). Even Fink realizes that friendship is a stable reality in a nightmarish world. In the midst of his feverish flight he remembers the warmth of Talbeau's faithful friendship:

It made Talbeau seem infinitely kind—
The one thing human in a ghostly land.
Where was he? Just a touch of that warm hand
Would thwart the dark! ("Three Friends," p. 121)

Through Talbeau, Neihardt also asserts that it is brotherhood which helps sustain mankind's ongoing spiritual quest. By associating it with the water/springtime image, Neihardt connects friendship with the power of revival. Talbeau erroneously assumes that his comrades will be reunited by the reviving joy associated with springtime. However, without the love which is by now irreconcilably lost between Fink and Carpenter, even springtime is impotent:

Among those hills where evermore in vain
The Spring comes wooing and the April rain
Is tears upon a tomb ("Three Friends," p. 77).

Therefore, brotherly love and nature appear to exist in a symbiotic relationship. Furthermore, when Fink pleads for a drink, Talbeau responds, "'You spilled the only drink in all the world./ Go on,' he said, 'and think about what you've done!'" ("Three Friends," p. 121), intimating that friendship is the most important source of sustenance and revitalization.
Just as love is the essence of existence, self-sacrifice is the essence of love. Talbeau is again used as the exemplary figure. When Fink's roan collapses during the escape from the prairie fire, Talbeau is suddenly forced to choose between self-preservation and self-sacrifice--and opts for the latter:

One horse—and who should ride it? All he hath
A man gives for life! But shall he give
For living that which makes it good to live—
The consciousness of fellowship and trust?
Let fools so prize a pinch of throbbing dust!

("Three Friends, p. 102"

Likewise, Hugh Glass' rescue of Jamie from the Rees in the face of almost certain death acquires legendary status among the trappers: "Long afterward the story went the rounds/ How old Glass fought that day" ("Hugh Glass," p. 132).

Neihardt exalts in a similar manner, and perhaps to an even greater degree, the man who sacrifices himself not for a particular friend but for all of his people. In "Indian Wars," he praises such magnanimity as embodied in one of the Sun Dancers:

A warrior who had done the bravest deed
Yet dared that year by any of the Sioux
Now struck the trunk as one who counts a coup
Upon a dreaded foe; and prairie gifts
He gave among the poor, for nothing lifts
The heart like giving. Let the coward save—
Big hoard and little heart, but still the brave
Have more with nothing! ("Indian Wars," p. 125.)

4 It is important to note, though, that in all of these examples, brotherhood never reduces, nor should it be expected to reduce, the struggle and suffering which is, to Neihardt, characteristic of human life. Friendship simply helps make them bearable.
Likewise, Spotted Tail is honored, despite his subsequent submission to white demands, for having offered himself sacrificially to appease the government's wrath against his people:

Who now went forth to perish, that his band
Might still go free? Lo, yonder now he stood!
And none forgot his loving hardihood
The day he put the ghost paint on his face
And, dressed for death, went singing to the place

Crazy Horse, however, performs the supreme act of self-sacrifice for the community. In surrendering his tribe to the reservation officials, he also surrenders the privilege which he has earned to die in the spiritual glory of battle. So that his people may suffer no longer, he submits to the loathed enemy and Lakotan traitors and accepts the utterly abhorrent fate of confinement and humiliation. It is this totally dedicated man of the people, then, that Neihardt exalts above all others.

Exemplary communal brotherhood, though, is not only witnessed in the Cycle at the level of sublimity, but also in the commonplace. The most striking image associated with this commonplace brotherhood is that of the campfire. Frequently in "Three Friends," the campfire is the focal point of scenes of yarn-spinning, good-natured brawling, and heavy drinking. More than any other setting, that associated with the campfire connotes total harmony among men in which they zestfully share their common humanity. In a gesture of wholehearted generosity, for instance, Black and Squire offer to share their campfire with Evans while his identity is yet
totally unknown to them. In turn, Evans liberally distributes his cache of whiskey and venison with no thought of recompense. In a moment of optimism, even Hugh Glass muses over the security and sharing associated with the campfire:

And as Hugh went, he fashioned many a phrase For use when, by some friendly ember-light, His tale of things endured should speed the night And all this gloom grow golden in the sharing ("Hugh Glass," p. 186).

More significantly, though, in the light of the campfire, men gain insight; they recognize their common plight and are able to temporarily overcome the suffering and confusion of their individual existences by way of the selfless sharing characteristically associated with the campfire. In "Jed Smith," for instance, the shared reminiscences of the three trappers produce sufficient recognition of brotherhood to stave off the persistent encroachment of loneliness and confusion:

Cozy in the wood
The tongued flame purred content. Again the bright, Brief moment vanquished the appalling night Of timelessness ("Jed Smith," p. 6).

The experience of human harmony at the campfire is even more acutely realized in the scene of Jamie's convalescence at the Piegan lodge:

The firewood splits and pops, the boiled pot purrs And sputters. On this little isle of sound The sea of winter silence presses round— One feels it like a menace ("Hugh Glass," p. 246).

Neihardt depicts this communal harmony among the Native Americans not only in shared experiences but also by the Lakotas' innate sense of unity which manifests itself in spontaneous and concurrent displays of emotion: "tribal
sorrow" ("Indian Wars," p. 20), "tribal wrath" ("Indian Wars," p. 29), "A thousand-footed, single hearted hate" ("Indian Wars," p. 50). Red Cloud's people, young and old, male and female, display their common loathing for a white sympathizer:

But the braves unstrung their bows
And beat him from the village, counting coup,
While angry squaws reviled the traitor too,
And youngsters dogged him, aping what he said
("Indian Wars," p. 21).

In "Messiah," the Lakotas simultaneously share the same peaks and gullies of hope and despair. The intensity of their sense of communal unity is witnessed by their natural willingness to share a common fate:

   And steadily the rag-and-tatter throng
   Grew with the sullen stragglers driven in
   To share whatever fate the rest might win
   Whatever hope might feed upon despair ("Indian Wars," p. 68).

On a grander scale, Neihardt also depicts communal harmony through intertribal union. Sharing a common plight and foe, the divergent Native American nations gain strength and power only when they unite in common attitudes and goals. The southern nations, for example, are heartened and their resolution is bolstered by the success of Red Cloud's war in the North:

Comanches, South Cheyennes and Kiowas,
Apaches and the South Arapahoes
Were glad to hear, Satanta, Roman Nose,
Black Kettle, Little Raven heard—and thought.
Around their winter fires the warriors fought
Those far-famed battles of the North again.
Their hearts grew strong. "We, too," they said,
"are men;
And what men did up yonder, we can do" ("Indian Wars," p. 81).
These displays of solidarity are consistently presented in a favorable light by Neihardt. They are only desirable, however, because they are necessary components of a comprehensive human unity. Neihardt was consumed by the concept that all men everywhere share the same bittersweet predicament which is endurable because of brotherhood. Therefore, his call to human unison recognizes no limits. The historical framework of the Cycle presented Neihardt with a monumental conflict between cultures and, thus, with an excellent opportunity to exhort universal human harmony.

Some whites are used as exemplary figures manifesting the proper attitude toward humanity. In direct contrast to Black's obvious scorn for the human value of the primitive desert natives, Jed exhibits an egalitarian attitude:

"If that was human mud, 'Twas badly baked and furnished with the blood Of rabbits. 'Diah /'Jedediah/ treated them the same As folks" ("Jed Smith," p. 37).

Hugh Glass' recognition of the "we're all in this together" theme achieves a more powerful effect, however. A tottering old woman carrying a small bundle of survival gear, gear which Hugh desperately lacks, trails the caravan of her migrating tribe by so great a distance that she is easy prey for Hugh. But despite his need and her affiliation with a decidedly hostile tribe, Hugh's desire to pounce on this opportunity for salvation suddenly wanes, and he spares her life because of his realization of their commonly shared humanity:
Why did he gaze upon the passing prize,
Nor seize it?Did some gust of ghostly cries
Awaken round her--whisperings of Eld,
Wraith-voices of the babies she had held,
Guarding the milkless paps, the withered womb?
Far down a moment's cleavage in the gloom
Of backward years Hugh saw her now—nor saw
The little burden and the feeble squaw,
But someone sitting haloed like a saint
Beside a hearth long cold ("Hugh Glass," p. 207).

Neihardt, however, attributes this attitude of universal human brotherhood as being typical of the Native Americans. The Piegan woman's selfless care for Jamie in his destitution, as well as the recurring hospitality of primitive desert peoples to Jed's miserable troop of explorers, attests to this. It is stated outright at Laramie through some of the guileless chieftains who attempt to compromise with the deceitful agents:

"Great Spirit made all peoples, White and Red,
And pitched one big blue teepee overhead
That men might live as brothers side by side.
Behold! Is not our country very wide,
With room enough for all?"("Indian Wars," pp. 7-8)

But the original attitudes of the Native Americans are untested. Only after they have lost almost everything that has given meaning to their lives are the full implications of universal brotherhood realized in the revelation of Sitanka's vision at the conclusion of the Cycle:

"And faces, glad and shining with surprise,
Were turned on shining faces, brown and white;
And laughing children with their wounds of light,
Went running to the soldier-men to play,
For those were uncles who had been away
And now were happy to be back again;
And twice I looked to see that they were men,
So very beautiful they were and dear"("Indian Wars,
p. 100).
When Sitanka's people recognize their hated oppressors as brothers merely gone awry, they have accomplished the highest of classical ideals—magnanimity.

The final aspect of universal human harmony involves unity with the dead. In "Messiah," Yellow Breast and many of the Ghost Dancers see visions of their dead relatives and receive consolation from them. If these passages were the only ones to relate such experiences, these visions easily could be ignored as Neihardt's way of showing the delusions of a desperate people. However, they are validated as components of Neihardt's spirituality by the spectral appearances of Carpenter to Fink and Talbeau before the prairie fire. Uninfluenced by Native American mysticism, both Fink and Talbeau simultaneously witness the same vision ("... Fink awakened at a whisper: 'Mike! He's come!/ Look! Look!' And Mike sat up and blinked and saw" /"Three Friends," p. 93), indicating that the Carpenter vision is not to be regarded as a hallucination.

In all of the communications with the dead, the living participants gain some form of instruction. Yellow Breast is told by his dead father to believe in a higher spiritual reality. Talbeau interprets the appearance of Carpenter as a forewarning of the prairie fire. All of these relationships with the dead focus on the same theme: the continuity with humanity of the past, the recognition of which may enable the achievement of valuable spiritual insights.
The Human Failure

Again, Neihardt's method of contrasting the ideal with human reality lends a forceful impact to the urgency of the message.

Neihardt vividly portrays the destructive force of egocentricity as the antithesis of selfless love between individuals. The inability to escape the confines of self is the direct cause of the conflicts which precipitate the tragedies of the first two songs. In glaring contrast to Talbeau's altruism is Fink's egoism. This is evident in the anecdote, which initially seems humorous, relating Fink's characteristic demand that all listeners show outward amusement at his jokes. It soon becomes apparent that this idiosyncrasy is but a manifestation of Fink's tragic flaw. Obviously, unrequited love is not truly the cause of his bitter hatred; the girl is never mentioned again. Rather, it is unrestrained pride which brings about the tragedy:

And much it grieved Talbeau
To see a haughty comrade humbled so;
And, even more, he feared what wounded pride
Might bring to pass... ('Three Friends,' p. 72).

This all-consuming pride, furthermore, blinds Fink to the noble values of brotherhood. Following Talbeau's reminiscences about former good times had by the trio, Fink almost succumbs to forgiveness and, ultimately, to brotherhood. Realizing this mellowing tendency in himself, however, Fink intentionally dispels it, preferring instead to return to his malice. Unable to overcome his fatal egocentricity and to achieve true compunction for his crime, Fink dies symbolically blind. In the concluding lines of "Three Friends" (containing perhaps one of
the most striking images of the *Cycle*), Talbeau discovers Fink's dead body, and even the scavenging crows scorn the folly of human blindness to brotherhood:

The thing remained!—It hadn't any eyes—
The pilfered sockets bore a pleading stare!
A long, hoarse wail of anguish and despair
Aroused the echoes, Answering, arose
Once more the jeering chorus of the crows ("Three Friends," p. 126).

Likewise, Jamie's capriciousness and flippancy in the opening section of "Hugh Glass" connote not only self-amusement but also self-absorption. His egocentricity manifests itself when he allows his own instincts toward self-preservation to suppress his more noble duty of fidelity to brotherhood, consequently precipitating, because of this failure, the saga of Glass. Like Fink, Jamie, too, is blind at the end of the narrative, and his blindness also symbolizes his inability to realize the full implications of human brotherhood. Jamie's understanding goes beyond Fink's, however, in that he realizes fully his guilt in betraying brotherhood. Instead, his blindness, although it also originates in egocentricity, symbolizes the failure to acknowledge the possibility of an even higher aspect of selfless brotherhood beyond fidelity— that is, forgiveness.

In a similar manner, Neihardt depicts the antithesis of the communal spirit through representative figures. As the exact opposite of Crazy Horse, the prototype of the selfless "man of the people," Short Bull exploits his people's desperate need of hope by using his assignment as one of the envoys to
Wovoka as a lever, thereby hoping to increase his own prestige and eventually to usurp a prominent position of leadership. Not only does he inflate the Lakotas' false hopes by relating grandiose tales of the wonders of Wovoka (who, he proclaims, is actually the Messiah), but he also implies his own exceptional piety by associating himself with the Messiah. With almost humorous pretense he boasts:

"From my youth
There had been voices. I was very young
When first the Spirit taught me in the tongue
Of birds. And often in some quiet place
The dead have spoken to me, face to face,
And dreams have shown me things that were to be.
I say this story was not strange to me,
Because I dreamed it just before it came
By living tongues. The Savior is the same
I saw in sleep. I knew it would be so.
His very words I knew" ("Messiah," p. 41).

Just prior to his assassination, Sitting Bull draws attention to the insidious, self-seeking intent of such pretenders:

"They who have seen this vision of the dead
Have seen what they have seen; and it is good.
But foolish hearts that have not understood,
They make a story out of it that lies....
That it would set men fighting for a lie--
And what to fight with, starving as they are?" ("Messiah," p. 8)

Hugh Glass proves to be the antithesis of the ideal represented by the campfire image of communal unity. Despite the already noted desire for the human warmth of the campfire, which he expresses during the crawl, he rejects that warmth altogether when it is within his grasp:

So now he turned his back upon the feast,
Sung ease, the pleasant tale, the merry mood,
And took the bare, foot-sounding solitude
Not only does he reject the human harmony of the campfire, but he also consciously sunders it. At Kiowa, still adhering to his planned (though love-confused) vow of vengeance, he displaces a mood of gaiety and good naturedness at the campfire with one of malice by relating his tale of betrayal:

His voice beat on; and now and then would flit
Across the melancholy gray of it
A glimmer of cold fire that, like a flare
Of soundless lightning, showed a world made bare,
Green summer slain and all its leafage stripped.
And bronze jaws tightened, brawny hands were gripped,
As though each hearer had a fickle friend ("Hugh Glass," p. 224).

The Native Americans also display notable lapses in the group communal spirit. Betrayers of this spirit are more conspicuous on the Native American side, though. Just as their world deteriorates so also does their unity. As Crazy Horse surrenders his people at Fort Robinson, many of his former allies are already united against him:

Now he met the glare
Of Dull Knife and his warriors waiting there
With fingers itching at the trigger-guard.
How many comrade faces, strangely hard,
Were turned upon him! ("Indian Wars," p. 176)

In a glaring portrait of treachery, the Metal Breasts (Lakota police, so named for their metal badges) come to falsely arrest Sitting Bull and, ultimately, to kill him. Before the end, however, his wife denounces them in the name of the brotherhood which they have betrayed:

"Red Tomahawk, for shame! for shame! I knew
Your father, and a man! He lies at rest
And does not see that metal on your breast,
That coward's coat! I do not want to see!
Begone, Dakotas that you ought to be!
Fat dogs you are, that bad Wasichus keep
To sneak and scare old people in their sleep,
And maybe kill them! Ee-yah!" ("Messiah," p. 84)
The most conspicuous human failure delineated in the Cycle is the failure to grasp the concept of universal human harmony. The gradual, painful realization of this failure, in fact, serves as the underlying theme of "The Song of the Messiah." Neihardt uses the red race predominantly to show this failure because, by their success in realizing unison with nature and each other and in their original limited success in achieving an abstract notion of comprehensive brotherhood, their failure to fully realize this noblest attitude of human harmony (until the conclusion) is all the more exasperating.

One of the Native Americans' chief problems is their overreliance on their unison with nature as a spiritual source. Unison with nature, though an essential component of the cosmic unity advocated by Neihardt, is not to preclude any other part. That the Native Americans of the Cycle have relied too heavily on natural unison is witnessed in the opening of the "Messiah" through their own realization that nature's power is limited. In their dejection and their disillusionment with nature, they even come to view the renewing power of springtime with cynicism:

Vision, sound,
Song from the green and color from the ground,
Scent in the wind and shimmer on the wing,
A cruel beauty, haunting everything,
Disguised the empty promise... 
... the bumblebee
Hummed with the old divine credulity
The music of the universal hoax....
And every morning the deluded lark
Sang hallelujah to a widowed world ("Messiah," pp. 2-3).

The immediate effect of this overreliance is spiritual desolation, while the ultimate effect, as already noted, is the rejection of natural unison altogether and the subsequent adoption of materialism.
But even after they acknowledge that their spiritual infirmity is attributable (at least partially) to their separation from nature, they fail to realize the true reason for that severed unison. Erroneously, the Lakotas believe that they began losing their intimacy with nature when they began adopting Wasichu materialism. But actually, the estrangement begins early during "Indian Wars." For unison with nature is integrally intertwined with human harmony. It is through their fierce hatred of the whites, then, that the Native Americans lose the power associated with natural unison. This concept is best illustrated by an examination of the use of the Cycle's predominant symbols.

The water image connotes spiritual revival or sustenance throughout the Cycle. As Native American hatred increases, a conspicuous turnabout occurs in the use of the image. In describing their malice toward the white man, Neihardt often uses the water image not according to its life sustaining aspect, but according to its destructive aspect as a raging flood. The flood image becomes consistently used to symbolize their unbridled hatred. In the Wagon Box Fight, the Native Americans are "great hordes raging like a flooded stream" ("Indian Wars," p. 62), and in the Fetterman Fight, their wild hatred is described as:

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a thunder-fathered flood
Surg/Ing/ upward through the sounding sloughs and draws
Afoot and mounted, veterans and squaws,
Youths new to war, the lowly and the great...
("Indian Wars," p. 50).
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Finally, it is notable that Black Elk's vision describes the Native Americans' spiritual affliction as that of being overcome by a flood:

"And I saw a rushing river full of foam, And crowds of people trying to get home Across it; but they could not; and I wept To hear their wailing" ("Messiah," p. 54).

"Home" is the proper unison with nature and the cosmos. This unison is prevented by the "rushing river" of their malice which, in their confusion, they are unable to comprehend. Thus, through their hatred, they have perverted the sustaining and reviving power (water) of their unison with nature.

There is also a reversal in the use made of the other major image, that of light. The overwhelming hatred of Mother Nature's blood-maddened children repulses the sun, so that it is no longer the symbol of spiritual insight. Rather, by its hidden nature, the sun becomes the symbol of the Lakotas' lack of insight. As the slaughter at Beecher Island commences, "They saw the sun put on a bloody veil and disappear" ("Indian Wars," p. 85). At the Fetterman Fight, "the pale-faced sun arose--/ A specter, fleeing from a bath' of blood" ("Indian Wars," p. 50). Therefore, it is their hatred which causes their alienation from nature, rampant materialism being merely an aftereffect.

Furthermore, the communal unity of the Native Americans, desirable in itself, is also flawed because it precludes comprehensive human harmony by its ethnic exclusiveness. Even after the Native Americans repent for their spiritual dissolution,
their reunion with nature is not effected. Even after they have embraced the messianic dream, nature is still characterized as old, lifeless, and it still abandons them:

... Summer slowly died
And in her waiting hushes prophesied
The locust, and the lark forgot his song ("Messiah," p. 56).

This continuing spiritual confusion, manifested by the imagery of a dying natural world which abandons her children, is caused by a misinterpretation of the messianic dream. In every interpretation, the white man is excluded. Most of the interpretations, in fact, necessitate the extermination of the white race. It is this misinterpretation, this hardy hatred, which precipitates the massacre at Wounded Knee. Yellow Bird, who evaluates Sitanka's preeminent revelation as a "sick man's dreaming," uses this hate-inspired explanation of the messianic dream as motivation and justification for initiating the slaughter:

"Why are you giving up your guns
To these Wasichus, who are hardly men
And shall be shadows?...
Stab them, and they bleed
No blood of brothers! Look at them and see
The takers of the good that used to be,
The killers of the Savior! Do not fear,
The Nations of the Dead are crowding here
To help us! Shall we shame them? Do as I! ("Messiah," p. 107)

The Cycle concludes with the extermination of Sitanka's band which, in turn, signifies the end of the Native Americans' vain hope of returning to their pristine past. The Cycle, then, appears to end on a note of utter despair. However, the last three lines of the Cycle throw open the gates of hope: that is,
that man will someday realize the attitude of universal brotherhood:

The mounting blizzard broke. All night it swept
The bloody field of victory that kept

The "secret of the Everlasting Word" is contained in the revelation of Sitanka's complete comprehension of universal brotherhood. Essentially, it is the Christian message, but a message reinvigorated by Neihardt's mastery of the Native American idiom:

"And even if the soldiers come to kill
The Spirit says that we must love them still,
For they are brothers. Pray to understand.
Not ours alone shall be the Spirit Land.
In every heart shall bloom the Shielding Tree,
And none shall see the Savior till he see
The stranger's face and know it for his own" ("Messiah," p. 101).

Thus, Sitanka's inspired insight at last verifies the spiritual revelation of the messianic dream of Wovoka. For the "Messiah Craze" is not a hoax at all, but its message has merely been misinterpreted. The second Savior of the world is the realization of universal brotherhood, not a man at all. Because of this revelation, mankind can realistically aspire to cosmic harmony.

The "secret of the Everlasting Word" appears to be buried with Sitanka and his followers under the snow at Wounded Knee. However, to Neihardt the message has been salvaged and lives in the Cycle of the West.
Alas! the Sprite that haunts us
Deceives our rash desire;
It whispers of the glorious gods,
And leaves us in the mire.—R. W. Emerson, "The World-Soul"

Unquestionably, the works of Emerson, with their transcendental orientation and classical status, were read by Neihardt. And even if he hadn't read "The World-Soul," Neihardt would have relished Emerson's sentiments concerning man's innate yearning for the spirit world and would have agreed that the spiritual quest is frustrating. Of course, Emerson did not really believe that mankind should avoid the pursuit of an ideal because of the pain involved. Neihardt vehemently opposed such an idea for, to him, the spiritual yearning of man can lead him, if he perseveres, ultimately to that final aspect of unison with the cosmos, transcendent spiritual harmony.

The Message

As gleaned from the Cycle, the achievement of this unison with the spiritual world is manifested in man by a state of serenity. Through the character of Jed Smith, Neihardt portrays the essential nature of the man who has reached this goal of serenity. Smith's arrival at spiritual knowledge allows him to maintain a posture of equanimity and magnanimity even in the most torturous situations of danger, deprivation, and apparent hopelessness. Though he solves worldly problems with exceptional competency, he is completely aloof from the
other men's understandable anxieties. To Art Black, it is obvious that Jed's serenity stems from this spiritual knowledge, which Black expresses simply:

"... he sort of knew what really is
And always was and shall be evermore,
So that he wasn't bothered looking for
What isn't, wasn't and will never be"("Jed Smith," p. 45).

Neihardt attempts to express figuratively the quintessence of spiritual serenity through the description of Sitanka's moment of death. Just as the soldier raises the butt of his gun to crush Sitanka's skull, Neihardt freezes the moment to reveal the experience of spiritual understanding which enables Sitanka to feel brotherhood with and compassion for his misguided killer:

Unmeasured as the tragedy of man,
Brief as the weapon's poising and the stroke,
It burned upon him; and a white light broke
About it... ("Messiah," p. 109).

Transcendent spiritual knowledge, a prerequisite for spiritual serenity, is only learned through constant and intense contemplation. Neihardt characterizes Smith as being notably taciturn. It is intimated that his silences are filled with contemplation: "that long-range look" ("Jed Smith," p. 95), "the peace on 'Diah's face" ("Jed Smith," p. 67).

Furthermore, contemplation brings new and revealing insights which refresh Jed's spiritual nature, allowing him to maintain an attitude of serenity amid intense confusion and pain. Neihardt conveys this idea by linking contemplation directly to the water symbol. Reflecting on a particularly waterless stretch of exploration, Black relates:
"There'd be a freshness in Jed's face and eyes
When he came striding from a spell of straying
Off trail somewhere. I know now he'd been praying.
You'd swear he knew a spring along the way,
And kept it for himself! He'd smile and say
We shouldn't doubt, but we should trust and know
There'd soon be water" ("Jed Smith," p. 31).

As water revitalizes the body, then, contemplation revitalizes the spirit through new insights which sustain Jed's equanimity.

Through the use of a variation of the light symbol, a variation which appears frequently in "Messiah" and "Jed Smith," it is evident that contemplation aids the achievement of spiritual serenity by enabling man to tap a source of inner revelation. Normally in the Cycle, light is transmitted, as can be expected, from a source external from man. Thus, spiritual understanding normally appears to be derived from an external source. For the person who has achieved cosmic unison, however, light also emanates from within. This is most clearly exemplified by Wovoka's messianic dream in which all of the creatures that survive the apocalypse and live in the millenium, and are therefore privy to spiritual understanding, cast no shadows because the light of spiritual understanding is no longer external:

"It did not fall
From heaven, blinding, but it glowed from all

Thus, the light of spiritual understanding radiates from within and, for Neihardt's cosmic man, spiritual understanding and serenity are gained through introspection.

The ability to achieve serenity, however, is not restricted to the specially initiated. Rather, spiritual knowledge is
available to all, as is witnessed by the three narrators of "Jed Smith." While the level of accomplishment depends on perseverance in the spiritual quest, even Squire, the basest of the three trappers, is vaguely able to realize a notion of transcendent spirituality. When crossing the divide and descending upon the Green River with Jed, he describes the spiritual feeling which is beyond the awe of the physical:

"A feel of something you could never know, But it was something big and still and dim That wouldn't tell....
'Twas the other side of things-- Another world!" ("Jed Smith," p. 17).

Consistent with his egalitarian ideals, furthermore, Neihardt shows that all men have spiritual yearnings. Henry Nash Smith asserts that the mountain man in American literature "is an anarchic and self-contained atom--hardly even a monad--alone in a hostile, or at best a neutral, universe."\(^5\) Contrary to Smith's classification, however, Neihardt's mountain men all long for a spiritual order beyond themselves. Again, lowly Squire (the significance of his name is obvious) recognizes an inherent compulsion toward spirituality in all men. When Jed stops to pray in the midst of the awesome beauty of the valley of the Green, Squire acknowledges that man is naturally inclined to the spirit: "It seemed the sort of thing a fellow does/With just that sort of feeling..." ("Jed Smith," p. 18).

In order to tap this source of inner revelation through contemplation, however, one first has to achieve a higher state

\(^5\)Virgin Land, p. 78.
of consciousness. (Neihardt's incorporation and attempted concretization of Vedanta mysticism becomes necessarily abstract at this point as the concepts themselves are nebulous.) This higher state is related in three motifs. In the first, higher consciousness is depicted as utter silence or, often, as the void. Throughout the entire Cycle, but most explicitly in "Jed Smith," the necessity of silence is advocated as a part of the process of achieving spiritual understanding. Not only does silence encourage contemplation, but more significantly, in silence transcendent spirituality can be realized intuitively:

"To feel that snow-hushed solitude of pine
Grow darker, darker, darker, listening.
And 'twasn't any sort of mortal thing,
That made you almost glad to be afraid" ("Jed Smith," p. 63).

Likewise, Neihardt persistently and conspicuously utilizes the desert image to convey the idea of the void. In the desert passages, Evans describes his trance-like, ethereal journeys through timeless space:

"One night holds changeless--blown of purple glass...
A dream of torture, with a dream of dawn
And food and water floating on ahead
Forever....
The sound of feet forever on the way
To emptiness, the hollow-sounding breath

It is during these desert passages that Bob Evans achieves his highest states of spiritual understanding. Another depiction of this state of higher consciousness is through deep, dreamless sleep. The harried Lakotas of "Messiah" hope that their suffering is advancing them to a spiritual state which is expressed in terms precisely descriptive of the Vedanta concept of dreamless sleep:
Verily it seemed
To many that their woes were only dreamed,
And this the verge of waking to a deep
Serenity beyond the pain of sleep
Forevermore ("Messiah," p. 69).

Bob Evans directly describes the state:

"I've often wondered what it is you find
Down yonder at the bottom of a sleep--
Not shoaling slumber, but the ocean-deep
And dreamless sort. There's something that you touch,
And what you call it needn't matter much
If you can reach it" ("Jed Smith," p. 81).

The final motif for the depiction of higher consciousness is
the death of self. Sitanka attains his profound interpretation
of the messianic dream only after having undergone an experience
so like death that his people assume he is dead:

The women now began
To make the dear one ready for the grass.
And then it was the wonder came to pass!
He drew a moaning breath. A tremor shook
His limbs. The empty winter of his look
Began to fill. There broke upon his face
From some immeasurably distant place

Likewise, the pretense of Short Bull is misjudged by the people
to be the result of exactly such a moribund experience:

What ecstatic death
Of self in vision yielded him the breath
Of universal living for a while,
That so upon this trouble he could smile,
With such a look upon the darkness beam? ("Messiah,"
p. 64)

The underlying intent of this motif is the manifestation of
a higher state of consciousness which approximates the total
loss of self associated with death. At any rate, all of these
motifs have at least one aspect in common: the attempt to
express figuratively an extremely abstract spiritual experience
of a higher, transcendent plane which is beyond the confines of the language alone.

What is it that the spiritually attuned discover when they cross over into this state of higher consciousness? On the surface, it appears they find that tangibility is not real but intangibility is. This misinterpretation may occur because of the momentous significance with which Neihardt views the recognition of spiritual truths. Actually, though, despite the great emphasis placed on spiritual realities, Neihardt does not purport that the tangible world is evil, valueless, or devoid of spirituality in itself. Rather, when the physical world is viewed from the proper perspective, its value is quite evident. As Yellow Breast simply states, "It seemed that something lifted like smoke/ And common things were wonderful and new" ("Messiah," p. 36). And Neihardt attempts to explain that the nuances between the tangible and intangible are very subtle, that the reality of the spiritual world is at least as evident as that of the physical world, and probably more so, to those who see with spiritual insight. For instance, the adherents to the messianic dream can sense, while listening to the message of the envoys, the proximity of the transcendent spiritual world: "A breath might break the world-wall, bubble-thin,/ Between the starry seeming and the Light" ("Messiah," p. 45).

The spiritual dimension, however, is definitely the more significant of these two aspects of reality to Neihardt. He succinctly expresses this conviction through one of Evans' metaphysical musings:
"As though the stubborn stuff of earthly things
Was thinner than you knew, or only seemed,
And suddenly the agony you dreamed

The supremacy of spiritual reality is periodically projected in the Cycle through the juxtaposition of dreams and the tangible world. Often, Neihardt presents these two forms of reality for comparison. In "Jed Smith," this is witnessed by Evans' persistent inability to distinguish between his trance visions and physical reality during his wanderings with Jed through seemingly endless expanses of desert:

"You sort of floated with a strange
Convincingness...
And suddenly you stumbled broad awake
And walking yet. Or were you still asleep?" ("Jed Smith," p. 75)

Evans' inability to distinguish, however, must be attributed to his frustrating inability to attain the heights of spiritual insight, rather than to a confirmation by Neihardt that the reality of the physical world and that of the spiritual world are of equal significance. For in "Messiah," Neihardt leaves no room for doubt that the reality of the spirit world (symbolized by dreams) is more substantial. The skeptics watching the Ghost Dance are forced to this realization, which Neihardt expresses by comparing living to the confusion often associated with sleeping, the dream being the recognition of a more crucial reality:

But suddenly, as though they slept
And dreamed till then, to wake at last and see
Swift saps [sic] of meaning quickened to a tree
("Messiah," p. 50).
Black Elk clarifies the notion that the world envisioned in dreams is more enduring than the tangible world perceived in conscious awareness when he describes his own Ghost Dance vision:

"What shall be so
Forever, I have seen, I did not sleep;
I only woke and saw it" ("Messiah," p. 55).

Likewise, Neihardt confirms the supremacy of spiritual reality by asserting that the truer form of vision is through the spirit. Although a man may see through the eyes all of his lifetime, it is not until he seeks and attains spiritual understanding that he sees what is truly worthwhile. Wovoka preaches that those who attain cosmic unison (and, therefore, spiritual understanding also) "shall see/ At last..." ("Messiah," p. 27).

Furthermore, attention focused on tangible sights often precludes spiritual vision. This concept is symbolized in "Jed Smith" by a mountain range upon which Evans fixes his gaze during one of the crossings of the Great Central Desert. The range represents the antithesis of spiritual insight (it is "blackened, featureless" ("Jed Smith," p. 71), and it eerily seems to float ahead of the expedition, continually blocking Evans' view of what lies behind it ("The black range looming near us seemed the same/ We left behind us when the moon was setting" ("Jed Smith," p. 76). It is significant that during this desert passage Evans nearly embraces nihilism, doubting the existence of higher spiritual truths altogether. This extreme doubt occurs despite the vivid depiction of the void,
an environment in which he should have attained the higher state of consciousness conducive to spiritual understanding. Therefore, it is implied that tangible realities (the dark mountain range) have blocked Evans' spiritual vision.

According to Neihardt, however, spiritual understanding cannot be attained by withdrawing from the mainstream of life. Rather, the seeker must undergo the struggle in order to come to terms with it. This concept constitutes one of the most interesting components of Neihardt's spirituality. He regards suffering and struggle not merely as aspects of human existence which must be endured nor as aspects which are desirable only because they make man pleasing to God. Rather, the struggle of existence is not dependent on external justification but is valuable in itself as the absolutely essential procedure for reaching the highest stratum of spiritual understanding. For to Neihardt, without the suffering and confusion of the struggle (in conjunction with contemplation, of course), there can be no realization of transcendent spiritual realities. Although this theme is laced throughout the Cycle, Neihardt does not explicitly state the concept until midway through "Messiah" when the skeptics watching the Ghost Dance are overcome by the realization that a spiritual truth motivates the dance. Neihardt describes their insight as one arrived at through suffering:

A joy that only weeping can express
This side of dying, swept them like a rain
Illumining with lightning that is pain
The life-begetting darkness that is sorrow ("Messiah," p. 50).
But the Native American people do not realize the significance of their suffering until Sitanka reveals a vague understanding of it just before the arrival at Wounded Knee. Messengers have arrived bearing the devastating news that not only is Kicking Bear's band, with which they were to link forces, unaccompanied by the Messiah, but that it has surrendered to the whites as well. Trying to encourage and enlighten his people, Sitanka prays:

"Great Spirit, give us eyes...
To see how sorrow can be wise,
And pain a sacred teaching that is kind,
Until the blind shall look upon the blind
And see one face; until their wounds shall ache
One holy wound, and all the many wake
One Being, older than all pain and prayer"("Messiah," p. 95).

The enlightened whites of the Cycle also come to this difficult but essential truth. Bob Evans understands that the spiritual vision which he has been able to achieve is the result of the agonizing experiences which he has undergone. Had they known the suffering and confusion that a particular desert crossing would entail Evans speculates that they probably would not have ventured forth, and he declares, "Now I'm glad we didn't know,/ Because of what I saw when I had learned" ("Jed Smith," p. 73). Therefore, because of the benefits to be gained from such a pilgrimage through pain, the struggle is not to be feared or shunned. On the contrary, Black Elk instructs the Ghost Dancers to embrace suffering and to fear spiritual ignorance instead: "Do not weep,/ For it is only being blind that hurts" ("Messiah," p. 55).
The Human Failure

It is readily apparent in the Cycle that very few of Neihardt's characters attain the goal of spiritual serenity. Only Jed Smith, Sitting Bull and Sitanka unquestionably do; it appears that Crazy Horse also has achieved transcendent spiritual harmony, although it is only intimated. But the rest of the characters are definitely left groping on a lower plane.

Although the white race, as a whole, is most exemplary of the failure to achieve spiritual serenity, it is important to note at this point that Neihardt does not despise the race. Rather, he is awed by its potential and consistently characterizes it as vibrant and glorious. On the first page of the Cycle, after describing the bustling scene in St. Louis of vigorous men lured there by adventure, Neihardt concludes with the terse line, "They were young" ("Three Friends," p. 1). "They" were the forerunners of the white invasion into the trans-Mississippi West. The vitality of their youth is accentuated when contrasted with the feebleness of the Native Americans at the end of the Cycle. Spotted Tail pathetically foretells the inevitable doom of the Native American way of life early in "Indian Wars" and, at the same time, recognizes the irrepressible vigor of the invading whites:

"And we are getting old. Consider, friends, How everything begins and grows and ends That other things may have their time and grow. ...About us now you hear the dead leaves sigh; Since these were green, how few the moons have been! We share in all this trying to begin, This trying not to die. Consider well
The White Man—what you know and what men tell
About his might. His never weary mind
And busy hands do magic for his kind" ("Indian Wars," p. 30).

Neihardt describes, through a parallel description of nature, the first whites ascending the Missouri as "stout oaks thrilling with the sap" ("Three Friends," p. 2) to emphasize their vigor and power.

The white race, however, is piteously unable to harness its boundless energies and convert them to spiritual fulfillment. As human beings, whites in the Cycle have strong spiritual yearnings, but they have no spiritual foundation to guide them toward serenity. This general lack of spirituality compels them to search madly for alternative means of fulfillment. In a headlong rush, then, they insanely pursue the unknown ("And we saw what fed our hunger for the new/ But couldn't satisfy it; for it grew/ Beyond the feeding" ("Jed Smith," p. 29),
danger ("For O how many a lad/ Would see the face of danger,
and go mad/ With her weird vixen beauty" ("Three Friends," p. 57), and material wealth ("The image of the eagle on the gold/
These mad Wasichus worship and obey!" ("Messiah," p. 80). The completion of the Civil War only fuels their madness and confusion, for, in their dearth of spirituality, they are impermeable to the lessons taught by war. It only makes them more restless:

Now many a hearth of home had gotten strange
To eyes that knew sky-painting flares of war.
... The spring, where erst
The peering plowboy sensed a larger thirst,
Had shoaled from awe, so long the man had drunk
At deeper floods.
... So the world went small ("Indian Wars," pp. 1-2).
Like their Lakota counterparts in "Indian Wars," the whites, too, are symbolized by a negative variation of the water image: that is, as a raging flood of destruction:

The valley roads ran wagons, and the hills
Through lane and by-way fed with trickling rills
The man-stream mighty with a mystic thaw ("Indian Wars," p. 2).

As a whole, the white race wallows in the depths of confusion at the opposite end of the spectrum from spiritual serenity.

One of the most glaring human failures to achieve transcendent spirituality occurs through the lack of perseverance in the struggle. Bob Evans is the outstanding example of this failure in the Cycle. Throughout "Jed Smith," intimations are made that Evans harbors a tremendous sense of guilt. During most of the tale, Neihardt suggests that Evans' troubled conscience stems from his belief that he had betrayed friendship by not accompanying Jed on his final and fatal journey. Even more plentiful than these hints of guilt, though, are recurring statements by Evans indicating an acute sense of spiritual frustration. For often in the song, Evans briefly reaches peaks of spiritual insight that rival the spiritual understanding of Jed Smith:

"A moment, maybe, when you felt at last
The miracle of water singing through you,
And suddenly it seemed the desert knew you
And was a breast that pitied, and the blind,
Wide stare of heaven softened and was kind" ("Jed Smith," p. 87).

But he cannot sustain his insightfulness, and, in the time just prior to the rendezvous, he has been wandering aimlessly in spiritual desolation:
"Well, I knocked about
Among the mountains, hunting beaver streams,
Alone....
And more and more
I knew, whatever I was hunting for,

At the end of the song, the two streams of guilt and frustration merge to reveal the depths of Evans' true failure. While it is true that he seems to retain some definite guilt in Neihardt's eyes for not following Jed on the last exploration, the far more significant implication of his failure to act is that he has avoided the essential suffering of the struggle. In foregoing the struggle, he has rejected the course of spiritual insight which could have elevated him to the transcendent spiritual plane manifested by serenity. Thus, the cause of his guilt (abandonment of Jed) is also the root of his spiritual frustration. Evans recognizes both the nature and the cause of his spiritual confusion and concludes his narrative on a note of despair as one who, having had spiritual triumph at hand, balked at the moment of truth:

"I should have followed anywhere he went.
... But when he started back
For California with another band--
And Silas--all the torture of that land
Came on me like a nightmare. I was gray
And old inside. And so he went away

At the end of the song, he figuratively relates to his dozing companions the frustration and desolation caused by his failure to face the suffering of the struggle:

"All around me there
Was empty desert, level as a sea,
And like a picture of eternity
Completed for the holding of regret ("Jed Smith," p. 111)
... or suddenly a hill or draw
Would sadden with the vision that I saw
Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Neihardt's spirituality is his conviction, despite his preoccupation with matters of the spirit, that man is inherently incapable of achieving complete spiritual understanding in his lifetime. Neihardt states this concept through a simple man, Art Black:

"You're always wanting life to be a story
With some pat end to show what it's about.
Somebody's torn a lot of pages out,
If that's the case! You never quite arrive" ("Jed Smith," p. 46).

Therefore, the cost of the struggle for spiritual understanding is never fully repaid in that complete spiritual understanding is never attained. Neihardt never denies, however, the necessity of the struggle, for, though the cost is not fully repaid, it is adequately repaid. The recompense is sufficient spiritual understanding to attain the goal of serenity. Part of that serenity comes from the peaceful acceptance of the fact that spiritual transcendence can never be complete in this life.

This concept is figuratively witnessed in the life of Jed Smith. Smith, remember, is Neihardt's cosmic man and is characterized as such throughout the song bearing his name. He has reached a spiritual serenity which distinguishes and separates him from all his human associates. Yet near the end of the song, even Jed momentarily loses his almost supernatural aloofness from the confusion of mankind. Having undergone the most torturous desert crossing of the several grueling journeys chronicled in the song, a crossing in which only three men and two pack animals have survived, the small expedition approaches
a ridge, beyond which, according to Jed's calculations, there is water. Jed's competent leadership through desolation and his ability to find water throughout the journeys have been symbolically indicative of spiritual serenity. He is also outwardly confident in his competence as an explorer, which, in turn, symbolizes his assurance of the strength of his spiritual understanding. Yet when they top the ridge, they find only desert stretching out before them. Jed, it is insinuated, becomes painfully aware that his spiritual knowledge is incomplete just as his knowledge of the desert is not infallible. His temporary loss of spiritual serenity is related in the moving words of Bob Evans:

"It was an old,
Old man I saw a moment in his place
The look of something broken in his face
That wasn't to be mended any more" ("Jed Smith," p. 95).

Evans goes on to mention "'Diah's haunted eyes upon a lake/ He didn't see, those hollow, haunted eyes" ("Jed Smith," p. 96).

To Neihardt, this inability to achieve complete spiritual understanding is a necessary restriction of the human condition. Nevertheless, it is this aspect of existence--to struggle valiantly toward a goal of complete spiritual understanding only to be inevitably doomed to at least some degree of spiritual frustration and blindness--that unites men most fully in their common humanity. Evans vaguely realizes this elemental truth of Neihardt's spirituality when he states:

"For more than pity happened in that bleak,
Forsaken moment when I saw him weak
Upon that ridge. I'd just begun to love him
And something in the breaking manhood of him
Was stronger than his old unbroken might" ("Jed Smith," p. 96).
The spiritual struggle is necessarily unfulfilled according to Neihardt because man's spiritual constitution while on earth is not strong enough to bear the full magnitude of spiritual revelation. Neihardt expresses this in the *Cycle* through Art Black. Squire, realizing in some vague way that the meaning of existence has eluded him because he has avoided the struggle, wistfully declares that he wishes he had accompanied Jed on his most grueling desert crossings. To this, Black scornfully replies:

"You wish he'd taken you, and if he had
You'd know, with inside knowledge of the thing,
How buzzards soar, what makes the kiotes sing
Such mournful ditties, what the crows regret
With their cawing. Maybe so--and yet,
Who ever saw a wolf with bowels of brass
Or bird with iron gizzard? Let is pass,--" ("Jed Smith," p. 26).

Black intimates that these secrets of the cosmos can never be known with absolute comprehension, that is, "with inside knowledge of the thing," because man's spiritually frail nature simply does not have the fortitude (the "bowels of brass," the "iron gizzard") to enable him to comprehend such awesome knowledge. Black insinuates that it is better, therefore, that man does not know such secrets.

This awesome knowledge, however, will not be withheld from man forever. The secrets left unknown in this life will be revealed in the afterlife. Neihardt projects this through the final gathering of Sitting Bull and his loyal friends. When his friends urge him to flee to some safer area because it has become evident that his enemies are planning some sort of entrapment for him, Sitting Bull deliberately twists the
meaning of their word "go" in order to direct their attention away from temporal anxieties and toward the more important transcendent realities, particularly those of the afterlife:

"You bid me go; but which way lives the Good? I know my friend would tell me, if he could, Where greens that land, the weary trail to go. How many sleeps, and where the grasses grow The deepest, and the waterholes are sweet. Then would I ride my horses off their feet To find that country! But the Spirit keeps The secret yet awhile" ("Messiah," p. 80).

Thus, Sitting Bull also acknowledges that man cannot achieve complete spiritual understanding, for "the Spirit keeps/ The secret yet...." But the secret is withheld only for "awhile," to be revealed after death. Again, Sitting Bull purposely misconstrues the intended meaning of his friends' word "sleep" (meaning duration, nights) to arrive at the profounder symbolic meaning of the slumber of death: "How many sleeps?/ One sleep, the last and deepest of them all!/ I will not ride, my friends" ("Messiah," p. 80). The secrets of the afterlife he is not able to actively pursue (he "will not ride") because it is not within his human power to capture, to recognize them. Only by passively submitting to death will they be revealed.

The obvious question, then, arises: If complete spiritual understanding is unattainable on earth but will be revealed in the afterlife, would not it be wiser to forego the agonizing struggle here on earth and simply wait passively for the afterlife? To Neihardt, the answer is very clear. Man's frustrating struggle to reach a comprehensive understanding of existence is not merely a senseless, Sisyphean labor. First, man owes it to others to seek the highest spiritual level possible.
Note that Jed's memory continues to inspire Bob Evans in his disheartening quest for insight; Sitanka's example and revelation enable many of his tribesmen to be at peace with their predicament; Sitting Bull's equanimity soothes his anxious followers. Secondly, man owes it to himself. Neihardt insinuates that life without spiritual insight is more torturous than the struggle for insight. Note Evan's continuing desolation after having avoided the suffering of existence on but one crucial instance. Squire, on the other hand, has given up the struggle altogether. Speaking about the times when all things held wonder, he says, "Them days are dead/ And gone forever..." ("Jed Smith," p. 20). Now his life is bearable only in a drunken stupor which partially diverts his mind from his failure to assume the necessary human struggle for spiritual knowledge. He berates Evans for musing on the higher spiritual realities with the words: "Aw, drink hearty and forget!/ You're far too sober, Bob!" ("Jed Smith," p. 12). Finally, man must seek the highest spiritual strata for the sake of his humanity. Note that Jed is exceedingly respected by his associates, but he is never loved as a human being by any of them until Evans witnesses his "breaking manhood" on the ridge. His struggle to accept the incompleteness of spiritual understanding has rendered him fully human. Therefore, spiritual insight cannot be passively awaited but must be actively pursued.

This is the supreme secret, then, in achieving the total human harmony with the cosmos which effects spiritual serenity. Neihardt exhorts the reader to exploit every avenue available
to reach the highest spiritual state possible, but in the end, man must accept the fact that his understanding will be ultimately incomplete.

Jed Smith submits to this realization and soon regains his serenity: "I saw that hawk-gaze coming back,/ That long-range look of something that he saw/ Beyond you" ("Jed Smith," p. 95). With this ultimate realization, his spiritual understanding is revitalized. This is symbolized by his discovery of water (source of spiritual sustenance and revival) soon after his realization of the incompleteness of spiritual understanding. The strength of his understanding, in fact, is enhanced. Bringing water to the other men, Jed is described by Evans in the words: "And he was blooming.../ All gentle light" ("Jed Smith," p. 102).

Likewise, through his peaceful acknowledgement of the incompleteness of spiritual knowledge, Sitting Bull reaches a state of ultimate serenity even in the presence of encroaching death. Neihardt figuratively concretizes Sitting Bull's total peace with the cosmos in an amazingly complete and compact image. Sitting Bull stands alone in the night, his breath rising like the incense of a votive offering to the spirit world. The spirit world confirms the unison by responding to Sitting Bull with the light of insight, while the fog of death gradually envelops him:
Still he waited there,
His ghostly breath ascending like a prayer,
The peace of starlight falling for reply
Upon his face uplifted to the sky,
And 'round his body, like a wraith of doom,
The ground-fog rising ("Messiah," p. 82).

In bidding his friends farewell, Sitting Bull symbolically expresses the achievement of the supreme, encompassing message of Neihardt's Cycle of the West--complete peace in the unison between man and the cosmos:

"It is well with me" ("Messiah," p. 81).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JOHN G. NEIHARDT

In his epic, *Cycle of the West*, using the historical framework of the transformation of the trans-Mississippi West, John G. Neihardt proclaims the urgency of and method for attaining spiritual harmony between man and the cosmos. The call to spiritual unison is well-ordered, well-developed, and consistent. This is to be expected considering the insightful, integrated world-view upon which it is based. Despite some already noted artistic flaws, Neihardt's *Cycle* is truly an impressive work.

It is unfortunate that this significant achievement is still relatively unrecognized today, for the *Cycle's* message carries particular relevance for the current era. John G. Neihardt did not devote thirty years of his life to write a musty, esoteric spiritual/historical treatise. Rather, he wrote *Cycle of the West* to leave a continuously relevant message to the world, and to America in particular, based on his spiritual observation of mankind. From "the farther slope of a veritable 'watershed of history,'"¹ he viewed the transformation of the West, not as a prosaic socio-economic event, but as a deeply

moving spiritual struggle with profound ramifications for ongoing generations.

In "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner stated:

He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.

* * * *

And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier is gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.\(^2\)

Neihardt also recognized the expansiveness and boundless energy of the American people, and he gloriied in them. But, as in the Turner Thesis, his Cycle acknowledges the fact that physical limits will necessarily restrict the technological and commercial quest. The Cycle warns "The worshippers shall come to be the prey!" ("Messiah," p. 80) In this spiritually troubled era Neihardt's message becomes ominous.

Turner insinuated that the second great period of American expansion was just beginning. Neihardt hoped that in this second period, the same boundless vitality and expansiveness which spurred an American people to such great achievements in the physical world could be harnessed to attain equally great heights in the spiritual world. To this end, Neihardt felt

compelled to spread "The secret of the Everlasting Word,"
lest it be buried in the confusion of materialism as it was
in the snow at Wounded Knee.

But the success of his spiritual message relies primarily
on the reader rather than the proponent. This he humbly acknow-
ledges through the words of Good Thunder in "The Song of the
Messiah":

"You too shall hear;
But feeble is the tongue and dull the ear,
And it is with the heart that you shall know" ("Messiah," p. 21).

Neihardt, then, leaves it up to the reader.

Unfortunately, the readers of the Cycle have remained
relatively few. Still, there is some hope for future recognition
because, in the past, many valuable works have not been widely
recognized until after the authors' deaths. Leaves of Grass
and Moby Dick come immediately to mind. But even if the Cycle
of the West never becomes widely acclaimed, it will not be
because of a dearth in profundity, continuing relevance, or
universal scope. John G. Neihardt has presented a strong case
for recognition by posterity.
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