

Masks of Tradition: Comedy and Tragedy in the life of Nicholas Black Elk

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When men no longer love nor hate; when suffering causes no pity, and the tale of great deeds ceases to thrill, when the lily of the field shall seem no longer more beautifully arrayed than Solomon in all his glory, and the awe has vanished from the snow-capped peak and deep ravine, then indeed science may have the world to itself, but it will not be because the monster (science) has devoured art, but because one side of human nature is dead, and because men have lost the half of their ancient and present attributes.

(Thomas Henry Huxley, English biologist; from a speech to the Royal Academy in London, 1883.)

One of the persistent themes cutting across the varieties of postmodernist philosophical critiques is the perceived necessity of dismantling the "given," the "natural," the narrow range of culturally-imposed hegemonic norms and classes that dominate both our private self-assessments and our public forms of life. To say that these norms and classes are culturally imposed is another way of saying that they are arbitrary, contingent, artificial, and simply the willful construction of those who seek to maintain their power in a given social context. This kind of externally established identification of individuals and groups -- whether in terms of gender, social class, racial or ethnic heritage, genetic composition, mental or physical condition, or any other form of taxonomy -- is disallowed. Unencumbered by any prior identity, each person is free to construct her own. Personal identity is "up to us," as Aristotle says,¹ if it is fair to attribute to Aristotle the claim that our character is equivalent to our personal identity, our substance.

But this is precisely the question we wish to raise. How are we to discern the truth about what it means to be a human being? Is there an enduring, substantial core that is specifically

¹Aristotle, **Nicomachean Ethics**, trans. Terence Irwin, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1985) 1113a 3-13.

common to human beings -- a "human nature," a "human substance"? The traditional argument has been that there is such a "nature" common to human beings, and further, that this "nature" serves as an epistemic boundary, within which we may safely explore the truth about the human creature. The alternative argument is that there is no substantial core, no "human nature," and that each person is therefore invited to invent (or re-invent) the Self. This is not merely an exercise in epistemic deconstruction, but an abolition of any reliable ontology in the name of epistemic freedom.

During the past half-century, both Alasdair MacIntyre and Kenneth Burke have contributed to the discussion that has taken place within the Anglo-American philosophical tradition which bear on these issues. MacIntyre has focused much of his work on social philosophy and moral theory, while Burke is best known as a social critic and literary theorist. By attending to very different aspects of contemporary western culture, both men have offered rejoinders to one of the stark and troubling consequences of the current philosophical movement to banish the "given:" a widespread surrender to epistemic and moral relativism. Our attempt in this paper is to describe the responses developed by MacIntyre and Burke to this problem, and by means of a specific and compelling historical example, to demonstrate that MacIntyre's emphasis on the character of traditions, and Burke's analysis of symbol systems embedded in social practices, can address the concerns that are provoked by the specter of an unfettered relativism. We will offer brief accounts of MacIntyre's and Burke's works, assess the relevance of their works to the problem of relativism, and suggest that the narrative history of the Oglala Lakota, Nicholas Black Elk, as recorded by John Neihardt, serves as an exemplar of inter-subjective translation of meaning between different traditions and contexts.

While in his early work Alasdair MacIntyre assayed a wide range of issues within social, political and moral philosophy from a broadly Marxist perspective, his more recent and celebrated work -- including **After Virtue**,² **Whose Justice? Which Rationality?**,³ and **Three**

²Alasdair MacIntyre, **After Virtue**, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry⁴ -- has taken over methods and insights from Aristotle in developing a particular critique within moral philosophy. MacIntyre has emphasized tradition, narrative and social practice as the fundamental ingredients in the construction of ethically responsible individuals. The phrase "ethically responsible individuals" is grounded in an Aristotelian teleology, whereby an individual is directed to pursue that which is the good for herself, and where that good is understood to be defined as a constant (that is, applicable to all individuals) within a particular context.

These particular contexts, understood in the broadest possible way, are what MacIntyre means by traditions.⁵ Traditions mark off domains within which a variety of discourses are contoured by the specific character of the tradition within which they occur; a discourse on art, or religion, or tool-making, that takes place within one tradition will differ in meaningful ways from the corresponding discourse in another tradition. MacIntyre connects discourses firmly to social practices, in that social practices functionally constitute the substance of traditions, and so also of the discourses within a tradition. Individuals, according to MacIntyre, engage in social practices within a tradition in order to seek the goods internal to the practices. These internal goods serve to identify the standards of excellence pursued by the individual who is engaged in the practice. When these standards are realized by the practitioner, then the individual will have achieved the good for herself. By submitting herself to the discipline of the social practice, the individual actualizes this good, which is a good that inures to her as a practitioner. Although various practices that flourish within a given tradition will express a multiplicity of internal goods, the general criterion of excellence is the universal constant that is the emblem, and the telos, of the individual engaged in any practice.⁶

³Alasdair MacIntyre, **Whose Justice? Which Rationality?** (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, **Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, Tradition**, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁵See MacIntyre, **After Virtue**, 204-225, and **Whose Justice? Which Rationality?**, 349-369.

⁶For MacIntyre's discussion of social practices, see **After Virtue**, 187-203.

It is precisely by engaging in a practice that, as it were, an individual "gets a life." The story that can be told about someone's life is just that story that can be told about the progress toward her telos, an effort carried out by seeking to acquire the goods internal to practices. This is the narrative structure of a human life, and it is the only kind of structure that MacIntyre will endorse. MacIntyre echoes the contemporary insistence that we must dissolve any reliance on some sort of "metaphysical biology" as a source for unifying the single human life. The essence of a human being is not to be found in a putative "soul" or "mind" or "autonomous self" (this last emerging from the fractious influence of the Enlightenment, for MacIntyre). What it means to be human can be described only by invoking the narrative of an individual's life, inasmuch as that life is shaped by the social practices adhered to, and the standards of excellence achieved, within that lifetime. It is the narrative that unifies a single life -- that gives a human life an identity -- and not some enduring essence resting at the core of our "metaphysical biology."

It is apparent that much of this is consistent with Aristotle's outlook: the emphasis on normative activities that occur within specific communities which in turn share a common set of understandings about what it is to live well. The claim that personal identity is tied to ethical concerns is also Aristotelian. Human beings can only be identified by means of the narratives produced to describe human beings, and these narratives summarize the individual's striving toward her telos by means of achieving the excellence embodied in the social practices sanctioned by a given tradition. Who I am is a question that can only be answered by considering how I have done in realizing the good for me. To be, is to be constantly seeking to achieve the good, which is my proper telos.

But what are we to say about all this, if it turns out that there are many traditions, each of which possesses its own set of social practices, each with its own standards of excellence and internal goods? Can we say that there is one version out of all these discourses that we can call "correct" or "accurate," or even "more adequate" than all the others? Is there any way to discover what may be the good that cuts across all traditions, all practices, all narratives? Is there any discourse that embraces all other discourses about human identity and the achievement

of the good, and arbitrates the discussion? Or are all traditions closed to each other simply because there is no common grounding or transcendent reality available for all traditions to point toward in the midst of their collective discourse? In short -- does MacIntyre's vision of what it means to be human, and to pursue the human good, inevitably result in a necessary turn toward moral and epistemic relativism?

This becomes a particularly serious problem for MacIntyre, since he has previously complained about the fragmentation of moral discourse in the west since the Enlightenment. Is it not the case that the existence of multiple traditions, each possessing a distinctive set of discourses, will produce a similar fragmentation? We may no longer rely on a uniform and universal "metaphysical biology" as an ontological grounding for our self-understanding as human beings, as the tie that binds all human beings together. Unless we can locate something to replace "metaphysical biology," there will be no common ground for us to appeal to, as the basis for any ongoing conversation regarding, say, what constitutes the good of human beings. Can we employ MacIntyre's concept of traditions (including his notions of social practice and the narrative unity of life) as that replacement for "metaphysical biology" in our search for a common ground? It would appear that this will only work if it is the case that there are not multiple and competing traditions, whose language and forms of life are not incommensurate. Unfortunately, there are multiple traditions, and what they say, and what they do, regarding the identity of human beings, and what constitutes the good for them, is likewise multiple, competitive and incommensurate. It would appear that MacIntyre's presentation of traditions will prove to be inadequate to the relativist challenge.

MacIntyre seeks to avoid this problem by describing the relativist (and perspectivist) position as an "heir of the Enlightenment," and by insisting instead that there is a "rationality of traditions" whereby traditions are able to engage in dialogue, as well as mutual critiques. It is possible, says MacIntyre, for us to judge one tradition as better or worse than another tradition, in specific ways and when considering specific practices. What is required is a kind of epistemic spaciousness within the discourses of a given tradition, which would allow the tradition to

absorb the critique offered by the different orientation and practices of the contending tradition. The first tradition may then inspect the critique, utilizing the resources provided by its own modes of inquiry, and determine whether there is any value for that tradition in the integration of any or all of the elements of the critique. There do not appear to be any claims here about the truth or falsity of the specific assertion contained within the critique, only a more modest claim about what takes for one tradition to "hear" what another has to say, and to assess what may be of value for the first tradition in what they "hear" in the critique offered by the second tradition.

In order to help transcend the incommensurability of traditions and attempt to reach beyond the either/or propositions of "metaphysical biology" and "postmodern relativism," we will use Kenneth Burke's "dramaturgical perspective" of rhetorical critique as a frame of reference to view the discourse between Nicholas Black Elk and John Neihardt. Burke asserts that a definition of man as a rational animal is inadequate. For Burke, the "common ground" of humanness does not rest in the individual but in the human's ability to use symbols. Therefore, traditional critiques of human discourse, which focus on the speaker/rhetor, limit understanding. On the other hand, the relativist's experiential focus examines the effects of the discourse on the critic/receiver. It asks the question: What is a discourse/tradition doing to the one involved in it? Rather than focusing on the individual speaker or the experience of the receiver, Kenneth Burke proposes that the locus should be on their interaction, their "symbolic interaction." Like MacIntyre, Burke asserts that it is the narrative that defines what it means to be human. If we are to critique the narrative, to judge between traditions and the differing discourses of traditions, a rhetorical critique that explores the discourse itself must be employed.

Burke proposes the "dramaturgical perspective," which simply assumes that "all the world is a stage." Dramatism could be said to be an attempt bridge the gap between science and the humanities. The human animal is more than the sum of his/her parts. Oedipus and Ahab tell us as much as the laboratory about what humanness is. How the so-called "social sciences" fit in the gap between science and the humanities is the subject of endless debate. Dramatism is offered as a paradigm that bridges the gap.

Theater becomes the root metaphor for a "contemporary image of man." One description of this perspective says, "Dramaturgical thinking is not a linear sequential explanation of human behavior based on mechanistic assumptions as most positivistic social science is. Its point of departure is Kenneth Burke's profound assertion that the difference between a thing and a person is that one merely moves whereas the other acts, and therefore the language of mechanism is inapplicable to the study of human selves."⁷ The human being is an actor on the stage of history.

Behavior then, is expressed in "dramatistic terms." Man is an actor, and his conduct is the action he performs in the drama of living, in order to achieve what he deems the "good life." The most straight forward definition of dramaturgy is that it is the study of how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives through this process of symbol sharing.⁸ What makes man different from other creatures is that he engages in symbol using, "symbolic interaction." Therefore, Burke's definition of man is revealed in this poem:

*"Man is
the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by a sense of order)
and rotten with perfection."⁹*

As a symbol user and misuser, identification takes place in the interaction. The identification with symbols transfers the substance of the symbols. Burke calls this the "consubstantiality" of substance. Symbols are more than the representation of substance. They are "consustantial" with the substance, or "of the same substance." Burke describes this process of symbolic identification in this manner: A is not identical to B, but A can be identified with B.

⁷Dennis Brissett & Charles Edgley ed. **Life as Theater: A dramaturgical Sourcebook**, 2nd edition. (New York: Aldine de Gruyer, 1990) 13.

⁸ *ibid.*, 2.

⁹Kenneth Burke, **Language as Symbolic Action**, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 16.

"Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique . . . Rhetoric deals with the ways people are at odds with one another; identification implies division . . . Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall."¹⁰

Beyond the uniqueness of symbol using and misusing, Burke asserts that within the use of symbols man has invented the negative and has then been moralized by it. Unlike other symbols that have some kind of substantial referent, the negative only exists symbolically. "It is not" has no specific referent. The negative is a specifically linguistic invention. Additionally, man is moralized by this symbol; "it is not" is translated into "thou shalt not." This implies the ideas of "obedience" or "disobedience" and translates into "order"/law which implies "disorder"/lawless. Between the slopes of order and disorder exists the "ACT of will," where "will is viewed as derivable from the idea of an act." From the ideas of will follow the ideas of sacrifice and grace, "the mortification of some desires." Sacrifice is intrinsic to order, and substitution is intrinsic to the symbol user. Hence, vicarious sacrifice as the way to the ultimate reward, "the Good Life."

This vicarious sacrifice is what is known as scapegoating. The symbol using/misusing human transfers guilt symbolically to the scapegoat. The symbol carries the substance, or to use Burke's terminology, the symbol is consubstantial with the substance. The scapegoat, then, is not a survival from earlier eras, but a device natural to, and inherent to language. Burke writes: "Dramatism, as so conceived, asks not how the sacrificial motives revealed in the institutions of magic and religion might be eliminated in a scientific culture, but what new forms they take."¹¹ The dramaturgical perspective then, has humankind playing symbolic roles on the stage of history with their script being the symbolic interaction of language (verbal and nonverbal), and the play is basically a tragedy, a story with a scapegoat which supplies a catharsis.

¹⁰Kenneth Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1969) 21&23.

¹¹Kenneth Burke. "Dramatism." *Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society*, Ed. James E. Combs & Michael W. Mansfield. New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1976, 14-15.

This theory of being is also addressed in Erving Goffman's conception of "Impression Management." Being is constructed by doing; for without a presentation of self, a self is not possible. Therefore, individuality is basically a social rather than a psychological phenomenon.¹² Goffman used the word "face" to describe the socially approved identity that an actor presents. This "face" defines the actor by transferring the substance of the symbols into his or her being. Each of us becomes a kind of playwright, writing the role we play, as well as an actor in the play.¹³ Or in other words, "theater occurs when one or more human beings, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others . . . Theater is a glutton. It will swallow any kind of material and experience that can be turned into performance."¹⁴ Burke's claim is that this play that we are all acting in defines us while we write and act out our scripts. And the script that we are acting out, at least in the western tradition, is a tragedy. This need of a scapegoat (vicarious victimage) is a form of "antithesis." Combined with substitution, it provides identification in terms of an enemy shared in common. He describes this tragic world view, this historical play, in the following poem:

*"Here are the steps
In the Iron Law of History
That welds Order and Sacrifice

Order leads to Guilt
(for who can keep commandments!)
Guilt needs Redemption
(for who would not be cleaned!)
Redemption needs Redeemer
(which is to say a victim!)

Order
Through Guilt
To Victimage
(hence: Cult of Kill)."*¹⁵

¹²ibid., 15.

¹³Erving Goffman, **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁴Bernard Beckerman "*Definitions -- Theater.*" **Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society**, Ed. James E. Combs & Michael W. Mansfield. (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1976) 7.

¹⁵Kenneth Burke, **The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology**, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970) 4-5.

The tragic frame of reference, then, is the foundation of being in western society, and Burke believes this to be the central temptation that must be somehow corrected. He writes: "A dramatic view of human motives thus culminates in the ironic admonition that perversions of the sacrificial principle (purgation by scapegoat, congregation by segregation) are the constant temptation of human societies, whose orders are built by a kind of animal exceptionally adept in the ways of symbolic action."¹⁶ Burke's answer to this ironic dilemma is to change the play of history from a tragedy to a comedy. Since humans are the writers of the script, as well as the actors, we can begin to change the script; we can begin to improvise, begin to play a comedy. Burke asserts that viewing life as a comedy rather than a tragedy should enable people "to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational."¹⁷

This of course is no small request. Nevertheless, a "comic corrective" to a tragic theme is an intriguing idea. Carol Burnette once said, "Comedy is only tragedy plus time." This statement has a western linear picture of history inherent in it. Yet, if one was to subject this idea to a cyclical view of history, the result would be the antithesis. If comedy corrects tragedy, would not an overly comic theme need a tragic corrective? It is this paradoxical relationship between the comic and tragic discourse of traditions that we wish to employ as we explore the question of whether, and to what extent, it is possible for those who live within one tradition to actually be able to "hear" what another tradition has to say.

We propose that humanness has two faces. There would appear to be a perspective here that could supply common ground to absolutists and relativists. If the essence of humanness is carried in the discourse, in the symbolic interaction, then the statement: "In the beginning was the word," has a clear appeal to rationality. Not only so, but the idea that we clearly play a

¹⁶ibid., 16.

¹⁷Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 171.

central role in directing of the script of the narrative is also evident. Burke's methods of rhetorical criticism provide a foundation by which we might examine the symbolic interaction of two very different traditions. We want to suggest that the historical figure of Nicholas Black Elk presents to us an example of the ability to straddle traditions; that he was authentically conversant with two traditions that would be identified by those invested in this contemporary philosophical issue as incommensurate.

Native American and western European traditions are currently being described as incommensurate. Calvin Martin, a historian at Rutgers University currently working with the Yupik Eskimos in Bethel, Alaska, has asserted that Native American culture and Euro-American culture are, "mutually irreconcilable, mutually antagonistic, and mutually unintelligible."¹⁸ Nevertheless, we believe that Nicholas Black was able to transcend this incommensurability.

First let us consider the nature of the American Indian world view. Howard Harrod's study of Northwestern Plains Indians demonstrates that although there were a number of differing world views among the Plains cultures in 1850, they have deep similarities. Native understanding of the world is "shaped by deeply shared symbolic forms sustained by ritual processes."¹⁹ Harrod's method of study was to describe the shared meanings which constituted the Plains Indian's world views. He found that through the process of ritual, "deeply shared symbols gave shape to native experience." He found the Plains Indian world view to be highly metaphorical and symbolic. Symbolic ritual is central to understanding the world, and it is the vehicle by which Natives acquire knowledge. His description of native symbolism delineates the difference between Native and Western world views.

"Symbols breach the everyday world, and they have been seen to function in both individual experience and in the collective experience of the group. The cultural flavor of social worlds has been understood to arise out of the way various possibilities for

¹⁸Calvin Martin, **The American Indian and the Problem of History**, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 9.

¹⁹Howard L. Harrod, **Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality**, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987) 157.

experience were ordered. **That is, cultures differ in the value they assign to dreaming, imagining, and religious experience, as compared with thinking, practical action, and working.**"²⁰

If this is the criteria by which cultures differ, Indian and Western European cultures are at opposite poles. Native cultures place a strong emphasis on visions, dreams, metaphor and myth, while European traditions, rising out of Enlightenment ideology, place a stronger emphasis on rationality, cause and effect, the conception of science and objectivity. These differences also point toward a fundamental difference between the cultures in their dramaturgical world view. The native cultures of the Plains and Northwest Indians have a much more comic frame of reference. The order and law of the tragic frame of western European culture that Burke describes, is in direct contrast to the comic frame of mythic native figures like Coyote and Raven and the Heyoka (clown) ceremony of the Plains Indians. In an earlier work, *Dancing in the Shadowlands with Coyote: The Prophetic Rhetoric of Native Dreamers*,²¹ I have asserted that Coyote is analogous to the frame of reference which Kenneth Burke describes as the comic frame. Coyote, the trickster is clearly a comic rather than a tragic figure. There is no ultimate penalty of judgment attached to Coyote's exploits. Whereas, in the tragic frame of reality, there is a death required by judgment unless the blame for a deed can be laid on a scapegoat. Yet, somehow, Black Elk, along with the help of the poet John Neihardt, found a way of crossing over the boundaries of these traditions, these very different discourses.

Black Elk was an Oglala, Lakota medicine man who participated in the Ghost Dance of 1890. In 1904, he converted to Catholicism and became a Catholic catechist for the rest of his life, some forty years. Upon his conversion, he was given the Christian name Nicholas. Yet, in the face of no small controversy, beginning in 1931,

²⁰ibid., 158 Bold type added for emphasis.

²¹Bruce A. Peterson, *Dancing in the Shadowlands with Coyote: The Prophetic Rhetoric of Native Dreamers*, (Unpublished Thesis, University of Texas Pan-American, Department of Speech Communication, 1995) 10-25.

he articulated his Indian ways, traditions, and sacred visions, along with his life story as a "wic'as'a wakan" (medicine man) to the white poet John Neihardt. The Nebraska scholar recorded these interviews in a book called, **Black Elk Speaks**.²² Raymond J. DeMallie, who has published the actual shorthand transcripts of these meetings, wrote: "for Lakotas symbols were not merely empty signs. They expressed identity: the symbol and the symbolized were one."²³ The Lakota, by their very nature, had an experiential knowledge of the process Kenneth Burke spent volumes articulating to western academia. The scene we will observe begins with the Lakota holy man, from a fundamentally comic tradition being sought out by the white, academic, tragic poet.

It was in August, 1930, that the "*Wasichu*" (white man), John Neihardt, went in search of a Lakota holy man to interview as the final preparations to writing the final volume of his epic poem "The Cycle of the West." In it, the poet laureate of Nebraska would tell the tragic story of the Ghost Dance, which culminated in the Wounded Knee Massacre, the symbol of the white man's conquest of the New World.

It was a dead-end road that led through the treeless, yellow hills to Black Elk's home--a one room log cabin with weeds growing out of the dirt roof. Two old 'long-hairs,' who lived in similar cabins in sight of the road, mounted ponies and followed us, curious to know what might be going on yonder. Little else but weather ever happened in that country--other than sun and moon and stars going over--and there was little for the old men to do but wait for yesterday."

Neihardt's Indian guide, Flying Hawk, said he didn't think the old man would talk. Just the week before he had refused to talk to a white woman who was writing an article on Crazy Horse. The famous chief was Black Elk's second cousin. Neihardt began to worry that the holy man would not talk about the things he held sacred. The two old men, the long hairs on ponies, followed the car up the dead-end road. That day they would see a meeting that might itself be considered

²²John G. Neihardt, **Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told by John Neihardt (Flaming Rianbow)**, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1932), Bison 1988.

²³Raymond J. DeMallie, ed. **The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John Neihardt**, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) xix.

sacred. It would be the meeting of yesterday, today, and the future, the meeting of tragedy and comedy.

When we arrived, Black Elk was standing outside a shade made of pine boughs. It was noon. When we left, after sunset, Flying Hawk said, "That was kind of funny, the way the old man seemed to know you were coming!" My son remarked that he had the same impression; and when I had known the great old man for some years I was quite prepared to believe that he did know, for he certainly had supernormal powers.²⁴

Neihardt described his experience that day in a letter written shortly after the event:

He struck me as being a bit uncanny in his intuitions; not that he favored me, but he seemed to know what was inside the visitor. He told me--the sphinx-like old chap--that, as he sat there, he felt in my heart a very strong will to know the things of the other world and that a spirit, which stood behind me, had forced me to come to him that I might learn a little from him. In spite of the sound of this statement, he was very modest, modest as a man may be who is sure of what he knows and that what he knows is worth knowing. I had no difficulty whatever with him. He seemed to be expecting me and welcomed me as though he had seen me often. He began by saying that he must tell me his whole story in so far as it could be done in the time we had, but it would take a long, long time to tell it all. First, he said he could not speak to me without giving me some reason to know that he had authority to speak. "I am just a common man, but I have a gift of vision, which has been hereditary in my family and I must tell you of my people before I tell you of my life so that you may trust me."²⁵

Thus began a relationship that would result in one of the most important documents ever to be drawn up between an Indian and a white man. **Black Elk Speaks**, would cross the boundaries of tradition, many traditions.

Transforming native oral tradition to the written word is not always received favorably by Native Americans. Black Elk was challenging the norms of native traditions by telling his visions to a white man that they might be written down. Beginning in May, 1931, Black Elk told his story to the sympathetic poet. Black Elk spoke in Lakota, four "old ones" sat in attendance to attest to the accuracy of the story, his son Ben translated the discourse into English, it was recorded in short hand by Neihardt's daughter, and from those notes the poet formed the story.

²⁴Neihardt, **Black Elk Speaks**, xvi-xvii.

²⁵DeMallie, **The Sixth Grandfather**, 27.

Black Elk Speaks did not do well financially when it was first published in 1932. Very few copies sold. It did receive positive reviews. It was praised as the most insightful work ever published on native shamanism. Even so, others attributed the philosophy of the book to Neihardt, unable to believe that an uneducated, illiterate Indian could possess such sophistication.²⁶ It was not until the book was republished in 1961 that it became a popular text of the counterculture of the day and it began to have a profound effect. Alice Kehoe, in **The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization**²⁷ poses the theory that the book, **Black Elk Speaks**, became the catalyst for the emergence of a pan-Indian religious movement which is responsible for the second Wounded Knee in 1973 and the rise of the American Indian Movement. She is not alone in the proposition that the siege of Wounded Knee in 1973 by the American Indian Movement has a religious rather than a political foundation.²⁸

Richard Morris and Philip Wander believe that the American Indian Movement might be better labeled The Ghost Dance Movement. They maintain that the rhetoric of the Wounded Knee occupation was primarily an unifying, identity rhetoric aimed at creating an "ethos" capable of transcending tribal and cultural differences. The purpose of this rhetoric is to form pan-Indian coalitions capable of withstanding encroachments by the dominant white society. In brief, the living history of the original Ghost Dance and the poignant massacre and suffering at Wounded Knee in 1890, were brought forward in time to the same place and recalled, recreated, reinterpreted, and reenacted in the present "so that the past becomes part of the present and the present becomes part of the story."²⁹ What on the surface appeared to be a poorly staged, radical,

²⁶ibid., 57.

²⁷Alice Beck Kehoe, **The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization**, (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1989).

²⁸Richard Morris, & Philip Wander, "Native American Rhetoric: Dancing in the shadows of the Ghost Dance," **Quarterly Journal of Speech**, v76, May 1990, 164-191.

²⁹Morris & Wander, *Native American Rhetoric*: 183.

political protest becomes in essence a sacred ritual. Viewed from the Indian perspective of history, where history itself is a symbolic ritual, where imagining, dreaming and religious experience are paramount, this view makes perfect sense. The second Wounded Knee accomplished two primary purposes. It renewed the pan-Indian religion when Leonard Crow Dog staged the Ghost Dance anew, and it became the iconoclast that brought Black Elk's teachings into the hands of both white and red Americans.

From 1973 to 1984, **Black Elk Speaks** was received, and in many cases still is, as sacrosanct. For many, the teachings of Black Elk in John Neihardt's **Black Elk Speaks**, and his subsequent work, **When the Tree Flowered**, along with **The Sacred Pipe**, by Joseph Epes Brown³⁰ have become the sacred writings of the Native American religious renaissance. In his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*, Vine Deloria, Jr., writes that:

The basic works of the Black Elk theological tradition, now bid fair to become the canon or at least the central core of a North American Indian theological canon which will someday challenge the Eastern and Western traditions as a way of looking at the world...Present debates center on the question of Neihardt's literary intrusions into Black Elk's system of beliefs and some scholars have said that the book reflects more of Neihardt than it does of Black Elk. It is, admittedly, difficult to discover if we are talking with Black Elk or John Neihardt, whether the vision is to be interpreted differently, and whether or not the positive emphasis which the book projects is not the optimism of the two poets lost in the modern world. Can it matter? The very nature of religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed. So let it be with *Black Elk Speaks*. That it speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the best that dwells within us is sufficient. Black Elk and John Neihardt would probably nod affirmatively to that statement and continue their conversation. It is good. It is enough.³¹

But Deloria's viewpoint here has not been enough. The task of articulating a theological canon based upon Black Elk's teaching has been undertaken, but it has not encompassed

³⁰Joseph Epes Brown, **The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux**, (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

³¹Neihardt, **Black Elk Speaks**, xiv.

everyone who proports to understand it, and distinguishing the differences in personalities has become the focus of the literature. Not only has distinguishing between Black Elk and Neihardt become the subject of debate, but also distinguishing between which Nicholas Black Elk is speaking is central to the discussion. Is it Nicholas B. Elk the Christian or Black Elk the "wic'as'a wakan" speaking?

In 1984, Raymond J. DeMallie edited the complete transcripts of the 1931 and 1944 interviews and published them as **The Sixth Grandfather**. One of the main differences demonstrated between the picture painted of Black Elk in Neihardt's versions and the actual transcripts of the interviews is revealed by Alice Kehoe. She points out that Neihardt's version concludes with a tragic epiphany. Neihardt has Black Elk ending his story with:

And so it was all over.

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

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth--you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, the sacred tree is dead.³²

Kehoe points out that Black Elk was hardly the pitiful old man which Neihardt portrays here.

DeMallie's work clarifies Black Elk's true frame of reference. What Black Elk actually said at that point was:

You have heard what I have said about my people. I had been appointed by my vision to be an intercessor of my people with the spirit powers and concerning that I had decided that sometime in the future I'd bring my people out of the black road into the red road [of life]. From my experience and from what I know, and in recalling the past from where I was at the time, I could see that it was next to impossible, but there was nothing like trying...

At that time I could see that the hoop was broken and all scattered out and I thought, 'I am going to try my best to get my people back into the hoop again,' At this time, when I had these things in my mind, I was abroad with strange people. *[In other words, this period of soul-searching and apprehension of the blackness of the Lakota's road*

³²ibid., 276.

was the time of his peregrinations in Europe, well before Wounded Knee.]...At that time the wilds were vanishing and it seemed the spirits altogether forgot me and I felt almost like a dead man going around--I was actually dead at this time, that's all [he means that his healing power had left him while he was away from his homeland]. In my vision they had predicted that I was chosen to be intercessor for my people so it was up to me to do my utmost for my people and everything that I did not do for my people, it would be my fault--if my people should perish it seemed that it would be my fault. If I were in poverty my people would also be in poverty, and if I were helpless or died, my people would die also. But it was up to me to scheme a certain way for myself to prosper for the people. If I prosper, my people would also prosper.

I am just telling you this, Mr. Neihardt. You know how I felt and what I really wanted to do is for us to make the tree bloom. On this tree [*of life*] we shall prosper. Therefore my children and yours are relative-like [*kin*] and therefore we shall go back into the hoop and here we'll cooperate and stand as one...our families will multiply and prosper after we get this tree to blooming.³³

Clearly Black Elk saw the interviews with Neihardt as being the beginning of a collaboration that would not only preserve his vision but become the path through which he could continue to fulfill the call of his vision to become the intercessor for his people. Kehoe writes, "Black Elk saw the tree of life blooming once more for the Lakota; 'you remember,' he said to Neihardt, 'I saw many happy faces behind those six grandfathers' in the vision."³⁴

Not only does DeMallie's book point to translation and style differences between the transcripts and Neihardt's finished works, he points to the fact that Black Elk was a Christian. This is in no way eluded to in Neihardt's works and has become a major point of dissension in the formulation of a native religious canon. How much of Black Elk's vision is influenced by his Christianity? Was he a traditional shaman or a progressive Christian? DeMallie and Kehoe imply that Black Elk became a Catholic for reasons of social expediency but remained a traditional Lakota at heart.³⁵ The record of Black Elk's position is anything but consistent. After an accident with a team of horses in the winter of 1933 Black Elk received the last rites of the Catholic Church and after he recovered he dictated a document concerning his belief in Catholicism. In the document, which is preserved in the Holy Rosary Mission, Black Elk says:

³³Kehoe, 59-62, I have used Kehoe's account here keeping her observations in italicised brackets.(DeMallie, 294).

³⁴ibid., 62.

³⁵Julian Rice, **Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose**, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991) 2. DeMallie, 71-72. Kehoe, 123.

Thirty years ago I knew a little about the one we call God. At that time I was a very good dancer. In England I danced before Our Grandmother, Queen Victoria. At that time I gave medicines to the sick. Perhaps I was proud, I considered myself brave and I considered myself a good Indian, but now I think I am better.

St. Paul also became better after his conversion. I know that the Catholic religion is good, better than the Sun dance or the Ghost dance. Long ago the Indians performed such dances only for glory. They cut themselves and caused the blood to flow. But for the sake of sin Christ was nailed to the cross to take our sins away. The Indian religion of long ago did not benefit mankind. The medicine men sought only glory and presents from their curing. Christ taught us to be humble and He taught us to stop sin. The Indian medicine men did not stop sin. Now I despise sin. And I want to go straight in the righteous way that the Catholics teach us so my soul will reach heaven. This is the way I wish it to be.³⁶

Many believe Black Elk made this statement because of pressure from the priests and his daughter Lucy Looks Twice who was a staunch Catholic. It is probably impossible to ascertain Black Elk's frame of mind from the written record but what is clear is that he continued to teach and promote both traditional Lakota ritual and Christian inspiration throughout his life. He was an active participant as a Catholic catechist, converting other Lakotas to the faith. He attended church councils and conferences, and he kept Christian holidays. One missionary estimated that Black Elk was personally responsible for at least four hundred conversions in his work as a Catholic catechist.³⁷ At the same time, he also danced in Indian pageants and struggled to see that his great vision and traditional Lakota rites would be remembered and preserved.

Apparently he never spoke of his Christianity to Neihardt. The purpose of his work with the poet was to preserve his visions. Yet, he also did not talk of the popular Lakota trickster figure "Iktomi" (Spider). Other than a brief mention of the Falling Star Myth in Neihardt's 1944 book, the trickster is absent. Also the "heyoka" ceremony, a central ritual in Lakota religion, is absent from the seven sacraments recorded in Joseph Epes Brown's, **Sacred Pipe**.³⁸ Alice Kehoe speculates that Black Elk may have felt the "heyoka" ceremony, where the wakan spirits

³⁶DeMallie, 60-61.

³⁷ibid., 26; Sialm, "Camp Churches," 88, and Joseph A. Zimmerman, S.J., "Catechist Nick Black Elk," **Indian Sentinel**, (October 1950) 101-102.

³⁸Joseph Epes Brown, **The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux**, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

communicate their otherworldly nature through the ritual of strange and magical clowning acts, was beyond the comprehension of Christians as he understood them. Or possibly he perceived that the ritual would be seen as pagan polytheism. In the **Sacred Pipe**, it seems his desire was to chose elements of Lakota culture that would make it easier for those who knew only Judeo-Christian religion to identify Lakota religion with Christianity. "It was, Ironically," Kehoe says, "those many years of intimate living with Europeans and the Catholic mission that enabled Black Elk to speak effectively for Indian religion today."³⁹

So much more can be said about this amazing man. The dim picture we have presented here is by no means sufficient. Nonetheless, it is evident that the collaboration of two men from seemingly mutually exclusive traditions produced a discourse that preserved and illuminated the depth of meaning of both symbol systems. Nicholas Black Elk spent a lifetime of reflection and participation in two religions, the Lakota and the Christian, and in the symbols of both, he saw the same God, the same Good. He organized Lakota religious tradition around a Christian setting, judging what was good in the two traditions, and making that good his identification, his identity. To the native tradition, the narrative of his life speaks of the need to understand that there is a scapegoat willing to take the blame for the tragic history of the Native American. To the Christian tradition his life and visions demonstrate that the tragic frame of the law is not the product that the scapegoat died for. With the blame laid on the scapegoat, people are free to live a comic feast without the guilt and penalty produced by "thou shalt not." During his life, he may not have communicated the "heyoka" to the poet who was so entrenched in the tragic western frame of the iron law of history, but his life narrative points the way for the western tradition to at least see that a comic corrective, a comic feast, is the ultimate goal of the perfect and innocent scapegoat.

³⁹Kehoe, 69.

Nicholas Black Elk might be viewed as a cultural middleman, his life personifying the "coexistence of oppositions."⁴⁰ He embodies a strategy for overcoming the conflict of traditions, a concern that MacIntyre struggles to accommodate within his own project, by situating himself (Black Elk) in the nexus of the "symbolic interaction" between two traditions, as suggested by Burke. In order for sustainable and intelligible meaning to be generated inside diverse traditions, it is not necessary, then, to posit an enduring given human "nature," as the common ground of meaning, nor as the means for establishing its epistemic reliability. It requires, instead, that an individual's personal identity be established--within a tradition--in such a way that it can locate a corollary within the symbol system of another tradition. Black Elk does not transcend his own tradition so that he may enter another; he trespasses on the second tradition, and he recognizes the terrain as formally analogous to his own. Thus, he points the way toward the ability to embrace thesis and antithesis, and somehow, through his dreamer's visions and profound rationality, he exemplifies and lives synthesis. Black Elk himself once said, "You have noticed that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping."⁴¹ The paradox of fully embracing opposites was not foreign to Nicholas Black Elk. Ancient masks of two traditions have become one in the narrative of his life, a life that sought the resurrection of a dead tree, a tree where the scapegoat died.

You know how I felt and what I really wanted to do is for us to make the tree bloom. On this tree [of life] we shall prosper. Therefore my children and yours are relative-like [kin] and therefore we shall go back into the hoop and here we'll cooperate and stand as one...our families will multiply and prosper after we get this tree to blooming.

⁴⁰For a discussion of the implications of this term, see David Rich Lewis, "Reservation Leadership and the Progressive-Traditional Dichotomy: William Wash and the Northern Utes, 1865-1928," **Major Problems in American History**, A. Hurtado & P. Iverson ed., Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1994), 433 Reprinted from (**Ethnohistory** 38:1, 124-142, 1991).

⁴¹Neihardt, **Black Elk Speaks**, 189.