

BLACK ELK SPEAKS AS A FAILURE NARRATIVE

by

George W. Linden and Fred W. Robbins

One of the most important books in Plains Indian religion and literature is Black Elk Speaks, the collaborative effort of Black Elk, the Oglala holy man, and John G. Neihardt, the poet. Both men were mystics. Their cooperative effort produced, in John Neihardt's words, "The Book That Would Not Die."¹

In his preface to the 1961 edition, Neihardt tells us that he sought out Black Elk to learn about the Ghost Dance religion, which appealed so strongly to the Sioux in 1890, and led to the Wounded Knee Massacre. Neihardt needed some inside knowledge about this phenomenon; he was trying to complete the epic Cycle of the West and poetry was his calling. Neihardt was working on The Song of the Messiah, the last volume of the Cycle. He felt he was close to finishing his epic, and he wanted to interview a holy man who had been involved in the messianic Ghost Dance movement. Obviously, Black Elk gave him much more than he expected to get. At their first meeting, Black Elk said to Neihardt, through an interpreter, "As I sit here, I can feel in this man beside me a strong desire to know the things of the Other World. He has been sent to learn what I know, and I will teach him" (BES, xvii).

Black Elk Speaks was published in 1932. Unlike other works born in that period, it has lived on. The German translation, Ich Rufe Mein Volk, was published in 1953; this was also the year of the Flemish version. Among other translations appearing in recent years were the Dutch (1963), Italian (1968), and Serbo-Croatian (1969). The fame of Neihardt's writings increased following his appearance on Dick Cavett's Public Broadcasting "talk show" in 1971. Black Elk Speaks was and is a success; Black Elk, the man, viewed himself as a failure. It is this irony that we shall pursue in this paper. We shall try to determine why Black Elk viewed himself as a failure, and by contrasting his views with those of Jonathan Edwards, another mystic who judged himself to be a failure, we should be able to ascertain the kind of failure Black Elk may have perceived himself to be.

Within the structure of this narrative, there are a few overtones of the epic poem, which is natural given Neihardt's almost lifelong preoccupation with this form and his intense devotion to his epic sequence: A Cycle of the West. One sees this epic aspect most clearly in the parts of the book that focus on the dissolution of the tribe, the battles with the U.S. Army and, in general, with the struggle for the frontier. If the reader wishes to comprehend the totality of the book, however, he must note the one great constant: the voice of the individual, Black Elk, telling his own story, talking about the state of his own mind and soul.

It is this sense of being spoken to idiomatically and directly by a real Lakota, by a man with a real vision and calling, which entrances the reader. We enjoy being confessed

to. We are fascinated by the psychological twists and turns that Black Elk makes in reacting to the pressures of his life. His vision, his search for the earthly means to minister to his people using the powers of his vision, and the intrusion of the Wasichu (whites) into his nation's world are aspects of the book which, we believe, have not received adequate scholarly or critical attention.

As Black Elk repeatedly asserts, his story is a tale of failure and the book is the successful "autobiography" of a failure. Current critical opinion seems to ignore or undervalue this failure aspect of Black Elk Speaks. For example, Vine Deloria, Jr. calls the book "a religious classic, perhaps the only religious classic of this century."² Deloria adds that:

The most important aspect of the book, however, is not its effect on the non-Indian populace who wished to learn something of the beliefs of the Plains Indians but upon the contemporary generation of the young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. To them the book has become a north American Bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life . . .

(BES, xii-xiii)

In emphasizing this salutary effect, Deloria is correct; but his view could also be taken as minimizing Black Elk's own sense of despair. A Christian could interpret this as saying that Black Elk triumphed--that success can come through failure, salvation through sacrifice. We believe that such an interpretation would not be consistent with Neihardt's intent nor with the narrative line of the book. It is a Christian assumption, not Lakota mysticism. At the time of his vision, Black Elk was no Christian. To believe that Black Elk's failure can lead to his people's triumph in this century is to miss the deeper meaning of Black Elk's tragedy.

Certainly, we all wish to honor Black Elk for the intrinsic values in his vision and for his struggle to be true to the sense of the holiness of his vision. But he failed, as he so often insists. While there are victories in his story, Black Elk cannot see the whole of his life as anything but a failure, as his eloquent final words attest:

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 sacred hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred hoop is dead.

(BES, 270)

If, as Deloria suggests, young Indians can use Black Elk's vision, and profit from his wisdom, it will be for spiritual gain, not for political change. And they will surely profit from the story of a wisdom born from failure.

The tone of failure is set early. In his invocation in Chapter I, Black Elk explains that the vision is hopelessly destroyed, so nothing can be lost in the telling of it:

But now that I can see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, but now it is withered; and of a people's dream that died in bloody snow.

(BES, 1-2)

The "autobiography" begins and ends with Black Elk's insistence on his own failure. Black Elk Speaks is lucidly chronological in its order, but it is also a retrospective narrative, partially organized by Neihardt, the literary man. Like all other literary forms, the autobiography must derive its structure from some internal subject-related order; examples are the lament, the search, the epic struggle, the success, the failure. Examples of the former types abound, but there are relatively few memorable failure narratives.

In our culture, one of the best-known failure narratives is Jonathan Edwards' Personal Narrative.³ The number of parallels between this work and Black Elk Speaks suggests that the failure narrative is a necessary subgenre, perhaps what Northrop Frye calls an archetype of feeling. We think that Black Elk Speaks is like the Edwards' narrative because it expresses similar emotions, not because Neihardt sets out to emulate this earlier work or to be artificially literary. It seems obvious that Neihardt's only concern was to allow Black Elk to speak, to touch the bottom of the deep reservoir of common human experience. It is Black Elk's utter devotion to his vision and his abiding sense of sacredness of the unity of his people, the nation's hoop, that makes the failure to realize it so great, the loss so deep. The greater the loss, the closer to the universal and the archetypal the confession of failure must come. Black Elk Speaks is such a confession.

Although Black Elk and Jonathan Edwards knew nothing of each other's thoughts or lives, the stories of the two men and some of their thoughts exhibit remarkable resemblances. Neither man sought to have a vision and yet mystical experience came upon each. Both became ill in childhood--Black Elk, paralysis; Jonathan Edwards, pleurisy--and, during illness, they experienced visions of divinity. Later, in youth, each man again became ill and underwent visionary experiences in near-death situations.

Since neither had sought or expected such an experience to occur to him, each was convinced of the utter reality and objectivity of his visionary experience. As a result, both saw evidence of divinity in the given world, but viewed this world as a mere shadow of ultimate reality. In this sense, Black Elk and Jonathan Edwards were Platonic Idealists who saw the empirical world as providing evidence for, but being less than, the world of forms. Thereafter, both men sought solitude for meditation while communing with nature.

Following their initial visionary experiences, both Black Elk and Jonathan Edwards were terrified by thunder.

After undergoing a spiritual crisis, Black Elk ceased to fear the thunders and came to see them as friends. The same was true of Edwards. Edwards relates:

And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder, which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.⁴

Thus, thunder lost its menace and became the music of divine providence.

Both Black Elk and Jonathan Edwards were subject to abstraction from the concerns of the everyday world. Both had an intense experience of the unity of all life. They perceived that men were related to all the other animals and, therefore, were weaker members of the universe. Neither saw man as the center of all things.

In spite of these striking similarities between their experiences, their thoughts, and their lives, the religious messages of the two men differed profoundly. Black Elk saw the relation between the world of vision and the material world as one of continuity; Edwards saw it as dichotomy. Thus, Black Elk saw himself as duty-bound to attempt to restructure the world so that it might more closely resemble the world of forms. Edwards, in contrast, saw the divine beauty as an incentive to denigrate the material world. In his words, it was a "divine beauty; far purer than any thing here upon earth; and that everything else was like mire and defilement, in comparison of it."⁵ Black Elk's vision was, for him, evidence of the presence of the holy in the world and all things in it. Edwards' vision was evidence of the lack of the holy in the world and the absolute transcendence and sovereignty of God.

In the face of such perceptions, both men counseled humility. But, for Black Elk, humility meant man must find his proper place in the cosmic order of things and be a brother to all things, a caretaker of being. For Edwards, humility meant that man should recognize that he was but a spider, a worm, the lowest of all things in comparison to God's absolute sovereignty and free will. For both men, humility implied equality. But, for Black Elk, it was the equality of love; for Jonathan Edwards, it was the equality of sin.

In the depths of despair about his religious faith, the great New England minister Jonathan Edwards became convinced that he was the worst of all sinners; he used his sense of having failed God to minister to others, trying to bring them to an acceptance of their own sinfulness. Unless his

congregation could be made to accept their degradation, they could not be made into vessels fit to receive Grace. Still, Edwards repeatedly insisted that he was a failure, unworthy to be God's servant.

With Edwards, the repeated assertion of failure is an important device for avoiding the great sin of pride, the vital mistake of being egocentric, Satan's sin, Adam's legacy. In his Personal Narrative, Edwards confronts the issue in these words:

When I ask for humility, I cannot bear the thought of being no more humble than other Christians . . . it would be a vile self-exaltation to me, not to be the lowest in humility of all mankind.⁶

To this great Puritan, the prevalence of pride is another reason to devalue the world and to focus on the hereafter. Personal Narrative is full of such distinctions, painfully drawn. Edwards continually tests his emotions, seeking to understand the spiritual by separating it from its imitations, which are lesser emotions.⁷

Being proud of his success in the ministry threatens the core of Edwards' theology. Success in the world causes a Christian crisis of humility. Indeed, from any perspective other than Edwards' own, we think "he doth protest too much." As Benjamin Franklin noted in his Autobiography, one can become so humble as to be proud of his humility, and thus complete the closed cycle of Puritanism.⁸

Success in this world is no threat to Black Elk, however. The world cannot be devalued by the manifestation of Black Elk's vision--just the opposite. His vision demands unity, the flowering of the sacred tree of his people, the union of the sacred hoop of the tribe. Certainly this world is not as real as the spirit world to the mystic Black Elk, but this world is no less valuable for that. In a social context, Black Elk is a success; he is a successful physician. As his people see him, he is their holy man, their healer, a man with a powerful vision. Black Elk's sense of failure is private; his despair isn't confessed publicly until he meets Neihardt. Is Black Elk's complaint an assertion of humility, then, and not truly a confession of failure?

We must consider exactly what would constitute success for Black Elk. As he says many times, in many ways, it is not less than turning back the Wasichu tide, restoring the sacred unity of the tribe, in effect bringing back the Golden Age of the Sioux. His vision is complete; he has seen the gods, the Grandfathers. He must make his vision manifest to his people by acting it out for the community in the form of a ritual, thus enabling his people to gain strength and unity by being touched and changed by its holiness, and restoring the nation's sacred hoop.

Black Elk's hope is destroyed in a grand paradox of history. But Black Elk is a mystic; what constitutes success for a mystic? It is the full experience of his vision. (Wasichu mystics feel fulfilled only when union is achieved; e.g., Dante sees the light

that is God.) Black Elk must be true to his vision. Black Elk can be satisfied with nothing less than the flowering of the tree, the full-fledged embodiment in the tribal life of the healing powers of his vision. Black Elk's true success would be the realization of his vision in the world of his people. That world is rapidly disintegrating just when Black Elk attempts ritually to enact his vision for his people. The federal government, with its cavalry, its Hotchkiss guns and its square reservation houses, finally blocks the potential realization of Black Elk's vision.

Black Elk's life shows us a case of arrested mystical development. The five generally accepted stages of mystical experience are: 1) the awakening; 2) purgation; 3) illumination; 4) the dark night of the soul; 5) union. One can see Jonathan Edwards progress through these stages in his Personal Narrative. He ends his life in an inevitable dark night of the soul but full of the sense of God's grace and the hope that he will be among the Elect. To achieve union, all Edwards must do is die. Black Elk's progress through these stages is even clearer. When he enacts the elk ceremony portion of his vision, just before he cures his first patient, he is deep in the third stage, illumination. At the beginning of chapter XVIII, Black Elk laments that the visions and ceremonies "had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds" (204-5). He had not yet fully activated his powers. He is a conduit, serving individuals, passively, and not the tribe, actively. As Black Elk searches for a solution to his religious predicament, we become aware that the white man's world--in the form of the U.S. cavalry, Buffalo Bill and the railroad--is ineluctably moving toward the final, crucial clash with the Sioux Nation that will shatter the sacred hoop forever.

Chapter XIX opens with a remarkable bifurcation, almost an emblem of the irreconcilable opposites with which Black Elk struggles; that is, the unity of his vision and the fragmentation of his tribe:

As I told you, it was in the summer of my twentieth year (1883) that I performed the ceremony of the elk. That fall, they say the last of the bison herds was slaughtered by the Wasichus.

(BES, 213)

As he enacts yet another central part of his great vision, hoping to gain enough shamanistic power to be able to unite his people, the whites are destroying the foundation of the entire tribal society. Black Elk's faith in his vision does not dwindle in his despair, but his doubt that he is worthy of his own vision certainly increases. For Black Elk, these worldly matters are only a kind of punctuation, not a reflection of the ultimate truth which he has seen in the world of the Grandfathers and in his vision. The Wasichu cannot be ignored. The reader feels the tension grow palpably at this point in Black Elk's narrative and, finally, Black Elk faces the dichotomy straight on.

In his twenty-third year (1886), Black Elk joins Buffalo Bill's Wild West show; at this point, he has been a practicing

healer for a little more than three years. He has healed individual people. Still, great insight about how to treat the tribal illness has eluded him, so he goes into the Wasichu world, hoping that "I might learn some secret of the Wasichu that would help my people somehow" (214-215). As he reminds us, the sacred herb of his vision is the daybreak star herb, the "herb of understanding" (215). So he journeys eastward, toward the sunrise and across the big water, on a quest for the Wasichu secret. There is a touching desperation here; the sacred hoop of the nation is broken, and drastic measures, even if they are white measures, must be taken to reunite the tribal life of his people.

It is important to note the parallel nature of the chain of events in Black Elk's life for these three years. It is as if the first cure leads directly to the elk vision ceremony, to the three years of ministry and healing, and then, in desperation, to Europe in search of the source of a white "secret." The pattern mirrors the events of the outside world: reservation and tribal stasis, the decimation of the bison, the looming threat of the growing numbers of troops led by vengeful and ambitious officers. Black Elk follows the lure of the cure--all "secret" eastward, seeking enlightenment. What he finds is the dark night of the soul.

Famous mystics of the Wasichu world, such as St. John of the Cross and Santa Theresa of Avignon, went through nightmarish experiences leading them into the depths of despair and spiritual desolation; Black Elk, though not yet a Christian, travels to England and France to experience his desolation crisis:

I looked back on the past and recalled my people's old ways, but they were not living that way any more. They were travelling the black road, everybody for himself and with little rules of his own, as in my vision. I was in despair, and I even thought that if the Wasichus had a better way, then maybe my people should live that way. I know now that this was foolish, but I was young and in despair.

(BES, 215)

Black Elk is not true to his vision here; he begins to doubt, even before he begins his journey "across the big water." The sea voyage itself is a kind of nightmare, almost a travesty of Indian life. The Indians are given hammocks to sleep on; they can't figure them out and sleep on the rolling floor of the hold. As the seas roughen, Black Elk is given a life preserver, but spurns it; "I did not want to float. Instead, I dressed for death, putting on my best clothes that I wore in the show, and then I sang my death song" (217). The elk and bison belonging to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show die in the storm and, as their bodies are dumped over the side, Black Elk tells us that he: "felt like crying, because I thought right there they were throwing part of the power of my people away" (219-220).⁹

The nightmare abates somewhat while he is in England. Then, Black Elk and several other Indians are left behind, lost when the show goes to the Continent. They are lucky to be able to join another wild west show in London, and travel with it to

Paris, Germany, Naples and Pompeii, and back to Paris. There, Black Elk's dark night manifests itself as a serious physical illness. He is unconscious for three days, during which time he hallucinates, dreaming that he flies over his village, hearing the voices of his "frightened people" (227) and seeing his parents' tipi. When he awakes, he is told that he was very near death. Black Elk's reaction is understandable--he wants to go home. Financed by Buffalo Bill Cody, who manages to find his "lost" Indians, Black Elk undertakes the journey to America alone. When he reaches the Pine Ridge Reservation, he finds things to be exactly as he saw them in his illness vision. He is, after all, a mystic.

The near-death mystical experience is fairly common. Jonathan Edwards experienced his most intense religious feeling (i.e., salvation) after bouts of serious illness, gradually moving toward total commitment to the demanding tenets of the wrathful Puritan God. In other words, each dark night was succeeded by a progressively growing enlightenment, at least measured in Puritan terms. The dark night of the soul is both the trial and test of faith and the preparation for union, which is the great imaginative leap of the Wasichu mystic, whether he is poet or preacher. Black Elk has not found the "Wasichu secret" in Europe. Europe almost kills him, and is more alien to his spirit than was New York in 1889. Black Elk returns to find his people are hungry, there is drought, the crops have failed, the bison are slaughtered, and the Lakota have nothing to eat except, as he says, "Wasichu lies" (230). Black Elk emerges from his dark night of the soul and finds the Waste Land, without any hope of union or unity. He can still cure sick individuals, but he cannot heal his nation's deeper wounds.

The Ghost Dance religion, a frenetic appeal to the gods to reverse history, was popular among the Lakota, as it was with other plains tribes. Wovoka, the Paiute messiah, claimed that his Ghost Dance would bring back all the dead Indians and all the slaughtered animals and would drive the Wasichus eastward, then back across the Atlantic. Wovoka's theology is a curious amalgam of nature worship, Christian apocalyptic symbolism, and wishful thinking carried to the point of pathos. As his despair deepens, Black Elk embraces this last-ditch belief. He attends a ceremony on the banks of a little creek near Manderson, South Dakota. The name of the creek is Wounded Knee. The place is infamous now, known as the site of a genocidal attack on the Sioux by the U.S. Army. The Lakota met there to pray away the Wasichus; then the Army met there to massacre the Lakota band led by Big Foot. Black Elk ends his personal history at the time of the massacre, the winter of 1890, forty years before the telling of his story to Neihardt. As he says, "I did not know then how much was ended" (270). Everything ended.

The vision ended there, with its hope of actualization--the only true mystical vision for a shaman--blasted away by the repeating cannons. The Seventh Cavalry massed its deadly Hotchkiss guns to fire into Big Foot's band, but they killed the Sioux Nation. There was an apocalypse, but there was no resurrection. Black Elk could not make the Christian leap--a flight for union in the transcendent realm. And, although he

was certainly an eloquent and poetic man, Black Elk could not write, so he could not make the kind of imaginative leap of mystical union that his contemporary, Walt Whitman, insisted on making in the highly artificial, well-made style of his verse. Black Elk did not have those options. Union, for Black Elk, could not be accomplished transcendentally or imaginatively on paper. All Black Elk could do, forty years later, was to ask a Wasichu poet to tell the vision for the sake of the good in it, since he could no longer bear the burden of failure alone.

Perhaps Jonathan Edwards achieved salvation through his own self-abnegation and God's Grace. If so, he was, in that sense, a success. If Edwards failed, his failure was singular. Black Elk's failure was dual; it was both communal and individual. Black Elk failed to embody his vision in the material world and save his people. He also failed spiritually. Black Elk deserted his own great vision for the alien ideology of Wavoka.¹⁰

Black Elk shares a great deal with us--his own life, the chronicle of his tribe's destruction, his people's hopes, his own beautifully profound vision--but the most important thing he shares with us is the burden of his double failure. All of us carry it, even those (perhaps especially those) who have never heard of Black Elk Speaks.

NOTES

1. John G. Neihardt, "The Book That Would Not Die", Western American Literature, 6, No. 4 (Winter 1972): 227-230.
2. Vine Deloria, Jr., introd., Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), xi. Subsequent references to this edition, cited as BES, will be made parenthetically in the text.
3. A less famous but very interesting confession of failure comes from an unlikely source, the poet Walt Whitman. In his preface to the 1882 edition of Leaves of Grass, he admits he tried and failed to preserve the integrity of the Union, the sacred hoop of his people. Seemingly, he saw his calling as nothing less than to inspire the entire nation to become a powerful whole by means of the mystical dialectic "the simple, separate self, and yet the self democratic, the self en masse." Nevertheless, in the Song of Myself and elsewhere, Whitman asserts the mystical union of the one with the all, succeeding imaginatively. Unlike Black Elk, Whitman had the option of sublimation; he could realize his vision in poetry.
4. Jonathan Edwards, Personal Narrative in Perry Miller, et. al., Major writers of America (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 138.
5. *Ibid.*, 139.
6. *Ibid.*, 142.
7. Perry Miller, Jonathan Edwards (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 106.

8. An interesting anthropological approach to the distinction between Edwards' right-religion and Black Elk's healing-religion is provided by A.B. Maslow, The Farther Reaches of Human Behavior (New York: Viking, 1973), 199-212. Maslow discusses Ruth Benedict's distinction between high-synergy and low-synergy cultures. In a high-synergy culture, the gods are benevolent and helpful; in a low-synergy culture, they are terrifying and malevolent. Edwards' world is a low-synergy culture; it is marked by the Puritan ethic, a materialistic individualism, glorification of ownership rather than concern for use. A society that funnels wealth to the already wealthy and frightens people with its gods is definitely a low-synergy society.

9. Black Elk's "identification" with the animals makes sense. The roster of Buffalo Bill's show listed freskos, glass-blowers, etc., but not Indians. Evidently, Indians were not people. Box 7J, W.S. Campbell Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

10. Black Elk appears to have realized his "spiritual desertion" at this point, for he is quoted as saying: "All through this I depended on my Messiah vision whereas perhaps I should have depended on my first vision which had more power. And that might have been where I made my great mistake". Paul B. Steinmetz, Pipe, Bible and Peyote Among the Oglala Lakota (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1980), 155. Steinmetz also asserts Black Elk became a Catholic, December 6, 1904 (158). This might be a second "spiritual desertion".