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Neihardt Works Mentioned: "To Alice, Three Years Old"

The Song of the Indian Wars

Black Elk Speaks

Photographs / Images: Neihardt and Mari Sandoz, 1962; Alice Thompson and Hilda Petri at ground-breaking ceremonies for the Neihardt Center in Bancroft; Neihardt's Prayer Garden and Study at Bancroft

JOHN G. NEIHARDT: MAN, POET, AND SPLENDID WAYFARER

By BOWER ALY

The following is a *verbatim* transcript taken from a tape recording of the address of Professor Bower Aly, University of Oregon, at the dedication of the ground for the John G. Neihardt Center to be erected by the Nebraska State Historical Society at Bancroft, former home of Neihardt. The address was delivered on Neihardt Day, August 4, 1974.

I.

Just fifty years ago next month, in September, 1924, John G. Neihardt signed the scholarly preface to his *Song of the Indian Wars*, one of the greatest of all of his poems and certainly one of the greatest poems ever to come out of America. It is fitting that this volume published in 1925 contains also the last of his lyrics — so far as known to me — if indeed lyricism may be so construed as to comprehend an epideictic poem. For this precious poem, entitled "To Alice, Three Years Old," is not only a late, perhaps the very latest, of Neihardt's lyrics; it is a dedication that offers insight into the life of Neihardt as a man, as a father, as a lover, as well as into his spirit as a poet. Let me read it to you so that you may gain some insight into the man Neihardt:

TO ALICE, THREE YEARS OLD

When I began the gift I bear
It seemed you weren't anywhere;
But being younger now I know
How even fifty moons ago
The apple bloom began to seek
The proper tinting for a cheek;
The skies, aware of thrilling news,
Displayed the loveliest of blues
For whoso fashions eyes to choose.
And all that prehistoric spring

Experimental grace of wing
And tentatively shapen forms,
From crocuses to thunderstorms,
And happy sound and sunny glow
Rehearsed you fifty moons ago.
Why, even I was toiling too
Upon a little gift for you!
And now that we are wise and three,
And I love you and you love me,
We know the whole conspiracy!

That is the mind and spirit of John G. Neihardt.

II.

In his youth, as I have said, Neihardt was a lyricist, and his lyrics, were acclaimed by those well qualified to judge. But the writing of lyrics, he thought, was for the young. Hence he made the conscious decision, some eleven years before he completed *The Song of the Indian Wars*, to abandon lyrics and to devote all of his time and talent to constructing his Epic Cycle of the West.

Even while regretting the loss of the further lyrics that Neihardt might have written, we must acknowledge the debt we owe him for the rich inheritance left us in the epic cycle. What is this inheritance, precisely, and how does it differ from the gifts bestowed by some other poets?

III.

John Neihardt differed from many other poets of our time in that he wished, and consciously endeavored, to communicate — and I mean to communicate with you and with me. One need not pose as a poet or as a critic to observe that some poets writing today — and a good many of them — often appear to speak only to themselves, or to a selection of other poets, or to such members of the literati as have the time and energy to understand and decipher the obfuscation they have apparently planned. These poets, or poetasters, do not wish to speak to you and me; but Neihardt, on the contrary, speaks to all of us in sometimes unforgettable language that “means” and “construes,” as in the speech of Sitting Bull; or in the account of the death of Crazy Horse; or in the description of Mooers, the surgeon, who

... with a sightless look
Of mingled expectation and surprise,
Had got a bullet just above the eyes;
But Death was busy and neglected him.

IV.

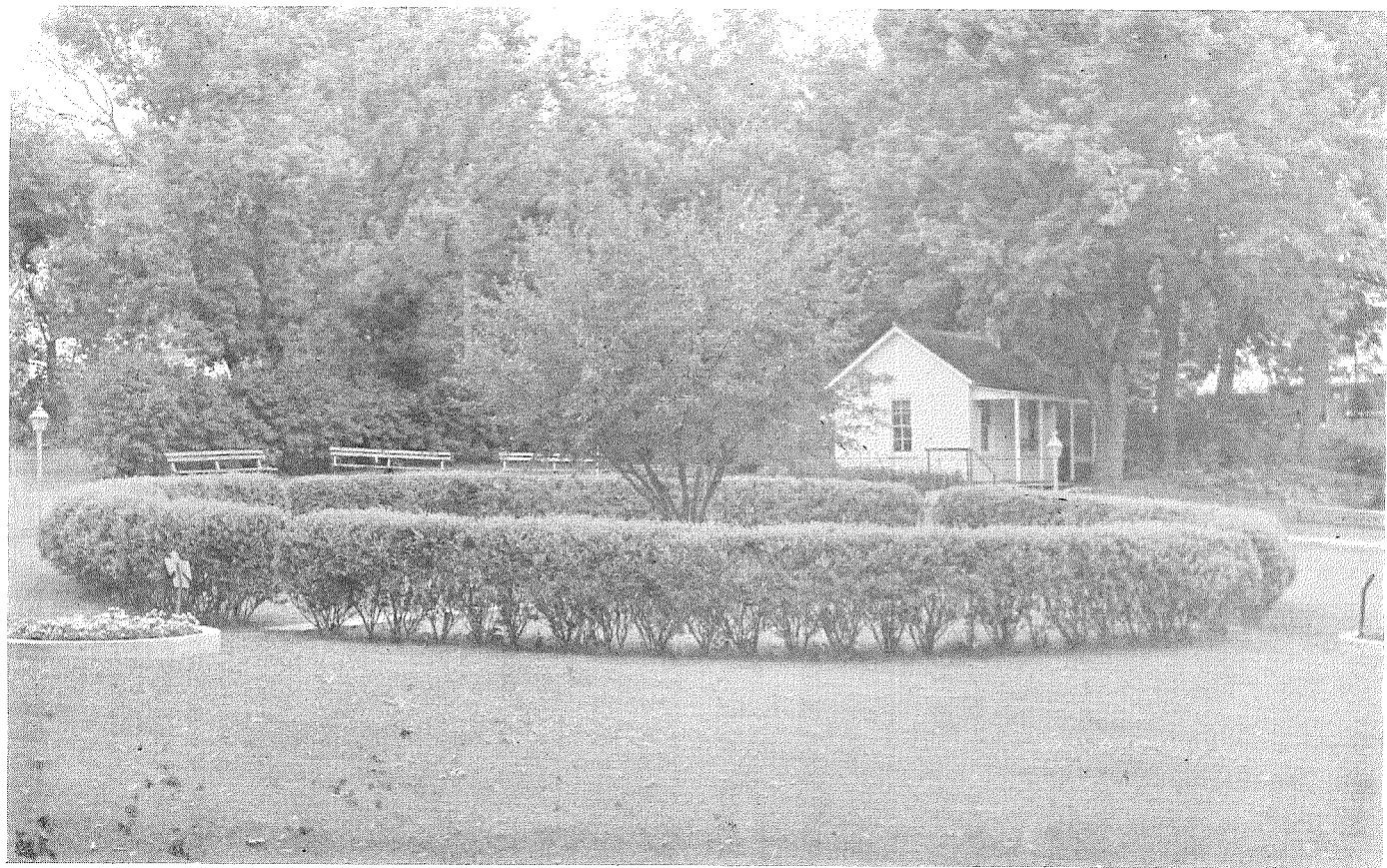
Indeed, yes, Neihardt talked to you and me, to all of us. And in his post-lyric years he differed from many another poet of the present in that he so rarely talked about himself. Save for



Nebraska Poet Laureate John G. Neihardt (1881-1973) and Nebraska author Mari Sandoz, taken in July, 1962, in Lincoln.



Daughters of John G. Neihardt, Alice Thompson (left) and Hilda Petri, both of Columbia, Missouri, at ground-breaking ceremonies for the Neihardt Center in Bancroft.



John G. Neihardt's Prayer Garden and Study at Bancroft was one of the Poet Laureate's favorite retreats. Nearby the Nebraska State Historical Society is constructing a museum to be known as the Neihardt Center.

the lines I read you at the outset of this discourse, I can think of no other poem in which he followed — in which he could be seen to follow — the example set by Walt Whitman, who wrote, as you may recall: “I celebrate myself and sing myself. . . . I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious.”

John Neihardt did not write about himself; he wrote about others. His story was not of his own aches and pains, and joys and sorrows, urges and restraints, or of himself at all. His story, as he said, was “of the great race-mood of the courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the 19th century.” His narrative is thus of epic quality; and if it be objected that the men of his mountains and his plains were often common folk, perhaps a bit flawed in character, and sometimes less than gods, let it be remembered that, save for the ministrations of the poet Homer, Achilles might have been just another Greek soldier with a vulnerable heel; and Helen of Troy, whose face “launched a thousand ships and burned the topless towers of Ilium” might have been — save for Christopher Marlowe — just another adulterous wife. Yes, we should remember also John Milton, who in search of a central character for *Paradise Lost* took up with a character known as Beelzebub, a hero even more unlikely than Mike Fink.

The heroes of Neihardt’s saga were real people, credible folk, yet they possessed in full measure what the famous philosopher, William James, called the indispensable virtue, namely *courage*.

V.

Neihardt’s epic cycle differs from some other poetry of our time also in that it is not parochial. Neihardt’s poetry is not exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon, or protestant. Neihardt’s human sympathy and his understanding of the ordeal of being human go out to red men as well as to white. They go out, in fact, to all men — and I mean by that to include the better half of the human race: the women. Doubtless this is one of the reasons for his growing reputation in England and in Europe generally, where *Black Elk Speaks* has been widely translated and acclaimed.

Concerning the pioneers, the white men who were pioneers, Neihardt observes:

Again the bugles of the Race blew west
That once the Tigris and Euphrates heard.
In unsuspected deeps of being stirred
The ancient and compelling Aryan urge.
A homing of the homeless, surge on surge,
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.
All summer now the Mississippi saw
What long ago the Hellespont beheld.
The shrewd, prophetic eyes that peered of old
Across the Danube, visioned naked plains
Beyond the bleak Missouri, clad with grains,
Jewelled with orchard, grove, and greening garth—
Serene abundance centered in a hearth
To nurture lusty children.

But no sooner had Neihardt told the story of the white men, this Cadmian breed sowing the dragon seed again, than he thought of the other side of the sowing, and we read:

But there were those—and they were also men—
Who saw the end of sacred things and dear
In all this wild beginning; 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.

We should never forget that, although he was born a white man in Illinois, Neihardt chose also to be a blood brother of the Sioux and was a member of the tribe.

VI.

Neihardt's Cycle differs from some other poems of the present day also in its unswerving masculinity. No chauvinist, he nevertheless wrote about a time and place where the male animal predominated, both among the red men and the white; and his Cycle naturally reflects the facts, the mood, of his time. Neihardt himself — and I knew him for many years — seems to me always to have followed the better ethic of the men of the mountains and the plains of which he wrote. I would state this ethic about as follows:

Men should be respected,
Children should be protected, and
Women should be adored.

VII.

John G. Neihardt has met the standard that must be set for all great poets of any age. He knew his craft. He was not for a few but for all people. He was not for a season but for all time. Hence, given the trust that has been imposed on me, I here and now request that the ground that has just been broken shall stand as a memorial to John G. Neihardt, to his life and work as a great poet, a great man, and a Splendid Wayfarer: Forever, and forever, and *forever*.