

The White Radiance

Although John G. Neihardt wrote the following article all in the day's work in 1926 when he was literary editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, he feels that the principle expressed is as true now as then, perhaps more obviously true. The principle involved is applicable not only to literary criticism, but to all judgments. Dr. Neihardt remarks that since the article was written thirty-one years ago, a world-wide urge toward a new social integration is to be noted.

It is a well-known fact, and one that has furnished vast comfort to many misguided literary aspirants, that contemporaneous literary criticism has very often proven ridiculously inadequate. Recently there has been published a volume entitled *Famous Literary Attacks* in which are gathered together a few choice vials of critical wrath poured upon the heads of those whom now we view as masters. It is a rather portly book, yet it is only one of many such that could be compiled. Also, if the compiler's appetite for grossly mistaken literary judgments were not appeased after so great a feast of futile ire, he might prepare an equally imposing collection of ill-fated eulogies.

Many an alleged immortal has succumbed to the inclement social weather of our world; and many an apparently puny infant has survived the croups of cultural autumns and the colics of new fruitage in the green.

Such a library of misconceived opinion, as has been suggested here, would make jocose reading for those of us who share the curious and fairly prevalent delusion that we, the first moderns, stand triumphantly unbunkable upon our height of time. But there are reasons for suspecting that we are now living in a time peculiarly liable to gross errors in artistic judgment.

Literature is merely one of many social phenomena and the literary activities of any age are to be considered first of all with reference to the prevailing social background. Growth in society proceeds, like any other growth, by alternate periods of increasing strain—which may seem almost static in their peacefulness—and periods of sudden release and unfoldment. Slow-moving pictures of a developing plant have been seen by almost everyone no doubt, and will

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A Visit With John Neihardt

On a clear spring day we drove to the farm home of Dr. John G. Neihardt, a few miles north of Columbia, with the University photographer bearing the paraphernalia of his trade. Mission: To take pictures showing America's epic poet among his books, with his grandchildren, with his animal pets, with the prized mementoes of his life among the Indians.

The mission ended happily, for Dr. Neihardt is not only a cooperative subject but a photogenic one as well. What added delight to the picture-snapping was the inspirational charm of the University's Lecturer in English, a quality admired by his students since he came to the campus early in 1949. Those who have come under his spell in the classroom, where he sits cross-legged upon his desk and talks of life's beauties and mysteries, will know that our experience was a rewarding one.

For, as the photographer busied himself with lights and settings, Dr. Neihardt spoke of many things. In the prayer garden, while the shutter clicked, he told the story of the sanctuary he has built near the front lawn of his home. There is meaning to all of it—the circle of shrubbery, the tree in the center, the four paths that form a cross and lead to it. The story was related to him by Black Elk, the Indian holy man who asked Dr. Neihardt to write of his life and his visions. (*Black Eagle Speaks*, published in 1932, has been discovered by the anthropologists and is enjoying much interest in Germany).

He spoke of religion:

"I feel that I belong to all churches. They are all trying to say the same thing and they have different vehicles for the one message. A doctrine is a vehicle through which a message is communicated to mankind. They are all honorable and they

are all good, in so far as they communicate the message. I have often remarked that doctrines may separate, but religion unites."

On rural living:

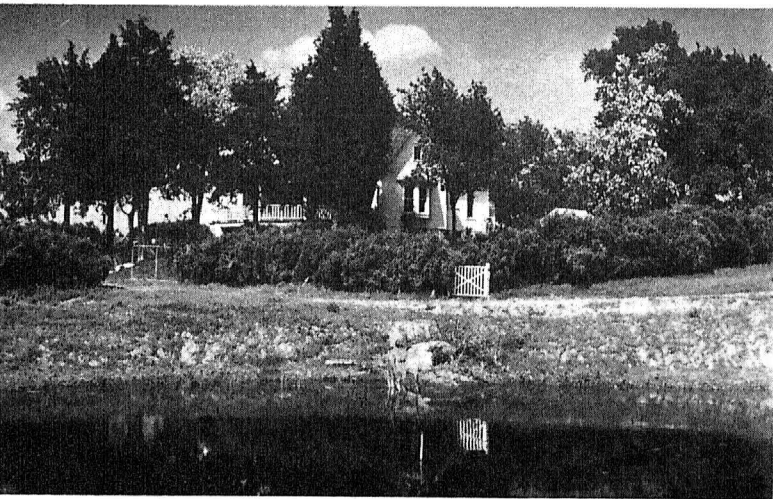
"I don't live in the country to escape people. I love people—and I also love solitude. Multitude and solitude are both essential. In the multitude you feel your relationship to the rest of humanity, and in solitude you become acquainted with your soul."

The affection he eagerly bestowed upon the farm animals during our visit was no surprise in view of his feelings:

"I think it is a great pity for people to go through this world without being well acquainted with animals. There is something you can learn from animals that you can't learn from men. They are loving creatures. If you treat any animal with love from the time he is little, he will return love. We feel that our animals have personalities and deserve respect."

These comments were but mere glimpses into the personality and views of the man who completed his writing of lyric poetry at the age of thirty, became poet laureate of Nebraska in 1921, and spent twenty-nine years writing the narrative poems that comprise his epic *A Cycle of the West*. There were many other observations as the camera followed him—about children (he has three daughters and a son and ten grandchildren, seven of whom live in the vicinity); about happiness, about his students and how he learns from them.

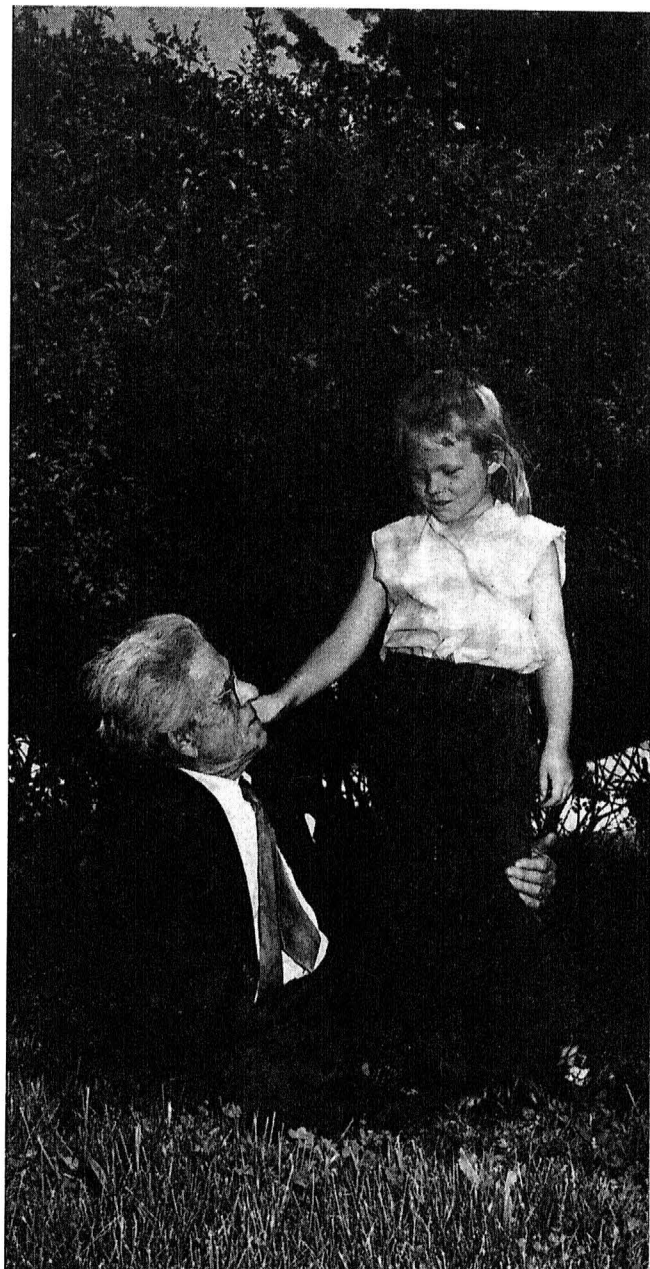
Clearly, a second mission is called for—to return on another day. No camera equipment next time; just a sharp ear and a sharp pencil.



Poet Neihardt loves people, but he loves country life, too; his Boone County farm home is surrounded by beauty. When we called on him, only one of his ten grandchildren, Erica Thompson, was present; she is shown with her grandfather in the prayer garden. The splendid sculpture of the poet reproduced below is from the skilled hands of his wife, Mona Neihardt, who studied three years in Paris with the great French sculptor Rodin; when she was nineteen she had three pieces of sculpture on exhibit in the Paris Salon.



**Neihardt on
The Creation of Man**



(The following is in answer to a youth's question: "For what purpose did God create Man?")

Bless that boy's heart! Of course he is entitled to a reply. As for an adequate "answer," that is a different matter!

With our pitifully limited understanding, we are not even in a position to ask the question: "What was God's purpose in creating Man?" First of all, God is all a wonder and a mystery, and any definite understanding of the meaning of the term is beyond us. We only know that there *is* "an integrating principle" in the universe, continually operating creatively wherever we look; that everything is a mani-

be remembered in this connection. The period of release and violent unfoldment which we are now experiencing may be viewed as having begun with the French revolution—which was, broadly speaking, the triumph of the individualistic idea over the monarchic idea. The extreme of concentration had been reached in the reign of Louis XIV after which the centrifugal, democratic, movement began. In America its influence was dominant in the realm of economics long before it began to affect what we call the higher values—those of literature, the arts, philosophy, religion, ethics. It was not until 1912 that individualism, long triumphant in industry, struck our realm of higher values like a whirlwind. Whether or not the storm has attained or is about to attain its maximum violence, who can say? We know that many very respectable old signboards are flying all over the place and that many a private window, once turned serenely upon a world of what seemed eternal certainties, has been broken in by chilling blasts of doubt.

To realize the change that has taken place in literary attitudes, as a result of individualism worked out to its logical conclusions, one has only to consider the rigid rules that were laid down by absolute critical authority for the writers of pre-Revolutionary France. The monarchic idea, long established in the lower realms of human activity, had penetrated to the realm of art. Then tradition was everything; now it is practically nothing. Taste was then a fixed thing imposed upon the individual by unquestionable authority; but what is taste now? The past was then the standard for the present; but now, to most, there seems only the loud moment, enormously prolific of contending whims—a bewildering spectacle!

It is the latter point that brings us to the matter of importance in attempting to judge the literature of our own time. We are witnessing the anarchic effect of extreme individualism in literature as in life. It is only the social body that lives on and on. The indi-

festation thereof; and through long experience men know (*some* men, of course) that to live in harmony with all we can know of the creative Mystery is to be religious.

Instead of the question, why did God create us, we should strive to learn how we can live *more* in harmony with the divine, creative process. We *can* learn as numberless men and women have learned, that we must find a way to lose our *petty selves* in a profound sense of the *Wonder and Mystery* that we call *God*, in our language. That is the function of prayer, which is *not*, in its highest form, a *request* for something, but a way of opening one's consciousness to the flow of that mysterious power. And whenever it *flows*



"She'll be a champion," is the Neihardt appraisal of this fine Hackney colt, who hears only "baby talk" from the poet. The pleased mother, Lucifer's Carolyn, stands by.

vidual's life is but a moment in the life of the race. During an age when the social body is conceived as a unit, to which individual interests must be sacrificed, the past has a tremendous meaning. For a generation dominated by the individualistic attitude, it is not unnatural that the living moment should loom larger than all time.

The result is that, being cut off from the long process that has given us all our human values, we now tend to become provincials in time. Just as the provincial in the usual geographical and social sense judges all things by the prevailing conceptions of his

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in, love grows, love of everything; and with the love there comes increased understanding, increased power to *do*. The question as asked also has the fault of placing too great a stress on man's importance. Surely it seems beyond doubt that all life is one, and "holy," somehow.

As for "purpose," let our dear boy look anywhere, and he will see design, design, marvelous pattern, beautiful pattern—in any bug's shape, in any leaf, or tree, or blade of grass. There is nothing but "design" in nature from planetary systems to snowflakes.

With design everywhere, surely we need not be troubled about there being sufficient "purpose."

—John Neihardt.

province, scorning the larger world, so do we now tend more and more to appraise our own literary products solely in the light that is peculiar to our agitated moment. The attempt to render absolute judgments with only the data of a limited reference scheme has always been the supreme tragedy (or is it comedy?) of human thought. But in an age like ours, it is very likely to become the rule.

The long and dearly bought experience of men, in the matter of ascertaining dependable human values, is momentarily ignored in our overwhelming passion for novel experiment. We lack the synthetic sense in literature as in life. We do not now commonly conceive all literature as organic. Its past for most readers seems to lie dead somewhere on the far side of an impassable gap. The literature that really concerns us greatly as a people is largely a sporadic phenomenon growing out of the peculiar mood of the time.

Being a revolting generation, impatient of all restraints, we are certain to overestimate the essential value of those works that most violently express the antisocial mood; and yet all of our genuine values are in their very nature social.

Doubtless Shelley had no thought of literary criticism when he wrote the strangely luminous lines:

“Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
Stains the white radiance of eternity”;

but he expressed a truth that is applicable here. The light of understanding and persuasion by which men live is constantly changing. New generations develop new social moods within which, as in a colored at-

mosphere, all views are colored. When the light of the time is red, as we may say, most men will think the truth is of that color; and the blues and yellows of other generations may seem absurd or pathetic or merely curious.

Yet, what is any color but a fragment of some single white radiance? And what is the white radiance, in our special application of the figure, but a vision of the larger truth about men and the human adventure in general, as opposed to the merely fragmentary view in keeping with the bias of the moment?

Eternity is a long, long stretch, and we can not follow our poet so far. Human literary history is much briefer, and here and there, throughout the whole length of it, flashes of the white radiance may be noted by those who have the eyes to see. Even in our own confused time of stormy red the white ray breaks in many a single line or passage; and now and then a whole book may glow with it. But it is the red that wakes the loudest clamor.

To scorn the red is to have no sympathetic understanding of one's own time—and that is a pitiful disaster. To seek the larger human values in that one necessarily transient key, is to miss the larger values.

More than once has the restless general consciousness of men passed through all the shades and colors of the social spectrum, from the naive germinating violet on through the slowly maturing blues, the flowering greens, the mellowly fruiting yellows, and the tempestuous revolting reds.

But the truth about the light was never to be perceived by the split ray.



Yo-yo, the toy terrier, receives attention aplenty from admiring master.



Dr. Neihardt displays old Kentucky rifle. His collection of guns has dwindled since his daughters, having outgrown the tomboy stage, no longer go on hunting trips with him.