

**JOHN G. NEIHARDT,
MAN AND POET**

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John G. Neihardt, Man and Poet by Julius T. House

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JULIUS T. HOUSE

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JOHN G. NEIHARDT
(From a bust made by his wife)

John G. Neihardt

Man and Poet

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BY

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, 1912

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INTRODUCTION

THIS study was undertaken with the purpose of finding out how a man achieved distinction in one form of art. To learn this, it was necessary to discover the influences, social, economic and literary, that have touched the life of the subject, and his reactions thereto. Thus we are able to discern his philosophy and the means by which his personality developed and his instinct for workmanship took its direction, and to place some tentative estimate on his work.

Back of all large human achievement lies a philosophy of life, a feeling, however chaotic, for life-values. The early nineteenth century was dominated by the philosophical conceptions of Rousseau. Nature was deified and an eternal harmony alleged between man's instincts and his happiness. All the structure of society was, therefore, so much limitation upon human well being. Freedom was the watchword and freedom was, as Mill said, removal of obstacles.

The fiscal policy of England was dominated by this strange obsession growing out of a natural rebellion against the repressive policies that had prevailed. Freedom of trade, of contract, of thought, of literary expression, war against restraint, except what men found in vague "laws of nature,"

(laws of nature being in the main creations of the desires and prejudices of the individual), such conceptions controlled.

Such thinking gave us Wordsworth, with his introspective teachings about Nature; our own Bryant, much like him; Byron, always defying custom and exalting the ego; Shelley, the philosophical anarchist.

All the movements of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; political, industrial, literary, rested upon a pleasure-pain psychology and an Epicurean philosophy. For a time men went wild with the conception. Hedonism ran rampant, romanticism in literature, individualism in state and in industry sowed the wild oats that ripened into a harvest indeed!

Then a gradual reaction set in. The later Victorian era found a world plunged into profound misery, the inevitable outcome of individualism. Multiplication of machines with capitalistic ownership, revealed how inadequate for a complex industrial society was the romantic individualism of Rousseau.

In the current philosophy there was no way out. God, Nature, each had ruled in turn and Evolution as now conceived had not yet arrived. The later Victorian period fell into a profound pessimism concerning society. Carlyle, Hood, and Mrs. Browning lifted voice against the tendencies of capitalism, but with little immediate effect. Browning remained an optimist by resolutely

placing the values of life chiefly in another world. His optimism was that of one who goes into battle leading a charmed life, as Achilles may have felt in the armor forged by Vulcan. Such optimism is sentimental. If God has ordained victory, what becomes of heroism? Browning is not modern in the fullest sense. He is pre-evolutionary. He is a throwback toward the earlier nineteenth century romanticism.

Tennyson more nearly represents the later Victorians. There is a hint in him of the puzzle presented by a world of suffering as the result of a fiat of an Almighty and All-loving God. He gropes more than did Browning. For him the old order changeth with considerable sorrow.

The poet of this age will be one who has a feeling for conceptions that have come to society through later knowledge of the law of evolution. Not long since, men were declaiming that all forms of art had been displaced for all time by science. This belief was due to complete misapprehension of the nature of science itself. Science was held to be exact and unchangeable knowledge. The conception was as rigid and finalistic as Calvin's creed. "Soon," men said, "the world will be platted into geometrical forms, which will remain fixed as the hills." But are the hills fixed? "The Pythagorean theorem is the same," they said, "yesterday, today and forever." But that was before the days of the non-Euclidian geometry. Even mathematics grows, changes, evolves. Even science is

true only for today. Creative human energy changes the unchangeable, recreates the fixed categories of science.

A narrow conception of the nature of science saw this world as ruled by the laws of matter. Steam engines, automobiles and telephones, trade regulations, and the "dismal science" of political economy were the only real things. It was a day of fixed principles like free trade (how "free" indeed!), written constitutions, "right of contract," and selfish individualism. How foolish the conception!

Pray, what has happened to this strange materialistic world? We find at the heart of everything only one unchanging law—that all things change. Science stands abashed before life that flows around it, pours through it and transforms it! Science is only science because man created it out of his experience, recreates it to his need, casts it away as useless when outworn.

How foolish the conception that matter is the only reality while the purpose to which matter is plastic material, the ideals, is a phantom! If matter is real at all, it is because it is an expression of purpose, thought.

The later understanding of social evolution has given us the free will and with it a new feeling for life. The world has become dynamic because man is consciously and definitely an agent in the process, "a vortex of energy," to use Neihardt's own phrase.