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CHIEF JOSEPH'S "SURRENDER SPEECH" AS A LITERARY TEXT*

George Venn © 1998

October 5, 1877, Bear's Paw, Montana Territory

Cold wind, new snow, dying grass, northern plains, white mountains, bronze light. Below the open ridge, dead and wounded men lay in Nez Perce and U.S. Army camps. Wallowa Valley women, children, and men have fled 1,200 miles since June. That flight ended here. The five-day military conflict and negotiation finally resolved. Chief Joseph rode a black horse up the ridge, his hands crossed, his head bowed. Five Nez Perce men walked with him. Above him, the bulky silhouettes of waiting whitemen: Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard, Commander; Colonel Nelson A. Miles, Fifth Infantry, Yellowstone; Second Lieutenant C.E.S. Wood, Howard's aide-de-camp and adjutant; Second Lieutenant Oscar F. Long, Miles' aide-de-camp, Ad Chapman, and perhaps Nez Perce messengers Old George and Captain John. Joseph dismounted, offered his rifle to General Howard. Howard waved Joseph to Colonel Miles. Even though Howard and his troops had pursued the Nez Perce for 1,200 miles, the Nez Perce

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had – until Bear’s Paw – successfully eluded or outrun Howard. Notified by telegraph, Miles had “caught” the Nez Perce by making a 200-mile forced march to Bear’s Paw , surrounded the fleeing Indians, driven off their horse herd, and after failing to overrun the Nez Perce, settled for siege until Howard arrived and negotiated with Joseph for a “surrender.” To reward Colonel Miles, General Howard had agreed to give “The Official Surrender” – an honorific military ceremony foreign to Nez Perce tradition – to his junior.

Since that 1877 event, what Joseph said or didn’t say after he handed his rifle to Colonel Miles has been disputed – possibly the longest dispute over a text in western American literature. C.E.S. Wood, the 25-year old aide-de-camp of General Howard, publicly claimed all his life that he wrote down verbatim a 155-word (+-) speech given by Chief Joseph after he handed over his rifle. No one at Bear’s Paw that day—including General Howard – ever published anything corroborating Wood’s text. While he had varying degrees of editorial control over the nineteen versions of the speech published between 1877 and 1939, Wood also revised the text, speaker, and contexts. After Wood’s death in 1944, historians doubting Wood’s veracity became more explicit, even though the “Surrender Speech” had become nationally-accepted as authentic Native American oratory. Since 1972, several historians have formally denounced Wood as “prostituting the truth,” as being “unreliable,” as “composing the famous speech himself,” as not “being particular about the truth.” As a result of their critique, Joseph is now represented in

many anthologies and texts with “An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs,” his much longer 1879 speech in Washington, D.C. in which Joseph narrates the tragic Wallowa Valley Nez Perce story.

This attack by contemporary historians on a poet, soldier, attorney, anarchist—perhaps the most complex literary figure in the early Northwest—raises a cloud of fascinating questions. Neither Wood nor Joseph can clarify much now. Wood’s ashes were scattered in 1944 in an oak grove above Los Gatos, California, and Joseph was buried on the Colville Reservation in 1904. During his lifetime, Wood never publicly retracted his “verbatim” claim: he was always the only person to record Joseph’s reply to General Howard. Wood’s 1877 journals end in Idaho – early in the Army’s pursuit. Wood’s original text—he always said—was lost by U.S. Army archivists. No other person at Bear’s Paw ever directly quoted or repudiated Wood’s text. So, consider for a moment that the controversy is still open: here stands C.E.S. Wood the soldier/poet/attorney now accused of lying his entire lifetime about the authenticity of the Chief Joseph “Surrender Speech;” there stand Wood’s contemporary accusers. What follows here will be a few of many interrogatories for a grand jury of readers.

Did Wood ever say the “Surrender Speech” was not a verbatim transcript of Joseph?

Yes and no. In 1936, at the age of 84, the poet himself wrote the following unpublished letter to Lucullus McWhorter, his earliest chief examiner:

My dear McWhorter – Don't expect me to correct all the misconceptions about Joseph – and at 84 – I will not guarantee my own recollection – But as often happens I remember this surrender more clearly than the events of last year. Further General Miles nor anyone else knows Joseph's surrender speech accurately except myself. No one was interested to take it down – Oscar Long – Miles' regimental adjutant was there to take it down but did not – no one was told to take it down – I was not told – the speeches of Indians were not considered of importance – **I took it for my own benefit as a literary item** (my emphasis) – and I have told you I at request gave it to the Adjutant General of the Army in Washington for the archives and it disappeared.... (1/31/36, WSU)

What might Wood have meant here – saying privately that the “Surrender Speech” was “taken as a literary item?”

He may well have intended the speech as a work of art and used commonplace literary conventions: selecting, arranging, and interpreting the facts to create an illusion that somehow made the facts more illuminating, truthful, comprehensive. Wood had many literary precedents here: he knew classical historians such as Tacitus were famous for inventing speeches to condense events and heighten drama; he knew the treaty speeches by Eastern chiefs such as Red Jacket who addressed whites with wise “King Solomon” oratory; he knew that Chapman’s translation of Joseph would be literalistic, so he could create his own version of any translation

he heard; Wood had read historical novelists, such as Walter Scott, who always pretended to be factual while writing fiction.

Calling the “Surrender Speech” a “literary item” also might have been Wood’s way of alluding to his interest in poetic form. While the speech has always been printed as a prose paragraph, the three-part Shakespearean or heroic sonnet form seems to shape the piece. To be specific, consider a brief analysis of the version Wood published as prose in *Century Magazine*, July, 1893, in his signed article, “Famous Indians: Portraits of Some Indian Chiefs.”

To write a Shakespearean or heroic sonnet, the poet must first sustain a list of images that generates a consistent tension and emotion. Since Wood did not fight the Bear’s Paws battle with Miles’ troops, he learned this list of facts from Joseph, from interpreters, or from unknown sources. While Wood attributes these first fourteen lines to Joseph, no one but Wood has asserted that Joseph spoke them at the moment of his sunset surrender. As Wood writes the first 14 lines, the repeated short sentences (grammatical parallelism) accumulate great emotional force:

Tell General Howard I know his heart.
What he told me before – I have it in my heart.
I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed.
Looking-glass is dead. Too-hul-hul-suit is dead.
The old men are all dead. It is the young men, now,
who say “Yes” or “No.” He who led on the young men
is dead. It is cold, and we have no blankets.
The little children are freezing to death.
My people – some of them – have run away to
the hills, and have no blankets, no food.

No one knows where they are – perhaps freezing
to death. I want to have time to look for
my children, and to see how many of them I can find;

This language, which also uses fractured five-accent meter and intense rhyme, displays great eloquence in defeat and shows Joseph is a noble adversary – not some stereotypical inarticulate savage. Joseph lists the Nez Perce dead in tight rhythmic parallels. He describes the Nez Perce suffering. By all historical accounts, this list is absolutely accurate – a fact never mentioned by Wood's critics.

After the sonnet's images of experience have been given, the Shakespearean or heroic sonnet requires the poet to prepare the reader for the ending statement with a transition or *turn* – a line, word, phrase, white space that signals the end of images and the beginning of statement about them. In this sonnet, “Hear me, my chiefs,” is the sonnet's *turn*. With this invocation, Joseph is apparently pleading with his peers by revealing his own personal emotion. With this *turn*, Joseph also implicitly becomes the highest-ranking “surrendering general” in the Euro-American military tradition. This *turn* or transition may be Wood's most obvious sonneteer device, since no chiefs accompanied Joseph to the surrender, no uneducated translator would deliver such a perfectly-placed transition, and no Nez Perce would become so blatantly and personally emotional in a moment of such tribal military crisis. Who Joseph addressed with this phrase has baffled everyone, since only one Nez Perce chief–White Bird–had survived the Army siege.

To complete such a sonnet, an ending statement or couplet—prepared for by the *turn*—must somehow resolve the emotional tension created by all the previous lines. The specific images must add up, become assertion, statement, idea—something more than mere sensory impressions. Here, the speech’s last lines make Joseph’s desire for peace conclusive, clear, and absolute:

From where the sun *now* stands
I will fight no more forever!

Many others present at Bear’s Paw agree that Joseph did, in fact, say something similar to this brief statement. Two years later, Joseph himself included similar language in “An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs.” These ending lines—which Wood may have actually heard from the interpreter Ad Chapman – may have inspired Wood to synthesize the earlier 14 lines of the poem. After all, great ending lines may be any poet’s most difficult test. (From 1918 to 1939, Wood revised the last line to “Joseph will fight no more forever.”)

No record shows that Wood criticized this July, 1893, version of his text. Over the next forty years, he would write, revise, and/or publish the speech seven times with the clear disclaimer that he was writing from memory. Confronted with multiple conflicting texts and revisions, in 1939, he sent his last version to Edward Lyman, publisher of Francis Haines’ *Red Eagles of the Pacific Northwest* (1939).

Did Wood ever write a sonnet-length treatment of the speech?

Yes. Sometime after 1884, Wood drafted but never published a long narrative poem titled “Chief Joseph.” Housed in the Huntington Library, that handwritten manuscript shows Wood wrote and revised the speech in 14 lines of sonnet length and style:

Tell General Howard – what he said to me before,
I have it in my heart – Maybe the Right is weak
I do not know – Tell him that I am tired
Of fighting – Too-hul-hul soot is dead – Looking Glass
Is Dead – he who led the young men in battle –
He is dead – Ah-laht-mah-Kaht – my brother.
The old men are all dead – It is the young men
Who say yes – or no – It is cold and we have
No blankets – and no fire – Our children cry
For food and we have none to give –
My little daughter has run away upon the prairie –
Perhaps I shall find her too among the dead –
Here(*sic*) me, my chiefs – From where the sun now stands
Joseph will fight no more forever –

(WD Box 10(20), 32-33)

So Wood publicly insisted throughout his life that the “Surrender Speech” was a “verbatim transcript,” but privately admitted to McWhorter that the speech was a “literary item.” What does this suggest?

From the beginning, he used formal English poetic strategies to select, arrange, and dramatize events he had heard about—the battle prior to his arrival with Howard. From literary tradition, Wood-the-soldier knew he could adopt a double mask to conceal himself as Wood-the-poet: when writing the speech, he masked himself as Chief Joseph. To conceal his identity in 1877, he first gave his text to Thomas Sutherland, the correspondent who accompanied Howard

throughout the campaign, and Sutherland leaked the speech to the press for him in Bismark and Portland.

Calling the speech a “literary item” also acknowledged that Wood had – over his lifetime – clearly edited, revised, recited, and published as many as nineteen versions of the speech. For example, after 1877, he always deleted “I am tired.” In 1895 and after, he moved the lines about Joseph’s little daughter from the prose frame into the speech itself. In 1895, he changed “Our chiefs are killed” to “Our chiefs are dead,” but in 1939, he still wasn’t sure which was correct. In 1918 to 1939, he revised the last line to read “Joseph will fight no more forever.” Between 1877 and 1939, he revised his spelling and his treatment of Ollicut – Joseph’s brother – three times: first he objectively “led” the young men, then he ironically “led on” the young men, then he pseudonymously “led-the-young-men-in-battle.” In 1877, he added the word “wet” to a version published in Oregon, and deleted Chief Too-hool-hool-zote from a version published in New York. In the prose frame of the speech, he also revised speaker and context.

So what might Wood's motives have been? What was driving this text into print?

Regardless of how much he invented or how much he recorded at Bear’s Paw, Wood-the-poet wanted to speak for justice, intelligence, compassion, mercy, peace. Through this speech, he could show the Nez Perce as human beings, as people with voices, emotions, souls. Surrendering in intensely poetic Shakespearean English and form, Joseph would not be silenced. He would be heard. Since the failure of the Lapwaii Council which basically started the Nez Perce War,

being silenced was a critical problem. Even General Howard had arrested Too-hool-hool-suit just for speaking against all Howard's presumptions. Also, while Nez Perce did not use any such poetic form or style in such moments, the formal Euro-American eloquence and compassion created and projected by Wood showed Joseph's greatness and humanity. Thus, Joseph's suffering – translated by Wood-the-poet–became explicit, personal, eloquent, public and Wood-the-soldier has successfully “humanized the enemy” and subverted military values.

The rest of Wood's career also supports the view that Wood-the-soldier was at war with Wood-the-poet. While he was supposed to be killing Native Americans, Wood, in fact, empathized with them and embraced their culture and literature. Wood's first published poem, “Song of the Salmon Fishing,” adopted the point of view of an Alaskan Chilkahit girl, and his later work included poems and folk tales in Native American personae and style. He revised his famous book-length poem, *The Poet in the Desert* (1929), to include in Part XLIX another quasi-Nez Perce speech synthesized from several sources. Throughout his life, he remained friends with Chief Joseph, sent his son to live with Joseph on the Colville Reservation. In 1997, the Wood family presented an Appaloosa horse to the Nez Perce at Chief Joseph Days in the Wallowa Valley—the Nez Perce homeland in northeast Oregon.

This self divided between conscience and power—one of many oxymorons in the heart of any “Christian soldier”—was not Wood's problem alone. Dr. Fitzgerald, a surgeon with

Howard's army, reported that many of Howard's soldiers regretted shooting at the Nez Perce because they felt the Nez Perce were innocent. So, the psychological crises haunting Howard's troops may have been serious and unresolved, but admitting them would have been taboo. How could there be any dignity in killing the very people who rescued Lewis and Clark? Kept a seventy-year peace treaty? Peacefully welcomed and traded—salmon, horses, cattle—with Oregon Trail emigrants? Owned herds of beautiful horses and cattle? Dressed and acted in honorable ways? Militarism alone could not resolve these conflicting emotions. Among soldiers in Howard's command, outward aggression may have ceased but—as delayed stress syndrome shows—inward aggression, doubt, fear, guilt go on and on.

Writing this speech, Wood might have been trying to resolve this dilemma. With poetic language creating the Euro-American illusion of a “formal military surrender,” Wood appealed to and evoked an acceptable, formal, and familiar emotion – the human cry for an end to war. Writing this speech may have allowed Wood to identify with Joseph’s pain, guilt, and suffering and thus offer catharsis on all sides. In the speech, Joseph shows his humane conscience in absolute terms, but Joseph might also be speaking for many of Howard's soldiers—perhaps even for Wood himself—who wanted no more racist war caused by greed, betrayal, and ignorance. As Dr. Fitzgerald reported, many soldiers already knew there was nothing heroic about such conflict.

So how and why could Joseph's speech become a national text that has been published, read, anthologized, and taught across the United States for more than 100 years?

The power to create the illusion of dignified closure where no dignity or closure actually existed may be one reason the speech became and remains even now a national text attractive to historians, teachers, writers, students. As a poetic text appearing near the end of continental expansion, after the Civil War, at the end of this penultimate Indian conflict, the “Surrender Speech” exposes the racist violence of empire, cries out for an end to that violence, and asserts that the overt “Indian Wars” are finally over – forever. Departing from many other texts that glorify “westward expansion,” the speech invokes universal humanitarian values, appeals to pity, mercy, peace, and love – the emotions denied by militarism. This synthesis of Wood and Joseph seems to speak without racist myth or patriot veneer. Like Picasso's “Guernica” or Shylock's “Does not a Jew bleed?”, the “Surrender Speech” becomes mythic, essential, timeless, authentic – a human cry for peace. (Even the popular defense attorney Gerry Spence has published it in his latest book on winning arguments.)

Due to this complexity – white soldier calling out for peace through an Indian persona – Wood may be the first northwest modernist poet. As described by Milosz, modernism has a complex heritage: “Art is used to triumph over others, to dominate, to command obedience and surrender, while the artist's other half, through distance, militates against his selfish instincts.” Applied to Wood, this paradox may help to define Wood's persona here: he clearly used Joseph's tragic experience to subvert racism and militarism while simultaneously denying any

personal, financial, or career benefits – which were numerous. From 1877 on, Wood sold articles, poems, sketches, and stories about the Nez Perce and Native Americans, and gained both renown and notoriety for them. Another good reason to consider the speech as a literary text may be that Wood intended to elevate Joseph and salvage humane feeling from annihilation, but Wood’s national success with the speech may have ironically contributed to the perpetuation of the “Vanishing Red” stereotype – that painting reproduced all over the United States of the naked mounted brave at sunset–head bowed in defeat. For instance, Native American editors Elizabeth Woody and Gloria Bird have criticized the perpetual teaching of such “surrender speeches” because they are too frequently published, read, and taught without any larger account of what happened to the Wallowa Valley Nez Perce either before or after 1877.

While this controversy may never be over, readers might value the literary complexities in the “Surrender Speech” which Wood’s more superficial critics have overlooked. It seems possible that Wood learned – after the fact – the tragic facts from Bear’s Paw , then, for complex aesthetic, political, ethical, and personal reasons, transformed those facts with sonnet form that, sounding like authentic Native American oratory, became part of the American national canon for more than 100 years. This 1877 work – which Wood never copyrighted or published in his books – may have exceeded all of Wood’s intentions or expectations.

Some evidence suggests that Wood was haunted by his claim to a “verbatim transcript” throughout his life. He was always asked to explain the origin of the speech—which he may never

have been able to fully disclose. In 1923, at the age of seventy, Wood wrote a one-act play *Odysseus*, which was performed in San Francisco. In this play, Wood may have again used literary strategies to identify, address, and interpret the crisis of credibility he had created for himself and to dignify and resolve that crisis. In Wood's brief play, the main character is the old and dying Odysseus. At one point, Odysseus and Dictys, a young Theban boy, have the following dialogue:

Odysseus: Zeus! – I seem like to be, and turn to a grasshopper. Here is a jewel for you – Let your tongue speak truth. It will be profitable to you – I did not do it. Men are such fools. O I could make a lie seem very truth. I am an old man now. You have a courtly tongue. Stick to the truth, young boy. It is more profitable.

Dictys: Great King; was not your Trojan wood horse a lie?

Odysseus: No. No. Horses do not lie. I was the liar – I was the master liar of them all. And I, the master liar, say train your young tongue to truth. There is a jewel for you from an old man – who has seen some things. Yes. Has seen some things; and done some things. Yes, done some things. Ha...." (Wood, *Collected Poems...* 149.)

In Wood's play, there is no final revelation or confession by Odysseus. The hero walks into the sea with his secrets. He dies. The play ends. How could Wood explain – after seventy years – that, as Picasso said, "Art is a lie that tells the truth?" How could he confess that he had feigned a verbatim transcript of Joseph in order to create credibility for a sonnet that would become more well-known than anything he ever wrote?

I suggest that the "Surrender Speech" should not be dismissed for its failures to meet some arbitrary factual test. Instead, the speech should be understood as a literary text designed to

transform the oppression that outrageous and intolerable racist facts created. Did Wood write what military history still attempts to annihilate by abstraction? Did Wood write what he and other soldiers needed to hear? Did Wood write what should have been said by any individual of conscience? Did Wood write to support General Howard? Did Wood write so Joseph and the Nez Perce would not be silenced? Did Wood write what all humane tradition required? Did Wood write to create catharsis for everyone? Any or all of these may be true. Whatever the case, the “Surrender Speech” shows that, for more than 100 years, Wood’s poetic language – parallels, image, rhyme, sonnet form, statement, paradox, persona, voice – transformed ignoble violence into humane statement.

As William Stafford once said, “Poetry is finally subversive.”

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The C.E.S. Wood letters—and many others consulted during this writing—are used courtesy of the Lucullus Virgil McWhorter Papers and Correspondence Collection. Holland Library, Washington State University, Pullman, with special thanks to Robert Matuozzi and Jose Barbery.

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Aspects of this address are explored in greater depth in *Soldier to Advocate: C.E.S. Wood's 1887 Legacy*, George Venn, Wordcraft of Oregon, 2006

