

Analysis of the speech¹ by Chief Seattle at the treaty negotiations at Point Elliott

~Dedicated to those with the strength, wit,
and courage to bridge cultures in conflict~

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According to Kenneth Burke, "Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose." He continues by saying, "This point of view does not...vow us to personal or historical subjectivism...the strategies possess universal relevance."² Chief Seattle's speech in December of 1854 was neither critical nor imaginative in the sense of it being composed for fictional or analytical purposes, but it is very much an imaginative and critical response "to questions posed by the situation in which [it] arose." The content and purpose of the response were critical for the future of Chief Seattle's tribe, and the terms in which he couched his response, showed an extraordinary level of both wit and imagination. More importantly, Chief Seattle employed rhetorical strategies and formal techniques that had that requisite universal relevance in a situation that has proven to have profound implications more than 150 years after the oration's delivery. This paper will explore some of those strategies and techniques in order to show how Seattle used them to create an imaginative bridge between two completely different cultures in order to help his people survive the cultural onslaught that the Western settlers represented. That speech effectively tapped into a complex configuration of cultural identities and consciousness that definitely has shown it to "possess universal relevance."

In his speech Noah Seattle set up a dichotomy between his people and

the incoming white settlers represented by the U.S. government. The government had offered the Northwest tribes a treaty—a contract—under which the Indians would surrender most of their land, the area that they had lived on and hunted in for hundreds if not thousands of years, to white settlement, and confine themselves to small reservations that were removed from the areas most suited for white settlement and expansion and also removed from much of their traditional fishing and hunting grounds. What was being demanded was not fair and many of the younger Indians rebelled at the idea of meekly acquiescing to the loss of their ancestral range.

However, Chief Seattle recognized that the battle had been lost long ago. Perhaps the realization for him grew from that dramatic childhood sight in 1792 of the great ship *Discovery* on its arrival off the coast of his village. Even then the power and determination and force that that ship represented instilled a sense of the enormous power that loomed in the world outside his tribal village. The sight of the great black ship, many times the size and weight of the greatest Native war canoe, gave physical shape to the doom that had been enveloping them in the form of strange, disfiguring, and deadly diseases. Power of that magnitude always has a massive appetite. Fortunately, Seattle had the mental agility to recognize the correlation of the rapidly changing social context with the introduction of this alien new cultural force and was able to develop a strategy that took it into account. As a Native American, Seattle had learned that life is best lived in accordance with natural rhythms, and he recognized that his people could not stop the onrush of the flow of this exceedingly powerful, new culture. Seattle's genius was in the way he was able to accommodate and find human connection within the newly developing culture and thus find a place that allowed his people to survive.

Indeed, he gave way to the white onslaught. Seattle was a large man

and a powerful warrior. He was a man of intelligence who had overcome marauding forces that were greater than his own by achieving surprise through superior tactics. However, this new cultural onslaught was on an entirely different level: It marked the transition point between the ages, the age of relatively primitive technology that employed bows and arrows and paddles, and the age of industry with a much more advanced technology that employed guns, canons, and engines. As Seattle's speech eloquently states, his people were "few and resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain" while the white man were "like a grass that covers the vast prairies."³ To save his people he had to look for shelter for them from the storm.

It is important to note that Chief Seattle was addressing a mixed audience. It was an important speech—one that carried the future survival of his people in the balance. His primary constituency, thus, was his own people who gathered in large numbers to listen to him. He spoke in his native language of Lushootseed and used images and references that they could readily understand. He spoke directly to the situation and the problems his people were facing in connection with the cultural invasion. He did not obfuscate the difficulty and gave an honest evaluation of their prospects. This must've had a profound impact on the tribe because these words were coming from a man of preeminent strength, intelligence, and courage, who had successfully met and overcome previous invasions of superior forces and had taken on the responsibility of leadership with a compelling humility and gravitas. However, even as he was speaking to his people, he was also very much aware of the diverse contingent of Westerners that were in attendance and listening to his words as they were being given a rough simultaneous translation. Chief Seattle made sure to include them in the speech in order to make the event into a kind of negotiated verbal contract between the two cultures.

Chief Seattle opened his address by invoking the setting and animating it into the role of audience or even witness: "Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion upon our fathers for centuries untold, and which to us looks eternal, may change. Today is fair, tomorrow may be overcast with clouds."⁴ This effectively placed his actual audience of fellow Indians and white settlers and visiting dignitaries and federal representatives on a stage that would be considered from a more universal context by more universal forces. The sky itself had witnessed and wept over the struggle for life that the Indians must undergo during the relatively brief span each individual had. The "tears of compassion"—the incessant Pacific Northwest rain—was/is an overwhelming weather pattern and perhaps the defining feature of life in that area. The long periods of overcast skies and drizzle cause a psychological depression that somehow must be overcome by incorporating it into the general philosophy and fabric of life. Since the rain does provide sustenance, the beneficial aspects obviously lend it an overall beneficent nature, but since the quantity of clouds and rain goes beyond that which is necessary and even interferes with the ease of daily life, it takes on a more complex and personal role in tribal life and lore. That the compassion seemed as eternal as the (weeping) sky, added an ironic and emphatic twist with the end of the sentence that introduced the possibility of a change in compassion and thus a loss of the sympathetic relationship that the Indians had enjoyed with and within their natural environment. The twist was doubled because the sky was fair and unclouded on this particular day, and the change would be to clouds and rain on the morrow—except, by implication the clouds might no longer bring compassionate rain.

Spoken in Lushootseed this colored the situation with an elegiac tone of gentle and self-deprecating black humor that his Native audience must have recognized and savored. This clever redefinition of the Native position

vis-à-vis their weather shows the light touch Seattle was taking with his audience at an extremely critical point in their cultural history and yet also indicates his understanding of the magnitude of the treaty under consideration. It is also a good example of how his position of leadership rested not so much on his considerable physical prowess and courage, but on his ability to recognize and navigate changes in treacherous, outside political currents as well as the more commonplace environmental ones. In this way it served as a deft reminder to his people that he was fully cognizant of the ramifications of the path he was suggesting they undertake and that he would be taking a more controlled long view of the situation rather than reacting to (or in) a short term outburst (cloudburst). In a natural culture like that of the Northwest American Indian, metaphor and simile utilizing forces of nature were the primary carriers of meaning and significance. Noah Seattle selected these figures of speech to establish a setting and atmosphere that would be most conducive to lead his people to adopt the plan of action that he would be promoting.

The second paragraph followed up on that with two similes: the first of which compared his words to the eternal stars and the second, which compared his words' reliability to the "return of the seasons."⁵ Both images—stars and seasonal cycle—were/are also loaded with twists that certainly his people appreciated because of their intimate familiarity with living under the stars within the seasonal embrace. Stars appear to remain permanently fixed in the sky—especially in relation to each other, though the fixed pattern does "move" over the course of a year with each season dominated by different constellations that return to their original positions after a one-year cycle. Furthermore, some of the "stars"—i.e., the planets—make more discernable movements across the sky on a different scale of regularity. However, there always remain the transitory elements like those ubiquitous clouds that obscure the fixed stars with a maddening

irregularity that sometimes lasts for a depressingly extended period of time. This figurative language employed by Chief Seattle was an important part of the point that he would make with his speech, with his argument for a certain course of action that appeared to go against the short-term interests of his tribe. He was attempting to establish a context, a setting whereby his people could accept a course of action that was associated with a natural permanence even though in the short term it appeared to more resemble a dark, cloudy and tear-filled future. He would be calling for a retreat, to accept a surrender to the natural flow of power away from their individual prospects, and to trust that the cycle would return again though it might take an astronomically long period of time. Chief Seattle was speaking his words to match the eternal pattern of life, not the transitory individual aspect that quickly changed like one day's weather.

On the immediate level, Chief Seattle was merely claiming the strength and trustworthiness of his word and bond that would be placed on the written treaty with the white settlers and the US government. His words wouldn't change with the seasons; rather, they were/are as permanent as the eternal cycle. However, with this imagery, he was claiming not just a contractual promise and oath to seal the treaty under consideration—his people already valued his word, but he was simultaneously trying to figuratively help his people see that this was all just part of a universal pattern that that was simply beyond resistance and, instead, was another expression of what they were familiar with and needed to be lived within. His people immediately appreciated this, and they also appreciated that the white men were also subject to the same natural cycles, and their turn would come.

It is with the third paragraph that Chief Seattle assumed full power and made the crucial identification with his people, that located both their current situation and his own position within the traditional mythos of his

tribe:

The son of the White Chief says his father sends us greetings of friendship and good will. This is kind, for we know he has little need of our friendship in return because his people are many. They are like the grass that covers the vast prairies, while my people are few and resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain.⁶

This section is often the source of misreading that causes some to doubt the authenticity of the speech itself,⁷ but when considered in terms of the traditional stories that form the cultural heart of Native life, this complex image (I use the singular here because the different natural images are interrelated) form a direct reference to one of the most important stories in Indian mythology – perhaps carrying the same import as an Old Testament story (like the Flood and Noah's Ark) would to a Christian. The grass – the prairies – the trees – and the storm-swept plain: some have read this and discounted the speech as apocryphal because the Northwest coastal tribes would have had little or no experience at that time with the high plains and vast prairies of the central part of North America.⁸ Though environmentalists like to attach themselves to the racial and environmental catastrophe that happened there in terms of the buffalo slaughter and Indian battles, Chief Seattle was not alluding to it at all. He was instead alluding to a completely different story and one more in keeping with its position in the early part of the speech where Seattle was weaving a referential framework that would allow him a close identification with his people through both his spirit power which he would be invoking and utilizing in the act of being the chief speaker, and in his purpose of offering a solution to the tribe's current dilemma.

The story Seattle was referring to was one of the most important

concerning the salutary role of the Thunderbird⁹ in Indian tradition. In this story, the Indian tribe is suffering from severe weather conditions from which they had to flee their coastal homes to a prairie high in the mountains:

Long ago, there was a sad time in the land of the Quillayute.¹⁰ For days and days, great storms blew. Rain and hail and then sleet and snow came down upon the land. The hailstones were so large that many of the people were killed. *The other Quillayute were driven from their coast villages to the great prairie, which was the highest part of their land.*

There the people grew thin and weak from hunger. The hailstones had beaten down the ferns, the camas, and the berries. Ice locked the rivers so the men could not fish. Storms rocked the ocean so the fishermen could not go out in their canoes for deep-sea fishing. *Soon, the people had eaten all the grass and roots on the prairie; there was no food left. As children died without food, even the strongest and bravest of their fathers could do nothing.* They called upon the Great Spirit for help, but no help came.¹¹ [Italics mine]

This is the beginning of one of the most important of the Thunderbird stories. In this one the Thunderbird was called upon to save the Indian tribe from destruction. The natural world had turned hostile and unlivable – they were beset by great storms that not only destroyed their means of livelihood but also directly killed with hailstones. Complete tribal extinction seemed imminent. Note how the people were at the mercy of a suddenly hostile environment and in need of divine intervention. The conditions were so bad that they had fled their homes on the coast where they normally

lived as fishermen and had sought refuge in the "*great prairie*." This prairie was not the same prairie that the Euro-American settlers were familiar with—especially those that had crossed America by wagon; instead this was a high, relatively flat plain in the middle of the Olympic Peninsula. For the Natives of that area there are several of these geographical anomalies that consist of large open spaces in the higher reaches of the Olympic rain forests that were created due to a combination of altitude, lack of sufficient soil depth, and sporadic forest fires. According to Native tradition, these prairies were created during a series of struggles between Whale and Thunderbird that uprooted trees and cleared wide spaces.¹² This was a prairie they were intimately familiar with, and it was a part of their shared cultural heritage. Moreover, it was a prairie associated with a grim and desperate struggle for survival that was beyond their human capability.

Initially in the story, even the Great Spirit seemed deaf to their entreaties. The chief of the tribe "called for a meeting of his people. *He was old and wise*. 'Take comfort, my people,' the Chief said. 'We will call again upon the Great Spirit for help. If no help comes, *then we will know it is His will that we die*. If it is not His will that we live, then we will die bravely, as brave Quillayute have always died.'" ¹³ [Italics mine] This was an apt identification for Chief Seattle for he, too, was "old and wise," and he, too, was speaking before a meeting of his people during a time of tremendous cultural upheaval or storm that was threatening to drive them from much of their traditional hunting and fishing grounds. Unknown diseases that disfigured and killed were striking many of the Native Americans. The parallel between the current situation and the mythic story must have been manifest to every Native American in attendance. To make it even clearer, Chief Seattle was universally known to speak with the voice of Thunderbird. Seattle was choosing his words and images very carefully in order to

establish his credentials and present the situation in mythic terms in order to communicate the importance of the impending decision: the ramifications were of tribal Life or Death proportions.

Furthermore, Seattle was making a connection between the mythic story and the current situation in terms of the fundamental helplessness of both. The warriors might have been able to fight the cultural onslaught, but it would have been a losing proposition. Survival would have had to come from powers outside tribal purview and recourse. Chief Seattle was thence setting himself in the role of both truth-telling supplicant and voice of traditional salvation, i.e. Thunderbird. In a complex way Seattle used a metaphor to link myth and reality, past trauma with current trauma, traditional recourse and a new, modern cultural recourse; moreover, the metaphor tightly bound the problem with the solution. He was also identifying himself here as carrying and personifying those same complex roles. This speech was a true tour de force reflecting backwards and forwards simultaneously while shedding clear light on the current difficulty.

This part also reflects one of Burke's insights into rhetorical analysis where he states a primary aspect of rhetoric is that "One must erect a vast symbolic synthesis, a rationale of imaginative and conceptual imagery... [to] provide... 'cues' as to what he should try to get, how he should try to get it, and how he should 'resign himself' to a renunciation of the things he can't get."¹⁴ This exactly reflects what Chief Seattle was doing in his speech—even in terms of the resignation aspect. Burke further adds, "The range of images that can be used for concretizing the process of transformation... favors the imagery of Life and Death, with its variants of being born, being reborn, dying, killing, and being killed."¹⁵ Indeed, the theme of Life and Death is central to the speech and all of the imagery and references underscore this focus. This is especially true for the reference to the tribal

story that all his people had to be very familiar with. And, of course, Seattle also effectively identified himself as the vessel of the Thunderbird power – as mentioned earlier. At the same time, Seattle was one of the people and shared the same fate. He thus placed himself at the very crux of the issue, identified with and sharing the characteristics and fate at both the spiritual and physical core of the Indian culture. Seattle clearly viewed the death aspect of the unavoidable transformation that was in the offing, and was seeking a strategy that would ameliorate as much of the destruction as possible—or at least avoid total annihilation, if possible.

As the Indian legend moves towards its climax, the chief prays again to the Great Spirit:

The people waited. No one spoke. There was nothing but silence and darkness. Suddenly, there came a great noise, and flashes of lightning cut the darkness. ...In silence, they watched while Thunderbird carefully lowered the whale to the ground before them. Thunderbird then flew high in the sky, and went back to the thunder and lightning it had come from. Thunderbird and Whale saved the Quillayute from dying. The people knew that the Great Spirit had heard their prayer. *Even today they never forget that visit from Thunderbird, never forget that it ended long days of hunger and death. For on the prairie near their village are big, round stones that the grandfathers say are the hardened hailstones of that storm long ago.*¹⁶ [Italics mine]

This third paragraph in the speech clearly indicated the deep understanding that Chief Seattle had of his and his people's position—perhaps a better understanding than anyone present, and certainly the most prescient. At this time, it must be remembered that the native Indians still greatly outnumbered the white settlers in the area, and the white settlers,

as well as the white population in general, had a great fear of Indian attack and savagery. If the Indians chose to resist the burgeoning settlements in the Pacific Northwest, they could have made life extremely difficult for a period of time and inflicted severe casualties on them. In fact, many of the young adult Indians wanted to take this very course of action in order to defend the area in which they had lived for so many generations. The US government was also well aware of the defensive difficulties inherent to rapid expansion, and they were fearful of a general Indian uprising in the relatively remote Northwest forests. Therefore, the government was looking to find a workable accommodation with the local tribes to safeguard the settlers' short-term interest and lay the groundwork for long-term development.

Also note that with this paragraph Seattle linked the universal consideration with official greetings. Though Chief Seattle maintained diplomatic courtesy, he at the same time bolstered his claim that he was a truth-teller by acknowledging that the polite courtesy of the proffered friendship and good will was, in fact, an act of considerable merit because he knew that there was a cultural tidal wave sweeping the continent that was bound to overwhelm any and all resistance. This small white settlement might have appeared vulnerable in an individual sense, but from a general, historical perspective, white development was simply too powerful to be stopped. The resulting cultural reorganization would be one-sided and friendship would indeed be irrelevant in the greater scheme of things. However, this friendship, if maintained, could offer long-term benefits to the Native culture even while it offered short-term benefits of peace and territory to the white colonists. Pointing out the fact that friendship and good will were unnecessary also added a hint of warning to his own people that resistance would be both counterproductive and futile as well as clarifying the terms of the treaty in a public way so as to make it more

also for we are no longer in need of a great country.¹⁷

difficult for the side that had the advantageous long-term position of power (i.e., the growing U.S. government and populace), to renege on the deal. He was trying to make the treaty a matter of honor, trust, morality and personal bond as well as a matter of contract law and justice.

This more expansive definition of the event proved to be a brilliant way to control the setting to some small degree, and it created the possibility of a peaceful coexistence that had failed so tragically so many times before and after for other Native Indian peoples. This also operated as a diplomatic way to elevate and praise in order to induce a possibly formidable opponent to act with generosity and fellowship. The imagery employed to show the relative power of the two positions worked well in conjunction with the earlier images to vividly stress for his people in clarified terms the particular position of extreme weakness they were currently in, yet allowed them to bear in mind that storms do pass and those scattered trees can survive, leaving unspoken possibilities that they could perhaps live to repopulate a forest. The prairie grass image representing the growing white population, juxtaposed with a separate simile of scattered trees on a plain representing the Native American situation, though seemingly a straightforward and apt figuration of two different cultural directions was subtly connected with the addition of a storm in the latter. For the Indians the white people were the storm that was threatening to sweep them off the face of the earth.

The question of what the true nature of the relationship between the two cultures was and would be is further stressed in the fourth paragraph:

The Great, and I presume, also good, White Chief sends us word that he wants to buy our lands but is willing to allow us to reserve enough to live on comfortably. This indeed appears generous, for the Red Man no longer has rights that he need respect, and the offer may be wise,

Chief Seattle was making it clear to his people as well as to the settlers and government officials in attendance that there was a disparity in power and values that must also be taken into account by all interested parties when attempting to negotiate a treaty between the different peoples, to evaluate how well it addressed the parties' needs and concerns—both long and short term, and to make a decision on acceptance or rejection that would have dramatic ramifications concerning the future of each culture and how they would interact.

Seattle undertook his task with the skill and intelligence that had always marked his tenure of leadership by directly addressing these concerns and problems stemming from misjudgment and miscommunication inherent to cross-cultural negotiation as he continued to amplify his greeting for his people by adding a spoken presumption of goodness on the part of the "White Chief," President Franklin Pierce. The rhetorical split between the adjectives "Great" and "good" caused by the insertion of a consciously made presumption added a distinct pause that qualified the "good" and undercut its complimentary nature, giving it a provisional status that indicated a distinct lack of naiveté concerning the intentions and long-term trustworthiness of the US government. Even with his greeting, Chief Seattle reflected the tenuous and problematic nature both of the cross-cultural negotiation and also of his tribe's prospects for survival.

Seattle went on to describe to his people the offer in stark terms. He outlined the case quite simply: The Indian population had dwindled (without reference to cause or without assigning blame), and that fact had the double effect of reducing their power of effective resistance and of reducing their need for extensive hunting grounds to support the smaller number of people.

As Chief Seattle transitioned from the greeting to the central part of his speech, in the next few paragraphs he offered his audience a sense of tribal value and history by reminiscing about the days when the tribe was at its halcyon, before bringing them back to objectively face the fact of their "decay." He even assumed a share of the blame for the loss—though the share came from responding to a perceived wrong rather than instigating one. Again, this assessment had a recognizable honesty about it that also left room for each side to interpret for their own psychological benefit. Significantly, Chief Seattle finished this with a call for an end to reprisals and a return to family life and its concerns. This movement away from war-like decisions and back to a re-grounding in family needs, prioritized tribal strategies from retribution to survival.

At this point it is pertinent to review the character of the speaker and the weight his words might carry in changing the direction of the tribe into a formal retreat from traditional hunting grounds. Chief Seattle's courage could never be called into question as he had a long history of facing his enemies in battle, even when outnumbered. He was the pre-eminent warrior of his generation and had never shied from taking his place in battle even after taking his place as an elder in his tribe. Moreover, there wasn't a single warrior who had the ability to match him in equal combat. He had the reputation of being ruthless in battle, and was a thoroughly intimidating figure. He was also a master at tactics as well as strategy on both the field of battle and in the council chambers. His long-term policies had already consolidated his tribe's power over much of the Northwest coastal area, stopping most of the depredations they had long suffered at the hands of powerful tribes like the Hyas to the north and the Green River tribes to the east.¹⁸ Since Seattle's ascension to leadership, his tribe enjoyed a sense of pre-eminence and security that they had never had before. His judgments, decisions, and his word had become a tribal trust. When he spoke his people

knew they were hearing the clearest and most reasonable assessment available. The humility and self-deprecating humor with which he spoke, together with his way of including every member of the tribe in his considerations only magnified his human understanding and emphasized the validity of his argument. Nevertheless, he was in effect asking the young warriors to make a very difficult, counter-intuitive sacrifice: They were being asked to give up their individual chance for glory through revenge for the greater good of the tribal family.

Paragraph seven marked an important transition as Chief Seattle introduced an important benefit to the tribe's acquiescing to the federal government's treaty and placing itself under the government's protection, while at the same time underscoring the inherent problematic nature of the situation:

Our great father Washington, for I presume he is now our father as well as yours, since George has moved his boundaries to the North—our great and good father, I say, sends us word by his son, who, no doubt, is a great chief among his people that if we do as he desires he will protect us. His brave armies will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his great ships of war will fill our harbors so that our ancient enemies far to the northward - the Simsiams and Hyas, will no longer frighten our women and old men. Then he will be our father and we will be his children.¹⁹

Chief Seattle addressed his tribal family of mothers and sons as being within the domain of a new "father," Washington. Through this reference to the first president of the USA as the new leader of their tribe ("*Our* great father Washington"), he was accepting the federal authority, and at the same time trying to align it with the more benevolent aspects of a family

relationship for his people. Again, note the humility on the part of Chief Seattle that this act epitomized. It is interesting to note that Washington, like Seattle, assumed the role of leader of his nation by means of proven military leadership, coupled with a disdain for using the power and authority for accruing personal gain. The actual president at the time of this treaty was Franklin Pierce, and he was not above the partisan political machinations that often eclipse the higher, more noble instincts that the rare breed of selfless statesman possess. It was Washington that represented the highest ideals of benevolent leadership, and it was to this spirit that Chief Seattle was appealing. The current president was not named but instead mentioned as a "son" and thus hopefully carrying Washington's generous and protective spirit forward, creating a broader and more inclusive family relationship with the childlike and vulnerable tribe.

Having established an ideal outcome for the treaty, Noah Seattle in paragraphs eight through twelve then dug into the critical cultural differences between the two peoples that made the family identification problematic. He launched into this section with the powerful rhetorical question: "But can that ever be?" The rhetorical shift from identification to differentiation is dramatic and must have been quite startling to the audience. Burke shows how the two are closely linked in a rhetorical endeavor: "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity."²⁰ Chief Seattle exemplified this combination of identification and differentiation that any complex metaphor or rhetorical piece binds together into a singularity. He wanted to ensure that the prospective treaty contained this complex mesh of needs by explicitly delineating some of the fundamental cultural problems that the treaty was attempting to bridge. In order to accomplish this, he could not let the

treaty rest on presumptions without exploring basic belief systems that underlay the contract.

He began by calling into question any possibility for success due to fundamental spiritual and world-view differences, and this made the previous language qualified by linguistic contingencies like "presume," and "no doubt" suddenly more dynamic because the possibility of irony was underscored. The nature of Noah Seattle made him uniquely appropriate to explore this situation. He had been baptized into the Catholic faith about ten years previous and had taken Noah as his Christian name.²¹ The choice of name was an excellent indication of his perception of the tribe's position vis-à-vis the flood of white settlers, as well as his position of leadership within the Suquamish tribe. Note how he identified with his people even though he ostensibly believed in the same God as the white people. "Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! ...The white man's God cannot love his red children or He would help them."²² When Chief Seattle had taken up Catholicism, he had been a high-profile convert who had attempted to partake in the universal power and brotherhood that belief conferred. The socio-political reality of the Faith, however, turned out to be quite different from the philosophical and spiritual promise. Noah here was pointing out this inescapable and harsh, logical reality that the white influx, the white flood represented, in a wonderfully complex irony: Chief Seattle, the visionary leader of his people, was taking upon himself the task of understanding and perhaps utilizing the spiritual powers that presumably underpin Western expansion, based on the Biblical principle that God gave man mastery over nature (obviously more power than simply living in harmony with nature and subject to nature's whimsy). Recognizing his place as the leader of a fast-diminishing people being overwhelmed by the onrushing flood of a new culture that was threatening to sweep his people away, Chief Seattle took upon himself the

mantle of that religious force and identified himself with Noah from the Book of Genesis, who had saved his own small family from the Great Flood and brought them to safety, and after many generations, to prosperity and proliferation, by assuming his name.

The cultural conflict with the continuing Western expansion created a logical paradox that could not be easily solved: two different cultures with two different economic systems based on two different views of the human position within nature could not both prosper and be protected by the same God, the same spiritual Father, because the growth and development of one had to be at the expense of the other. In accepting the irony, Noah Seattle was attempting to build his "ark" to protect as much of his culture and as many of his people as he could against the flood of white people, supported by their God, who were threatening to completely overwhelm the Indian culture. The "ark" would be in the form of this treaty built upon a fundamental spiritual and cultural irony. Seattle's people must have savored this irony because it was completely in tune with the natural irony of life in the rainy—and often flooded—Pacific Northwest.

This part of the speech must have caused great discomfort to the white official representatives because it laid bare the paradox of definition of human equality and an acceptance of racial superiority that allowed the exploitation and dispossession of other races and cultures deemed inferior, that helped fuel Western development. This very exclusive definition of human equality was often ignored or papered over with spiritual generalities in order to facilitate short-term acquiescence, but Chief Seattle was addressing the paradox of equality in the eyes of God in a direct way. Moreover, since Seattle had always been willing to engage the settlers and create relationships built on friendship and mutual trust that promoted Western financial interests while protecting and even enhancing the interests of his own people, his words rang true. Much of Seattle's own

material wealth came from economic projects that he actively undertook with friends among the settlers,²³ and he used it to expand his own power base among the Northwest Native tribes by regularly sharing it with his people through their potlatch-based economic system.²⁴ Chief Seattle was extremely adept at manipulating both economic systems even though the systems were fundamentally antithetical in nature. Chief Seattle understood exactly what was at stake in this cross-cultural interaction, and his people completely trusted him because he had many times over proven himself in terms of insight, judgment and courage. By using the dichotomous image of day and night being unable to simultaneously coexist to sum up the untenable situation concerning the influx of the newly emergent white man into the Red Man's part of the world, Noah Seattle acknowledged that the Red Man would have to flee or else they would "evaporate" in the powerful new force.

After delivering this devastating assessment to his people in the form of clear, natural similes and metaphors derived from traditional mythology, Chief Seattle in paragraphs thirteen through twenty-two (the end) then brought up the terms of the treaty and acquiesced to his tribe's removing themselves to the reservation set aside for their use, because it fit the current natural order, which was the source of the Natives' own spiritual identity. Seattle turned elegiac as he mourned the coming diminution and loss—the figurative movement into darkness, further developing the image of night versus day and cementing the Indians' identification with the night and, ultimately, death.

Death haunts this speech and Chief Seattle did not flinch from facing it, and calmly accepted it as part of their life—both in the individual sense and in the larger tribal sense. This acceptance reflected the same attitude as the Great Chief in the Thunderbird-Whale myth. Death was part of the cycle of life reflected in the passage of seasons as well as the day/night

cycle. It was reflected in the predator-prey dance. It was reflected in all of the natural imagery that he employed. And the impending loss was justly mourned. Notice, however, that throughout the speech, even as he placed the different cultures in antithetical positions in the life cycle, he also maintained a connection by juxtaposing them within each natural image. Seattle drives this point home first by using the comparative language of "...a people once as powerful and as hopeful as your own," (paragraph 15) and then by following up with the logical surmise that "Even the white man...is not exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all" (16). Chief Seattle had now completed the linkage that made it possible for his people to psychologically accept a treaty made between equals ultimately facing the same fate.

Noah then took up the treaty itself and added a condition that would honor and respect this link: that the tribe be allowed to visit "the graves of [their] ancestors and friends" (17). This was followed by a description of their natural Northwest environment inextricably bound up with their individual lives and the life of the tribe. In this way, Chief Seattle claimed the spirit of that area as part of their identity. They were in effect part-and-parcel of their own God—their Great Spirit, and even in death shared in the life.

The last few paragraphs were a powerful statement of continuation even after death and further emphasized the Indians' complete—physical and spiritual—connection and identification with their environment. These are also the passages that continue to reverberate today for environmentalists who use his words to support Earth-friendly attitudes and activities. The coming of nightfall now would become time for the Indians to embrace because it would then be their time; and even though they would be wandering as spirits, they still would have their love of "this beautiful land." (22) Seattle added a final admonition to the white man as they were

taking up their dominant position in the new day, and that was to respect and be fair to Seattle's people as they were making way for the white man, because night and death had its own power.

In conclusion, Chief Seattle wove a complex web of natural images and metaphors as well as mythic references into the speech in order to place his audience—his people—within the natural context that they were familiar with and would recognize as their own. He also endeavored to make the Western contingent aware of their own responsibilities in the proceedings. This complex web also incorporated the settlers' antithetical Euro-American context of environmental development and subjugation that was overrunning the Native culture that was based on living within Nature's parameters. The Native Americans had difficulty understanding how a people could be seemingly at war with the natural forces that had been the Indians' source of life. It was a complex paradox of Nature: At which level could the Indians find life—individual, tribal, governmental, transitory-natural (like in a weather system), astronomical, or perhaps spiritual? Chief Seattle created a rich mixture of images to explore this question on behalf of his people. This was perhaps the essence of Seattle's art: he was able to redefine the world in which they lived in terms that they could understand, and yet he clearly demarcated where the two cultures diverged. Moreover, within this twisted irony Seattle somehow found a place where his people could remain with their spiritual identity intact, even as the Euro-Americans were attempting to subordinate their beloved nature. With the acceptance of the Indians' diminishment, Seattle allowed that the cycle of nature was beyond the power of any individual or any particular people, and that finally Nature—the environment—would trump and encompass the Euro-Americans best efforts, though the Indians—as individuals—might not be able to survive. However, the Native American natural spirit would remain.

This speech was a philosophical / psychological / sociological tour de force that found a way to: First—allow the Natives to be aligned with a more powerful spiritual force that would empower a kind of eternal spiritual survival, second—enfold the overwhelming Euro-American invasion within that force, third—allow the current individuals, though doomed to be physically overwhelmed, to accept terms that would allow them the resources to physically live as individuals and as a culture under the powerful Euro-American umbrella. It was a great performance by Chief Seattle, and with wit, honesty, and grace, he addressed issues that remain profoundly important.

Finally, in his seminal book, *Counter-Statement*, Burke describes a work of literature in terms of the relationship between psychology and form²⁵ where the psychology "is not the psychology of the *hero*, but the psychology of the *audience*" and form becomes identified with this psychology because it is "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite...[that] at times involves a temporary set of frustrations." (p31) Later Burke talks about how the poet or artist starts with an emotion and creates a symbol out of it in order to make both an emotional and logical consistency to pull together the various parts of his work.²⁶ In this case the artist was the orator Chief Seattle, and his audience was comprised primarily of his own people, although the US government officials and settlers (who were at cross purposes to varying degrees to the welfare of the Indian tribe) were also in attendance and were inextricably bound up in the success or failure of his oration, which was being directed simultaneously at the psychological manipulation of all attendees.

To do this, Seattle reached back into tribal lore to create a symbol of impending loss with a view to perhaps understanding and coping with it. In so doing, Chief Seattle took upon himself the dual role of speech deliverer

and deliverer of his people through his speech. He became the symbol of both Noah and Thunderbird, and in that duality reached out as a bridge between the two cultures that were so diametrically opposed. With this marvelously complex self-identification that only the Thunderbird could carry off, he became the embodiment (literally and figuratively) of that symbol. His successful linkage of form and psychology within both cultures also connected the two peoples and allowed his own people to weather the storm while allowing the settlers a place where they could live and prosper. This is also where his speech took on its universal nature because the commonalities he put forward within the life-and-death cycle are the same elements that bind us all in this world. Truly, the voice of Chief Seattle still resonates today.²⁷

"In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude."

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¹ According to Dr. Smith, the speech was much longer than what he finally transcribed as he states in an article in which he publishes the speech: "The above is but a fragment of his speech." <http://www.ilhawaii.net/~stony/seattle.html>

² Burke. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 3.

³ These two images are central to the meaning and impact that the speech imparts to and has on Seattle's audience. I will take up the important reference and identification that Seattle is making with these interrelated images in due course.

⁴ See a translation of Seattle's speech in the Appendix.

⁵ See Appendix.

⁶ See Appendix.

⁷ See Jerry Clark article.

⁸ Among the reasons that Jerry Clark covers for discounting the Seattle speech, he quotes this section of the speech that contains the prairie image and then juxtaposes it with a letter written on behalf of Seattle to President Pierce (Chief Seattle could neither read nor write English with any facility) that referred to shooting buffalo on the Great Plains. Though Clark does not directly state that these two images are referring to the same thing, he does strongly infer the connection by the juxtaposition and then by discussing how the letter must be spurious (and thus the speech) because Chief Seattle would not have been witness to the buffalo massacre on the Great Plains.

⁹ The greater significance of Seattle's usage of the Thunderbird myth will be taken up at length later in this paper.

¹⁰ One of the tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Like Chief Seattle's immediate tribe, the Quillayute were located on the Olympic Peninsula. All of these tribes shared the same fundamental myths and stories, especially the ones dealing with Creation and culture building. The Thunderbird was one of the primary spirit figures and was extremely powerful, often being the spiritual guide of only the most imposing chiefs.

¹¹ Ella Clark, <http://www.angelfire.com/realm/bodhisattva/thunderbird.html>

¹² See Ella Clark. A brief summary of this myth can be found at <http://www.angelfire.com/realm/bodhisattva/thunderbird.html>

¹³ Ella Clark.

¹⁴ Burke. *Attitudes toward History*, p. 179.

¹⁵ Burke. *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 12.

¹⁶ Ella Clark.

¹⁷ See Appendix.

¹⁸The events enumerated here are covered in more detail in a previous paper, "Authenticating Chief Seattle's Speech." *Studies in English Language and Literature*, Vol. 49 Nos. 1-3, March 2008. Seinan Gakuin University, Fukuoka, Japan.

¹⁹See Appendix.

²⁰Burke. *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 22.

²¹See Whitehead, Margaret. "Christianity, a Matter of Choice."

²²See Appendix, paragraph 8.

²³Osterhaus, "Authenticating Chief Seattle's Speech," pp. 63-64.

²⁴Beck and Bracken both have written excellent studies on the Potlatch.

²⁵Burke, *Counter-Statement*, pp. 30-31.

²⁶Ibid. pp. 60-61.

²⁷As I was finishing this paper it was interesting for me to inadvertently discover that my junior high school son was at that very time studying the speech of Chief Seattle in his English class—in a Japanese school.

Appendix

Chief Seattle's Speech at the Point Elliott Treaty Negotiations

Translated by Dr. Henry Smith, published in October 29, 1887 in the *Seattle Sunday Star*

1 **Yonder** sky that has wept tears of compassion upon our fathers for centuries untold, and which to us looks eternal, may change. Today is fair, tomorrow may be overcast with clouds.

2 My words are like the stars that never set. What Seattle says the Great Chief at Washington can rely upon with as much certainty as our paleface brothers can rely upon the return of the seasons.

3 The son of the White Chief says his father sends us greetings of friendship and good will. This is kind, for we know he has little need of our friendship in return because his people are many. They are like the grass that covers the vast prairies, while my people are few and resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain.

4 The Great, and I presume, also good, White Chief sends us word that he wants

to buy our lands but is willing to allow us to reserve enough to live on comfortably. This indeed appears generous, for the Red Man no longer has rights that he need respect, and the offer may be wise, also for we are no longer in need of a great country.

5 There was a time when our people covered the whole land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea covers its shell-paved floor. But that time has long since passed away with the greatness of tribes now almost forgotten. I will not mourn over our untimely decay, nor reproach my paleface brothers for hastening it, for we, too, may have been somewhat to blame. When our young men grow angry at some real or imaginary wrong, and disfigure their faces with black paint, their hearts, also, are disfigured and turn black, and then their cruelty is relentless and knows no bounds, and our old men are not able to restrain them.

6 But let us hope that hostilities between the Red Man and his paleface brothers may never return. We would have everything to lose and nothing to gain. True it is, that revenge, with our young braves is considered gain, even at the cost of their own lives, but old men who stay at home in times of war, and mothers who have sons to lose, know better.

7 Our great father Washington, for I presume he is now our father as well as yours, since George has moved his boundaries to the North—our great and good father, I say, sends us word by his son, who, no doubt, is a great chief among his people that if we do as he desires he will protect us. His brave armies will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his great ships of war will fill our harbors so that our ancient enemies far to the northward - the Simsiams and Hyas, will no longer frighten our women and old men. Then he will be our father and we will be his children.

8 But can that ever be? Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! He folds His strong arms lovingly around the white man and leads him as a father leads his infant son - but He has forsaken his red children, He makes your people wax strong every day and soon they will fill all the land; while my people are ebbing away like a fast receding tide that will never flow again. The white man's God cannot love his red children or He would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. How, then, can we become brothers? How can your Father become our Father and bring us prosperity, and awaken in us dreams of returning

greatness? Your God seems to us to be partial. He came to the white man. We never saw Him, never heard His voice. He gave the white man laws, but had no word for His red children whose teeming millions once filled this vast continent as the stars fill the firmament.

9 No. We are two distinct races, and must remain ever so, there is little in common between us. The ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their final resting place is hallowed ground, while you wander away from the tombs of your fathers seemingly without regrets.

10 Your religion was written on tablets of stone by the iron finger of an angry God, lest you might forget it. The Red Man could never remember nor comprehend it. Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors - the dreams of our old men, given to them by the Great Spirit, and the visions of our Sachems, and is written in the hearts of our people.

11 Your dead cease to love you and the homes of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb. They wander far away beyond the stars, are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its winding rivers, its great mountains and its sequestered vales, and they ever yearn in tenderest affection over the lonely-hearted living, and often return to visit and comfort them.

12 Day and night cannot dwell together. The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the white man, as the changing mist on the mountain side flees before the blazing morning sun.

13 However, your proposition seems a just one, and I think that my folks will accept it and will retire to the reservation you offer them, and we will dwell apart and in peace, for the words of the Great White Chief seem to be the voice of Nature speaking to my people out of the thick darkness that is fast gathering around them like a dense fog floating inward from a midnight sea.

14 It matters little where we pass the remainder of our days. They are not many. The Indian's night promises to be dark. No bright star hovers above his horizon. Sad-voiced winds moan in the distance. Some grim Nemesis of our race is on the Red Man's trail, and wherever he goes he will still hear the sure approaching footsteps of

the fell destroyer and prepare to meet his doom, as does the wounded doe that hears the approaching footsteps of the hunter.

15 A few more moons, a few more winters, and not one of all the mighty hosts that once filled this broad land or that now roam in fragmentary bands through these vast solitudes or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to weep over the graves of a people once as powerful and as hopeful as your own!

16 But why should I repine? Why should I murmur at the fate of my people? Tribes are made up of individuals and are no better than they. Men come and go like the waves of a sea. A tear, a tamanamus, a dirge and they are gone from our longing eyes forever. Even the white man, whose God walked and talked with him as friend to friend, is not exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see.

17 We will ponder your proposition, and when we have decided we will tell you. But should we accept it, I here and now make this first condition, that we will not be denied the privilege, without molestation, of visiting the graves of our ancestors and friends.

18 Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks, which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore in solemn grandeur thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people, the very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred.

19 The sable braves, and fond mothers, and glad-hearted maidens, and the little children who lived and rejoiced here and whose very names are now forgotten, still love these solitudes and their deep fastnesses at eventide grow shadowy with the presence of dusky spirits.

20 And when the last Red Man shall have perished from the earth and his memory among white men shall have become a myth, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe and when your children's children shall think themselves

alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude.

21 At night, when the streets of your cities and villages shall be silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land.

22 The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless.