

Jeffers Studies

Robert J. Brophy

Department of English

California State University

Long Beach, CA 90840

Jeffers Studies

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GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

Shorter manuscripts, suitable for numbers 1, 2, and 3 of each volume, in two double-spaced copies, should typically range up to 4,000 words. Longer essays should be between 5,000 and 9,000 words. Both should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped postcard for prompt acknowledgment. The author's name should appear on the initial page only. All copies are non-returnable. Citation of Jeffers's poetry should be from the Stanford *Collected Poetry*, abbreviated *CP*. Until the *Collected Letters* (Stanford) is available, citation of Robinson and Una Jeffers letters should be from Ann Ridgeway's *Selected Letters (SL)* (Johns Hopkins) or from the Una Jeffers Correspondent series in issues of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* (see *RJN* index, issue 100, Fall 1996). Formatting should follow the *MLA Handbook*, fourth edition, with parenthetical citations, endnotes, and works cited. A final revision of an accepted article should be submitted in hard copy and as an IBM-formatted Word file on a 3.5" floppy disk.

Robinson Jeffers Association Bulletin

JEFFERS ESSAY PRIZE

The Robinson Jeffers Association is pleased to announce the third annual Jeffers Essay Prize. The Prize is underwritten by the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation and its board member John Varady, and is given annually to the undergraduate or graduate student who submits the best previously unpublished essay on any aspect of Jeffers's work. Applicants are encouraged to consider Jeffers's relations to other significant writers and thinkers.

In addition to a cash award of \$500, the winning essay will be considered for publication in *Jeffers Studies*, and the recipient will be invited to deliver a talk based on the essay at the annual gathering of the Robinson Jeffers Association. The 2001 conference will be held in Taos, New Mexico, on the weekend of April 28–29 and will focus on “Robinson Jeffers and the Circle of Mabel Dodge Luhan.”

Each applicant should follow MLA style and submit four copies of his or her essay to David J. Rothman, Chair, Jeffers Prize Committee, P.O. Box 1296, Crested Butte, CO 81224. The deadline for this year is December 1, 2000.

RJA CALL FOR PAPERS

The Seventh Annual Conference of the Robinson Jeffers Association will be convened at Taos, New Mexico, April 28–29, 2001, with the theme “Robinson Jeffers and the Circle of Mable Dodge Luhan.” The conference site will be the Mabel Dodge

Luhan House, where the Jeffers family vacationed for several summers in the 1930s, and where Jeffers's hostess hoped he would find inspiration to redeem the modern world through a connection to primal vitality.

The Association welcomes talks that examine Jeffers's works in relation to any aspect of the American Southwest, either in his own life and work or in relation to other artists, writers, and thinkers, such as D. H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keefe, Alfred Stieglitz, John Reed, Amy Lowell, Edward Abbey, and many others. The Association also welcomes submissions for a related panel on “Jeffers and Wilderness.”

Brief proposals should be sent to David J. Rothman, Executive Director of the Robinson Jeffers Association, P.O. Box 1296, Crested Butte, CO 81224, e-mail <djr@rmi.com>, with copies to Alex Vardamis, President of the Robinson Jeffers Association, P.O. Box 5323, Carmel, CA 93921, e-mail <vardamis@redshift.com>. Deadline for submissions is December 15, 2000.

Robinson Jeffers's California Landscape and the Rhetoric of Displacement

Pierre Lagayette

Theodore Roosevelt's well-known phrase, "When I am in California, I am not in the west, I am west of the west," has more to it than a superficial look of rhetorical redundancy. Beyond mere linguistic repetition, it points to some cultural phenomenon that has to do with direction, movement, distance, and difference.

The formula first conveys a sense of furtherance through accumulation. Obviously California concentrates upon itself all the essential characters of the West—i.e. the so far commonly accepted conception of the West—plus another special set of qualities that may transform redundancy into improvement. In fact, California epitomizes a whole movement/displacement that incessantly drove people westward with the hope of personal or collective improvement. Repetition, here, stands for migration. And the West is, metonymically, the archetypal land of migrants, or emigrants—which is to say, of dis-placed persons.

Repetition is also the best linguistic approximation to the sense of other-worldliness that California always imparted to those who sought to connect the place to any of their previous experiences of place. In that respect, it would easily symbolize arch-displacement, in the same way as Americans are arch-migrants. In other words, there is a whole cultural construct based on displacement or out-of-placement that California has helped develop because it somehow enlarged the western canon without being entirely contained by it. The preposition ("of") is not inclusive but directional, and signals a change of place if not a change of world. This is no "western" west but another—different—region, "at the west of things" as young Robinson Jeffers somewhat awkwardly wrote around 1912.

The power of Roosevelt's description is to indicate that California is the recipient of a whole tradition of "westerling," for which it supplies an appropriate symbol (but symbolization is already detachment), yet is likely, because of its geographic and cultural placement, to provide new grounds for a repeated, though different, western experience. This is repetition and variation, then, if we want to substitute even more abstract concepts for Roosevelt's already symbolic West, or "the other of the same" as Girard Genette would have it.

The formula may lead us to a couple of additional comments on California as a land of novelty and as culmination of a historical process. If we do approach “west of the west” from the standpoint of the dialectics of repetition,¹ we recognize that California cannot but repeat the past experience from which the very notion of the American West emerged, and, at the same time, acquires its originality in the very process of repetition. California thus appears both as a final place—an end—and the locus of a new beginning: there is concentrated the powerful dynamics of change, there lies the tension by which the sense of dis-placement is founded, both in time and in space.

The exceptional quality of the California landscape had been acknowledged by a long line of travelers, observers, and artists, and Jeffers inherited their vision of California as the perfect epic and the culmination (apotheosis, said W. Everson) of the American Sublime. Glorified by Pike, Muir, Olmsted, or even Emerson, the far western landscapes brought a final touch to the widespread belief in American excellence, both because it was final (topographically it included, in California, the end of the continent—*finis terrae*) and because its beauty had no equivalent elsewhere. Olmsted, for example, was overcome by the majestic scenery in Yosemite, by the “union of the deepest sublimity with the deepest beauty of nature” (qtd. in Huth 149). California was a spectacularly natural counterpart to human eschatology. There you could, through landscape, visually experience finality. “Come join me to worship Nature,” Muir had written to Emerson in 1868: “It will cost you nothing save the time, and very little of that for you will be mostly in Eternity” (qtd. in Huth 151).

Watching, however, excludes, separates the spectator from the scene, places him in a position of aesthetic contemplation. The West may well be, then, that form of “first class art” that Whitman mentions in *Specimen Days*. Representation does divide the seeing subject from the observed object, and only symbolic vision may seem to atone for the severance. In this respect, we may contend that the spectacular is also specular, inexorably referring us back to ourselves and the power of the eye. There is a Romantic, humanist, anthropocentric tradition of seeing Nature as a mirror image of ourselves, powerfully translated in the homonymy *eye/I*, which Emerson and Jeffers use in very similar ways.

But our aspirations towards empathy, towards a blending with Nature (of which there are many instances in Jeffers’s poetry) go along with a permanent desire (clearly a constant in American culture) to dominate Nature, to tame the land beyond the limits of subsistence. This utilitarian relation to Nature is a way of refusing severance, but also humility. Civilizing the wilderness in the West is truly a way of denying our dis-placement from the center of Creation.

Yet, this is exactly what Robinson Jeffers had undertaken to do: give man his true place back in the physical world. “Uncentering” was his catchword. Or decentering, shifting the eye from man to not-man, to landscape and the intrin-

sic values of the natural world. This, an idiosyncratic response to the humanist tradition, he aptly called Inhumanism. But shifting the emphasis from man to not-man, one must concede, is essentially a matter of rhetoric, the art of expression and discourse. One can formalize only into language the desire to express the emotions aroused by the contemplation of landscape. Which, in fact, amounts to moving the problem from percept to concept, from sense to utterance. For the well-known paradox of the poetic undertaking (among other types of expression) is precisely to try to name the unnamable, to turn a presence into an absence, to dissolve the real into words. Jeffers, as a poet, could not escape the contradiction. He simply pretended he could overcome it with his own words, using two major expedients: incantation (i.e. repetition) and narrative enlargement. His is a definitely Promethean project, one of a poet dramatically confronted with the anxiety of the fragment, conscious of the impermanent nature of the poetic act. The fragment, as we find Derrida explaining, is nevertheless the natural form of writing, an illustration of the principle of discontinuity produced by the rationality of the Logos: "Writing," says Derrida, "will never be Nature. Writing proceeds only by jumps. Which makes it perilous. Death roams between the letters. To write, what is considered so, requires acceding to the spirit courageously by losing one's life, by being dead to Nature" (108).

The hugeness of the continent and that of the ocean (see "Continent's End" for example) as experienced by Jeffers in California has a rhetorical equivalent in the huge narratives, the endless dialogues—even beyond death, as in "The Double Axe" or "Hungerfield"—that seem to defy the extinction of voices. The incantatory quality of Jeffers's poetry is there also to remind us that repetition of the Same is one way of attempting a reconciliation of fragment and permanence.

But obviously there is no one word (except if the divine could speak itself) to invite us into the beauty of landscape, no word either to carry us beyond the walls of the Logos. There is no syntax, however transitive, that can express the processes of Nature: "There could be no complete sentence," Ernest Fenollosa once wrote, "save one which it would take all time to pronounce" (qtd. in Blasing 148). The poet must compose and circumvent, without cheating must trap language into unexpected—if not unprepared significations.

To illustrate one way that Jeffers adopted to treat the theme of displacement in a California environment, let us turn to the often discarded long poem "The Loving Shepherdess" (*CP* 2.45). This 1929 poem appears superficially more alluring than the previous somber epics of family disaster like "Tamar," "Cawdor," or "The Women at Point Sur." Here is a gentle, caring, loving heroine with a flock of sheep, the meekest of creatures. No visible violence, little blood. Yet, beneath the surface of an innocent pastoral lies the most terrifying of realities: that we are mortals. While we wander over the land with the shepherdess, Clare

Walker, the real object of the poem is human finitude and, accordingly, to the horizontal movement over the California landscape corresponds a vertical displacement of signification from surface to depth, from the physical to the meta-physical.

Much of Jeffers's poetry (as one recent study of "Roan Stallion" by Tim Hunt suggests) was allegorical. This poem may itself be considered an allegory which I would qualify as an allegory of closure; with three types of interrelated closures: 1) the end of the Frontier and the pastoral ideal; 2) the closure of life; 3) the closure of the text (which brings us back to the problem of the fragment).

Clare the shepherdess is definitely as out of place as she is anachronistic. In the opening scene of the poem, she is confronted with a bevy of children coming out of school, who jeer at her with the usual unrestrained verbal violence of children. Clearly, the school represents the world of thought and knowledge while Clare and her sheep are the world of feeling. What is more, Clare has to suffer from constraints that reflect the post open-range era (*CP* 2.53), having to avoid ranches, ranchers, and their cattle along the way. She is, to some extent, re-enacting the old pastoral idyll of the classical shepherd, but in a post-pastoral world from which she is being expelled on account of her untimely quest (see the bucolic scene, *CP* 2.52). Rejection is her lot even though she encounters a few charitable individuals along the roads.

The sense of a final Frontier is also conveyed by the northward direction of her progress. The continent drops here into the sea and along the invisible wall that seems to deprive the protagonists from any chance of advance beyond it. Clare repeats the primitive, original movement of migration ("along the last ridge of migration," 74) into California, effected along a north/south, or south/north, axis. The presence of a Spanish Indian boy that befriends her spontaneously and protects her from the school children, and that of Onorio Vasquez (64), the Spanish farm-hand with visions, confirm the allegorical reference to the first occupation of the land, one untainted by modern civilization. Clare is clothed in rags and tatters, lives a primitive life she shares with animals that she eventually proves to be very similar to ("as meek" as one of her ewes, 46). She is out of place because she is out of time, her own sense of chronology being extremely vague (she had left her home "a long time ago," 63). Only the month of April and its intimations of renewal seem to be part of her personal sense of history—but negatively, since she is expecting to be dead by then. Jeffers lets her life story unfold by little bits, with blurred time bounds, fragments of a past that the reader is offered as clues that 1) no biography can be apprehended whole; 2) stories import only as they are shared, so that Clare's life is revealed only through dialogue.

Geographical movement, rambling through the hills, finding subsistence and pleasure wherever one wants, seems to represent perfect freedom for Clare

after her stay in prison (91). Yet, something seems wrong with this too perfect freedom. Jeffers's narrative introduces alarming intimations of doom, scattered through the poem. Clare cannot bear a child without jeopardizing her life. The heart of the narration is that Clare is not moving back but on, inexorably, the way she leads her flock. And the sheep who blindly follow her are in similar danger of unpredictable death. The linguistic construct of the poem comes to terms with this unpredictability by trying to stage the drama of human mortality, by providing the conditions in which inevitability supersedes unpredictability, without despair.

Reconciling man with his human condition, with his mortal fate, is what Jeffers does with Clare. Showing that birth and death are intimately connected requires the affirmation of an inescapable movement ahead. Man's ontological nature is progressive, characterized by this displacement we experience in time—which Clare also experiences in space. Her journey towards death is also a journey towards life-giving—which is also the poet's "inspiration" (see the etymology of the word) in his development of a narrative. His tale of "The Loving Shepherdess" is an allegory of mortality, a reflection on our feeble resistance to finitude.

Repeatedly, Clare indicates that she is aware of the vanity of her journey: "happiness must end" (51). She is going "to nowhere" (53), while looking for a place to die. For she knows her fatal predicament: "The life that will make death" has begun in her body (she is like her mother who "died to bear me," 82) and her wanderings are but a way of translating into spatial movement through landscape this slow, inescapable, approach of death. She knows she "must move or die" (75). Movement is an indication of life: "It is horrible to lie still" (94) she admits, and fully meditates on the fate of salmon swimming upstream to the place of their death, moved only by their instinct of reproduction. One is reminded here of Ted Hughes's magnificent poem, "October Salmon,"² where he meditates on the pathetic efforts of the fish towards their doom. "She saw her own fate reflected" (105). The journey is from the mother's womb to the earth's, a "flutter from darkness to darkness" Jeffers writes in "The Torch-Bearers' Race," not cyclical, but linear, like a story unfolding.

Not even Vasquez's visions can atone for the tragic outcome. Jeffers, after Pascal and Schopenhauer, asks the metaphysical question of why come into this world of being? Why wring man from the realm of non-being for this finitude? Ionesco's dying King asks: "Why was I born, if it were not for ever" (qtd. in Jankelevitch 406). Jeffers's answer is simple: life, like Nature, is not kind to the meek, the humble, and the submissive. Love and gentleness are not properly rewarded: Clare dies of having loved too much. She loves her sheep, yet is not much of a savior for them. She loses them despite her utmost care. "What's punished is kindness" (57) she observes when one of her ewes has broken a leg while she was making love to Will Brighton.

Though she would like to save the heron attacked by a hawk (61–62), she is helpless towards striking death, just as she is helpless against her own fate. She claims to have finally made peace with death but yearns to go back to the only Eden she remembers—not California—“a purer peace in a more perfect heaven” (93), her mother's body (94).

Vasquez's visions work as an attempt to revoke the power closure. Imagination is the place where the illusion of canceling mortality can be strongest. One of the most striking of his visions is about space, the cosmos, the universes where the allegory of displacement finds its best rhetorical expression. Envisioning the gigantic dance of the stars in the empty cosmos, he realizes that all creation is marked by perpetual motion. The formula he finds for this is revealing: “no annihilation, no escape, but change; it must endure itself forever” (97).

Unfortunately, this does not work for discourse and text. Allegorically representative of life itself, the story has a beginning, a middle, and, above all, an end. Yet while implicitly conceding that the imagination cannot entirely transcend the limits of its own expression, by contrasting Vasquez's fiery, beautiful, but useless visions with Clare's inexorable doom, Jeffers stubbornly looks for ways of canceling the sense we may get of a desperately closed narrative. These are mere expedients, rhetorical devices, that use language to displace our attention from the inevitability of an ending, to establish the necessity of writing as an act, and a sign, of life; writing the poem, just like Clare's rambling, is also a movement in space. To it Jeffers adds a movement through literary texts as well. Intertextuality is at work in this poem, and we cannot miss it.

There would be much to say about the similitudes between “The Loving Shepherdess” and Mary Austin's story “The Walking Woman,” not just because Austin's protagonist is called Mrs. Walker, but in connection with a woman's experience of maternity. There is an elegiac tone in both texts and other parallels that make Clare's story a distant echo of Jenny's (Mrs. Walker's) own.

More significantly, Clare's journey also retraces some literary steps across Jeffers's own poetic corpus. Places she visits, landscapes she watches, may have an indisputable topographical reality (Point Pinos, Point Sur, Carmel Valley, etc.), but what should interest us here is that they refer back to literary places or landscapes that have a previous significance of their own. The most meaningful of these intertextual “displacements” is Point Sur and the landmark farm of the Barclay family whose tragedy is recounted in “The Women at Point Sur” (55, 63–64).

The intertextual references distract us from the contents of Clare's story towards an outside of the text which here is elegiac because reminiscent of past deaths and losses, and which makes somehow the present story an extension of former ones, whose remains are thus revived. The writing project uses places and landscape to provide connections between the texts and challenge their

closure through repetition. In a way, all such revisited places are Clare's own "west of the west," a manner of taking up an old thread for a new use.

Yet, can words, as redundant signifiers, cancel the reality of the fragment, of closure? Not quite, although Jeffers takes pains to suggest, especially towards the end of the poem, that former landscapes and places, vacant, empty, and ruined, may be re-used for another tragedy (see at Cawdor's barn, for example).

And the last lines also describe a line of trees (poplars) that point "dreadfully away" (105–06) to the north, to an exit from the narrative. Worse, even, the poem ends on an ultimate recoiling upon consciousness and self-centering. The narrator, who so far had followed Clare's final journey northward objectively ("she was seen," 105) surreptitiously turns to a subjective stance: "she called / The sheep about her and perceived that none came" (106), as if to prove that there is no escape from mortality (both her death and her sheep's are concomitantly suggested) and that since no further vision or imaginary construct may atone for it, the story should be terminated there.

"Imagination my traitor," cried Jesus in the companion poem "Dear Judas," "I am in the net and this deliberately sought / Torture on the Cross is the only real thing" (34). The same is true of Clare, caught in the net of her humanity, deluded by the power of love for her flock; and the conviction that love (despite the risks of childbirth) would vanquish death. This fantasy of godlike powers ("I am like its God," 94) is the poet's own delusion. Even though he once declares (one of Vasquez's visions) that the human and the non-human may occasionally blend ("And Clare love all things / Because all things are herself," 98), the recognition itself irremediably confirms the severance, being only a figment of the imagination. Displacing, de-centering humanity to project it onto the landscape (in California and elsewhere) will always be a rhetorical artifice. The lesson is that there is no transcendence possible through the "flaming walls" of vision (98). Gazing, or trying to gaze beyond the "four walls of humanity" ("The Torch-Bearers' Race"), Vasquez only meets "his own eye." "I am whom I have sought" (98).

But as we see in the poem, Clare's essential solitude (hers is a story of successive losses, mother, father, lover, child, sheep) is compensated by chance encounters of other suffering humans, thirsty for love themselves and by the freedom that her unmediated contact with Nature provides.

For all her wanderings through California "On the last coast above the not-to-be colonized / Ocean" (74), Clare can't escape her fate and the poet the fact that, as Milton said, "the mind is its own place."

To strain the limits of human intelligence (see "The Beginning and the End"/"Old age hath clawed me"³ in order to leave such a place and explore the shores of not-being is a temptation into which Jeffers regularly falls. California, being both the end of a continent and an open space overlooking a huge ocean, instigated, stimulated, but also thwarted his attempts. Like Clare,

nevertheless, he would each time overcome his defeat and move on, over the poetic landscape he cherished most, his California.

ENDNOTES

¹ For “what is repeated was, otherwise it could not be repeated, yet it is precisely the fact that it was which gives repetition its character of novelty” (Soren Kirkegaard, quoted in “Repetition and Variation,” *Corps Ecrit* 15, 91).

² Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg. This chamber of horrors is also home. He was probably hatched in this very pool (“October Salmon,” Hughes 74).

³ “And the passionate human intelligence / Straining its limits, striving to understand itself and the universe to the last galaxy— / Flammantia moenia mundi, Lucretius wrote / The flaming world-walls, far-flung fortifications of being / Against non-being” (“Old age hath clawed me,” *CP* 3.484).

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Pierre Lagayette is Professor of American Studies and Director of the Center for the American West and the Asia Pacific Zone at the University of Paris IV—Sorbonne.

Slip, Shift, and Speed Up: The Influence of Robinson Jeffers's Narrative Syntax

Mark Jarman

I wish I could change the second half of my title to “The Influence of Robinson Jeffers’s Narrative Energy” in order to echo a book that I admire, Donald Davie’s classic from 1955, *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry*. In fact, when I titled my essay, I had a portion of Davie’s book in mind; for he theorizes that every sentence has a plot, even a tragic plot, and he derives this theory from H. M. McLuhan (Marshall McLuhan, to the rest of us), who suggested as much as he dwelt on certain couplets of Alexander Pope, like this one from “The Rape of the Lock”:

The hungry judges soon the sentence sign
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine.

Davie notes that the couplet has a plot and a sub-plot and that its articulation depends on rhyme as much as on images.

Now, I know that this is beginning to get tangled. I would like to be as accurate as possible in what I am about to claim, while at the same time to honor my deceased colleague and fellow admirer of Robinson Jeffers, Donald Davie. I will, indeed, try to speculate on the nature of Jeffers’s narrative energy as it originates in him and the poets I will try to associate with him; frankly, I think it comes from a moral impulse, which distinguishes him from his two great contemporaries, Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson, the other legs of the narrative stool on which the curious but living tradition of modern narrative poetry rests. However, I will try to stick with the phrase “narrative syntax,” not because of the plot of Jeffers’s sentences, but because the syntax of his narrative verse is recognizable in a number of contemporary practitioners. It may be more recognizable than anything we hear in Frost or Robinson. The reasons are many and have in part to do with the division between free and formal verse in this country.

The first half of my title, “Slip, Shift, and Speed Up,” comes from Jeffers’s poem “Prescription of Painful Ends” and is a phrase he uses there to describe a rhythm of historical events; it is not meant in any way to be salutary or admir-

ing, but to describe the pathetic manner in which modern nation states try to regain their footing after slipping in some moral quagmire.

. . . The future is a misted landscape, no man sees clearly, but at cyclic turns
There is a change felt in the rhythm of events, as when an exhausted horse
Falters and recovers, then the rhythm of the running hoofbeats is changed: he will run miles yet,
But he must fall; we have felt it again in our own life-time, slip, shift, and speed-up
In the gallop of the world . . . (CP 3.14)

Nevertheless, I like the phrase and think it may help to describe the narrative syntax I hear in Jeffers and the contemporary poets I wish to discuss, because of its narrative energy, that moral impulse that leads Jeffers to create the metaphor and embed in it a narrative sequence of action, and because of its parallel structure. The poets I hope to bring before you share two aspects of Jeffers, then: the moral impulse of his storytelling verse and his means of narration—narrative energy and narrative syntax.

First, however, I would like to draw a clearer distinction between him and his great peers in the art of narrative verse, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost. Let me show you a sonnet by Robinson.

Ben Trovato

The deacon thought. "I know them," he began,
"And they are all you ever heard of them—
Allurable to no sure theorem,
The scorn or the humility of man.
You say 'Can I believe it?'—and I can;
And I'm unwilling even to condemn
The benefaction of a stratagem
Like hers—and I'm a Presbyterian.

"Though blind, with but a wandering hour to live,
He felt the other woman in the fur
That now the wife had on. Could she forgive
All that? Apparently. Her rings were gone,
Of course; and when he found that she had none,
He smiled—as he had never smiled at her." (575–76)

Robinson is motivated by the naturalist's desire to examine a slice of life and consider its reason for existence. In a sonnet like "Ben Trovato" he gives us a narrative almost as complicated as a novel by Henry James, complete with unreliable narrator and love triangle. The deacon conveys a story to us as juicy

as gossip, a deathbed scene to rival the choosing of Jacob over Esau. We look on in amazement at the complexity of these human hearts, recognizing that this telling anecdote hints at social pressures created by the characters' beliefs about marriage and class, while at the same time giving us behavior that cannot be described by any "theorem" of society. In considering the way the wife disguises herself as her rival, we are, like our narrator, "unwilling even to condemn / The benefaction of a stratagem / Like hers—," whether we are Presbyterians or not. All of our interest is in the way the sonnet holds this microscopic universe of haute bourgeois realism.

Robert Frost offers us something else, of course, something more, though in rather the same dimension of the relative, the pragmatic, in his narrative poems. Take the following, for example.

Out, Out—

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.

The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (136–37)

Is it right that the boy is in the lumberyard, doing a man's work? No, probably not, but there may be extenuating circumstances. It could be this is a family concern, with his sister doing the cooking, and besides he's a "big boy . . . though a child at heart." The accident that cuts his life short could have occurred as easily in the natural world as in the world of dangerous machines, although this is not the only Frost poem in which modern technology devastates a life, if you remember his early narrative, "The Self-Seeker." The point of a Frost narrative, especially those we find in blank verse, is also to lift a section out of a life—which he has in common with Robinson—but without the naturalistic sense of determinism. What is happening is more open to interpretation; indeed, in his narratives contending views offer their imaginative responses to the fact of an event. In "Out, Out—" even the narrator interjects his belief that the tragedy might have been averted, if they had "call[ed] it a day" earlier. The boy, the sister, the doctor, the onlookers who turn away at the end, all have their particular stake in the meaning of the accident. What we are to make of it depends not on choosing a point of view but on recognizing how all of them contend. The blank verse of Frost's narratives may be his attempt to resolve moral ambiguity, as much as the more controlled forms of Robinson's ballads and sonnets may represent the determining factors of culture and society. I suspect that a free verse narrative of the contemporary variety that I will be talking about and that I think shows Jeffers's influence may be the paradoxical result of a moral clarity missing in Robinson and Frost.

So, how is Jeffers different? For one thing, he is not a relativist like Robinson or Frost. His stories are enactments of moral problems that have inevitable ends because the characters presented with these problems make the wrong choices. Admittedly, he, too, can be considered in the naturalist tradition, but I would put him there with Thomas Hardy, in his novels, in which characters choose badly, at times because they simply cannot help it. Jeffers's difference with Hardy (a writer of importance also to Robinson and Frost) is that Jeffers, one senses, is less forgiving of human weakness, because he is appalled at its tragic consequences. It may be that because of the moral drive or impulse to his narratives, we hear his influence more readily today than we hear the influence of Robinson or Frost. Moral clarity is part of his legacy. I hope the examples I am going to give you, from three contemporary poets, will persuade you that

this is true. And because I don't want to lose track of my title, as much as I would like to flee its demands, I believe we will hear a kind of phrasing or expression in the contemporary narratives that I have chosen, which recalls Jeffers more than Robinson and Frost, because of the nature of their syntax and free verse form.

First let me consider Jeffers's *ars poetica*, "Apology for Bad Dreams," by focusing on the first of his longer narratives.

Apology for Bad Dreams

1

In the purple light, heavy with redwood, the slopes drop seaward,
Headlong convexities of forest, drawn in together to the steep ravine. Below, on the sea-cliff,
A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof under spared trees. Then the ocean
Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and polished to shining. Beyond it, the fountain
And furnace of incredible light flowing up from the sunk sun. In the little clearing a woman
Is punishing a horse; she had tied the halter to a sapling at the edge of the wood, but when the great whip
Clung to the flanks the creature kicked so hard she feared he would snap the halter; she called from the house
The young man her son; who fetched a chain tie-rope, they working together
Noosed the small rusty links round the horse's tongue
And tied him by the swollen tongue to the tree.
Seen from this height they are shrunk to insect size,
Out of all human relation. You cannot distinguish
The blood dripping from where the chain is fastened,
The beast shuddering; but the thrust neck and the legs
Far apart. You can see the whip fall on the flanks . . .
The gesture of the arm. You cannot see the face of the woman.
The enormous light beats up out of the west across the cloud-bars of the trade-wind. The ocean
Darkens, the high clouds brighten, the hills darken together. Unbridled and unbelievable beauty
Covers the evening world . . . not covers, grows apparent out of it, as Venus down there grows out
From the lit sky. What said the prophet? "I create good: and I create evil: I am the Lord." (CP 1.208–09)

As I proceed to consider this passage as free verse, let me acknowledge that I know how Jeffers regarded his double pentameter line and I know, too, that when the line contracts here, it is to a roughly pentameter line. Nevertheless, the poem is metrically freer than anything in Robinson and Frost, and its way of establishing rhythm derives not only from the English verse tradition, but from the repetition and parallelism we find in Biblical poetry and in Whitman. Notice the construction of the setting: "A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof under spared trees." And notice the way the narrator directs our gaze, after shrinking the humans "to insect size": "You cannot distinguish / The blood dripping from where the chain is fastened, / The beast

shuddering; but the thrust neck and the legs / Far apart. You can see the whip fall on the flanks . . . / The gesture of the arm. You cannot see the face of the woman.” The syntax here embodies action, imitates action, in which the animal’s pain and the agent of that pain—the woman—though they cannot be distinguished, are united by what you can see: the whip, the gesture of the arm. In parallelism like this, details take on an equality. In Whitman, it is the Democratic ideal of a self that contains all that it catalogues—these United States. In Jeffers, whom I once heard William Everson refer to as the dark nadir to Whitman’s sunny zenith, the same syntax conveys moral judgment, its narrative energy. When section one ends, “What said the prophet? ‘I create good: and I create evil: I am the Lord,’” I think we can infer that the good here is manifested in the “[u]nbridled and unbelievable beauty” that “covers the evening world.” The Lord has created it as surely as the evil taking place in the clearing. The two parts, good and evil, though unequal in value, are of equal weight. The recognition of that equality marks Jeffers as a tragic poet.

We may not see Jeffers’s tragic dimension in the contemporary poems I am about to read and discuss, but we will sense his moral impulse, the source of his narrative energy and syntax. Here are a pair of poems from C. K. Williams’s 1988 book *Flesh and Blood*.

The Mistress

After the drink, after dinner, after the half-hour idiot kids’ cartoon special on the TV, after undressing his daughter, mauling at the miniature buttons on the back of her dress, the games on the bed—“Look at my pee-pee,” she says, pulling her thighs wide, “isn’t it pretty?”—after the bath, pajamas, the song and the kiss and the telling his wife it’s her turn now, out now, at last, out of the house to make the call (out to take a stroll, this evening’s lie), he finds the only public phone booth in the neighborhood’s been savaged, receiver torn away, wires thrust back up the coin slot to its innards, and he stands there, what else? what now? and notices he’s panting, he’s panting like an animal, he’s breathing like a bloody beast. (20)

The Lover

When she stopped by, just passing, on her way back from picking up the kids at school, taking them to dance, just happened by the business her husband owned and her lover worked in, their glances, hers and the lover’s, that is, not the husband’s, seemed so decorous, so distant, barely, just barely touching their fiery wings, their clanging she thought so well muffled, that later, in the filthy women’s bathroom, in the stall, she was horrified to hear two typists coming from the office laughing, about them, all of them, their boss, her husband, “the blind pig,” one said, and laughed, “and her, the horny bitch,” the other said, and they both laughed again, “and *him*, did you see *him*, that sanctimonious, lying bastard—I thought he was going to *blush*.” (20)

I hope you could hear the way the action in both poems comes in a series of parallel statements: “he’s panting, he’s panting like an animal, he’s breathing like a bloody beast” and “so decorous, so / distant, barely, just barely touching their fiery wings, their clanging.” This sort of repetition is one way, the primary way, free verse creates rhythm. The way it illuminates and reveals the story, in a series of pulsing, parallel flashes, recalls Jeffers’s own technique, his narrative syntax and energy.

And the story here, of sexual transgression that is like a violation of the landscape, is also reminiscent of Jeffers, although in this case, as in the other three poems I will discuss, the landscape is urban. The vandalized public phone in “The Mistress” that puts the unfaithful husband in a rage and the “filthy women’s bathroom” in “The Lover” where the unfaithful wife hears the pair of typists give their choral denunciation of her, are not directly the consequence of adultery, but they make us ponder its degradation. Both hang in the balance of the poems’ parallel structure, with a weight equal to the husband’s lies in “The Mistress” and the profane epithets in “The Lover.” It is interesting to note that C. K. Williams in these and other poems speaks with a vehemence we sometimes hear in Jeffers, although Jeffers manages usually to keep a more Apollonian distance from what he disdains.

A poem that recalls Jeffers’s cool, appraising, and yet judgmental detachment is Garrett Hongo’s “Four Chinatown Figures” from his 1988 book *The River of Heaven*.

Four Chinatown Figures

In a back alley, on the cracked pavement slick with the strewn waste
of cooking oil and rotting cabbages, two lovers stroll arm in arm,
the woman in furs and a white lamé dress with matching pumps,
her escort in a tux casually worn—the black tie undone,
the double-breasted, brushed-velvet coat unbuttoned.
They’re a Wilshire lawyer and city planner out on the town.
When they pass the familiar curio of the wishing well
with its Eight Immortals spouting aqueous wisdoms
through their copper mouths and baggy sleeves, they spend a minute
considering the impotent, green nozzle of its fountain.
The reflecting pool, speckled blue willow or streaked turquoise
as a robin’s egg from the small litter of coins wintering on its bottom,
catches starlight and red neon in a tarn of winged ephemera
streaking across the black glaze of homely water. The lawyer
kisses his date and tosses some bus change, balls up
the foil wrapper from an after-dinner mint and throws that,
while she laughs, shaking her head back so the small,

mousse-stingered whips on the ringlets of her hair shudder
 and dress sequins flash under the sore, yellow light of streetlamps.
 Two dishwashers step from the back door of the Golden Eagle
 arguing about pay, about hours, about trading green cards
 with cousins for sex, set-ups with white women, for cigarettes
 or a heated hotel room to sleep in on a dry, newspaper bed.
Bok-guai, they curse with their eyes, *Lo-fahn*, as the four nearly collide,
 separate galaxies equal in surprise as they wheel to face each other.
 The lawyer thinks little of these punks in T-shirts and Hong Kong jeans,
 but the woman rhapsodizes, for no reason, in suspense/thriller prose—
slender and boylike, the bull's ring curl to their flimsy moustaches;
they must be cold in this dry, winter chill of late December in L.A.—
 the sky a high velvet, indigo-to-black as it vaults, lazily,
 from the city's fluorescent glow to the far azimuth
 where the bear and huntsman drift casually into nothing.
 Without jackets, the Chinese have bundled themselves in castoff,
 cotton aprons stained with intricate patterns of lard and duck's blood
 and wrapped like double-slings around their shoulders and folded arms.
 Something grins on the face of the taller, fairer-complected one,
 glints from his foxteeth, smolders in breathfog, camphor about to flare.
 She tells herself, *Forget it, c'mon*, and, with a hooked finger,
 snaps at the man's satin cummerbund. They turn away.
 Without a gesture, in the greasy dark, the two Chonks turn away too,
 back towards each other, and hear, quickening way behind them,
 steps receding into the light din of street noise and sidewalk chatter.
 The fair one says, audibly and in English, *Kiss me, white ghost*,
 and, briefly staggered in the amniotic burst of light
 from a passing tourist's flash, shrugs off his gruesome apron,
 pulling out a pack of Gauloises, blue-wrapped, *especial*,
 and strikes a match, holding it in the orange well of his hands
 as, dragonlike, they both light up and puff, posed on a street vent,
 hunching their thin shoulders and turning uptown against the wind. (57–58)

The narrative syntax here appears to be more relaxed than in C. K. Williams's
 poems or "Apology for Bad Dreams." But the long, complicated sentences that
 describe the lovers in their leisurely, after dinner walk end abruptly in the glare
 of those "sore, yellow" streetlamps. Then:

Two dishwashers step from the back door of the Golden Eagle
 arguing about pay, about hours, about trading green cards
 with cousins for sex, set-ups with white women, for cigarettes

or a heated hotel room to sleep in on a dry, newspaper bed.

Bok-guai, they curse with their eyes, *Lo-fahn*, as the four nearly collide . . .

Slip, shift, and speed up: repetition begins to pulse, the energy of the syntax brings two distinctly different moral forces together. After they meet, the syntax almost returns to a more leisurely, descriptive pace, as the Chinese pair become the focus, but the narration subtly maintains its parallel structure and repetition, as it considers these “separate galaxies equal in surprise as they wheel to face each other.”

On the face of it, this poem represents what used to be called a clash of cultures, and the encounter between the expensive lovers, both indigenously associated with Los Angeles (one a lawyer from Wilshire Boulevard, the other a “city planner”), and the immigrant Chinese dishwashers looks like a literal rendering of such a clash. Although the figures meet each other in territory that by rights is Chinese, all four are identified as Chinatown figures, and, after all, Chinatown is as much a part of L.A. as the Wilshire district. And yet, the yuppy lawyer and his date, when they pause at the wishing well, which is decorated with figures from Chinese myth, behave in a way that looks awfully like sacrilege. The lawyer tosses in some worthless change and a piece of trash, and his date laughs at the act. The dishwashers, smeared with gore, appear then, as if they have been invoked, spirits of the desecrated well, eliciting contempt from the man and decadent daydreaming from the woman. In the end we also have to consider the urgent, even desperate concerns of the Chinese workers and the exotic foreignness of their curses alongside the exquisite attire and pursuits of the lovers. Insofar as the place itself exists as a reproach to the inhabitants, this is a landscape that recalls many in Jeffers, including the one at the beginning of “Apology for Bad Dreams.” As the dishwashers light up their foreign cigarettes, they become native parts of a particular landscape, one that harbors dragons, embodiments of the moral impulse that shapes the poem and recalls Jeffers in the very way the human and the inhuman, the real and the mythic, the divine and the profane, confront each other.

I want to look at two more contemporary poems which I think recall Jeffers’s moral impulse, his narrative energy, and his syntax, but first I would like to mention something that I noticed about some of these poems, after I chose them for this presentation. In each, part of the poem’s moral dimension depends on an animal or animals. The tortured horse in “Apology for Bad Dreams” and the pair of dragonlike dishwashers in “Four Chinatown Figures” serve in their respective poems as a moral focus. In C. K. Williams’s two poems, this focus appears in the form of epithets. In “The Mistress,” the frustrated husband is likened to “a bloody beast.” And in “The Lover,” the caustic typists refer to their boss as “the blind pig” and his wife as “the horny bitch.” Granted we are seeing in each case examples of very old literary traditions, that of the fable and

the allegory; still, it is striking to me that the following poem by Chase Twichell, “Aisle of Dogs,” from her 1995 book *The Ghost of Eden*, should summon up Jeffers’s own regard for animals in his poetry.

Aisle of Dogs

In the first cage
a hunk of raw flesh.
No, it was alive, but skinned.

Or its back was skinned.
The knobs of the spine

poked through the bluish meat.

It was a pit bull, held by the shelter
for evidence until the case
could come to trial,

then they’d put him down. The dog,
not the human whose cruelty

lived on in the brindled body,
unmoving except for the enemy eyes.

Not for adoption, said the sign.

All the other cages held adoptable pets,
the manic yappers, sad matted mongrels,
the dumb slobbering abandoned ones,

the sick, the shaved, the scratching,
the wounded and terrified, the lost,

one to a cage, their water dishes
overturned, their shit tracked around,

on both sides of a long echoey
concrete aisle—clank of chain mesh gates,
the attendant hosing down the gutters

with his headphones on, half-dancing
to the song in his head.

I'd come for kittens. There were none.
So I stood in front of the pit bull's
quivering carcass, its longdrawn death,

its untouched food, its incurable hatred
of my species, until the man with the hose
touched my arm and steered me away,

shaking his head in a way that said
Don't look. Leave him alone.
I don't know why, either. (59–60)

The lines in Twichell's poem are short, no more than eight syllables or four stresses usually, whereas those in Williams's and Hongo's are long and recall Jeffers's double pentameter and pentameter lines, respectively. It is possible that Twichell's are short and theirs long because hers is a more imagistic poetry, that is, more inclined to condense storytelling to as much as the image alone can reveal. Nevertheless, in this poem, we once again encounter the power of a narrative syntax that brings Jeffers to mind. The way the pitbull's condition is revealed, the way the speaker takes in the surroundings, and the way she returns to regard the brutalized animal, until she is made to turn away, recall both the narrative syntax and the narrative structure of "Apology for Bad Dreams." Instead of Jeffers's grand and moving declaration, "I create good: and I create evil: I am the Lord," we hear at the end of Twichell's poem the more modest, but just as moving, "Don't look. Leave him alone. / I don't know why, either." Human cruelty lives on, as the poet tells us, in the dog's body, and it will be the dog who is destroyed, after he serves a final human purpose in the trial of his violator; it will be the dog and not the human, she notes, who will die for this crime. I think we know what Jeffers himself would have written about such a thing. It is my hope that we can hear how he might have done it, by reading Twichell's poem.

Earlier I suggested that free verse, as we find it in Jeffers's narratives and the contemporary narratives I have been discussing, may be the result of moral clarity. This is the kind of notion that gets expressed in passing in a talk like this, but lingers on to nag, because it sounds like a value judgment. I do not mean it to be one at all, since I do not think poetry in traditional English meters is in any way superior or inferior to American free verse. Still, I suspect that the traditional meters of English verse in their own clarity tend to resolve ambiguities as they lend their authority to the most ambivalent argument. The writer of free

verse may choose to base his or her authority on the urgency of the message. In the case of the narrative that shows Jeffers's influence, the structure of this message, as I have tried to argue, includes setting side by side, in a pattern of parallel structure, contending forces in a moral drama. The very rhythm and syntax of that drama, as it is narrated, derive from the clear idea that the forces, though of equal weight, are of differing value.

Let me illustrate with one more contemporary poem, this one by my colleague Kate Daniels, from a work in progress, entitled *My Poverty*.

Autobiography of a White Girl Raised in the South

In any self-portrait from the 50s, you'd have to see the me that was not me: the black girl trudging along the side of the road while I whizzed past in my daddy's car. Or the not-me girl in the bushes, peeing, while her mama kept watch and I relieved myself inside, daintily, in the sparkling facilities of the Southside Esso, labelled WHITES ONLY. All those water fountains I drank from unthinkingly, all those lunch counters where I disdained my lunch—she was there, around the corner or outside, sipping from a Mason jar of tepid water her mama'd lugged from home, eating her sandwiches of homemade biscuits and a smear of fat on the bench for blacks, shadeless and dusty, on Broad Street in front of the depot.

From the beginning, then, there were always two: me and not-me. The one I was, white and skinny, straight brown hair. And the one I wasn't but could've been—that black or brown girl, hair coarser than mine, eyes darker, skin gleamier and smooth, free of freckles. I didn't even know where she lived, only saw her in public when she stepped upon my granny's back porch with a paper bag of okra, accompanying her mama selling turnips and tomatoes, or her daddy, with his tools, come to sharpen the knives. Then we looked at each other, I recall, hands behind our backs, faces solemn and shy, our hair plaited, mine in one long, limp twist, and hers in a dozen marvelous sprouts, each tied at the end with colored twine. Now, I think it's odd, cruel even I never put my hand out, showed off a toy, never asked her out to my special place in my grandmother's yard, the powdery patch of gray dust beneath the cherry tree, blossoms plopping down in tiny poofs of air and color. There, cross-legged, knee to knee, we might've touched each other and satisfied our terrible curiosity—whether she, in fact, was just like me, and I, like her. There, beneath the flowering tree, as the simple creatures

we were meant to be, the universe might have come to us
as once it was—various in its multitudes, full
of rich textures, interesting odors, a wide palette of color and hue.
There, we might have seen each other as the works of art we actually
were, might have understood the role of art, to explain the peculiar
state of being human, how it sometimes is a glorious thing
to be alive, to feel and see, how, at others, it's a crushing
weight, how one cannot exist without the other, how useless
any battle to divide the light from dark which can only coexist.
We might have seen how necessary we were each to the other,
how, separated by the bad laws and sick habits of the culture that produced us,
we were doomed to live bizarre, half-lives of racist lies.

Even now I see her toes, bare and curled in the powdery dust
and feel the envy that I felt for her going free of shoes,
my own toes twitching in my polished brogans. I see our hands reaching out
to fill with blossoms, dumping mine to her and hers to me.
And then I hear my granny's much-loved voice, calling
from the porch, to come away and go inside. She sends away
the not-me's daddy without a sale, and chastises me throughout our lunch
for what she calls "familiarity." And through the back screendoor,
I see the not-me girl, walking away behind her daddy, not
looking back, and I hear his voice, querulous, too, chastising
her, as well, for something bad, whatever it was we almost did
but didn't, finally, dare to do. (unpubl. ms.)

Not only does this poem, like the others, depend on a parallel structure, in
the small ways sentences are constructed and the large ways the story is
revealed, which we also find in Jeffers's narratives, but in one passage it echoes
sentiments close to those we find in many of Jeffers's poems.

There, beneath the flowering tree, as the simple creatures
we were meant to be, the universe might have come to us
as once it was—various in its multitudes, full
of rich textures, interesting odors, a wide palette of color and hue.

Daniels tells a story about "the peculiar state of being human" in a society that
deforms humanity. Even her choice of the word "peculiar" has a Jeffersian
quality, though the subject—racism—is not one he ever treated directly. And, of
course, that is not my point. My point is that Daniels's poem derives its syntax
from a narrative energy, the urge to tell a story in verse, that embodies a moral
imperative. It puts the experience of a white child beside that of a black child,

and weighs both in the balance with the prejudice that separates them. This setting side by side, of making parallels in expression and in the structure of the poem, has to make us think of the modern master of this form.

When we encounter a contemporary narrative poem like this one by Kate Daniels, and the ones by C. K. Williams, Garrett Hongo, and Chase Twichell, free verse poems that tell stories with a moral clarity, in which opposing forces are set side by side, in which the syntax itself reflects that opposition by its parallel structure, a structure that by its very repetitive nature creates the poem's rhythm and feeds on its narrative energy, then the poet who comes to mind in the modern American tradition of narrative poetry is Robinson Jeffers. It is not Edwin Arlington Robinson, whose ballads and sonnets are like black boxes with a voice inside. It is not Robert Frost, whose blank verse narratives, complete with live action and talking heads, are like documentary films. Jeffers took Walt Whitman's great free verse lyric, harnessed its power of reiteration for the purpose of narrative, and left this new form as part of his legacy to American poetry.

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Mark Jarman, Professor of English at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, is the author of Isis (Story Line Press, Ashland, Oregon, 1992), a verse narrative with an overreaching Jeffers presence.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark's "Strange Hunting"

Terry Beers

In 1940, Walter Van Tilburg Clark published his best-known work, a slim novel called *The Ox-Bow Incident*. Set in Nevada cattle country, the novel tells of tragic consequences when normally law-abiding men let frustration, anger, and blindness unite them into a revengeful lynch mob led by a charismatic, morally-flawed ex-soldier. The book earned for Clark lasting recognition as the author who had reinvigorated the western novel. Yet for many readers, good as it is, *The Ox-Bow Incident* is not the most notable of Clark's three published novels. That distinction, says William Everson, belongs to the 1949 work, *The Track of the Cat*, a book in which Clark manages "the real reduction of [Robinson] Jeffers's narrative verse to prose fiction" (102).

Although Clark worked on several other projects before his death in 1973, *The Track of the Cat* would be his last published novel. In it, he tells the story of the isolated Bridges family, whose Nevada ranch falls in the shadow cast by the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. During a winter storm, a mountain lion raids the Bridges' livestock, a predator familiar to Joe Sam, an aging Paiute man long haunted by dreams of a malevolent "black painter" (23–24) and to the second son, Arthur, who also feels a panther's mysterious presence in his own dreams (3–5). The conflict thus set, the story works to conclusion as three brothers stalk in turn a real-life threat and two of them fall prey to some mysterious, vital, natural force drawing power from something elemental and wholly inhuman. What Everson no doubt responded to is Clark's unsentimental depiction of the failure of human beings to recognize that elemental force, akin, perhaps, to what Jeffers once called the world's God who "is treacherous and full of unreason; a torturer but also / The only foundation and the only fountain" (CP 1.371).

That Everson finds Jeffers in Clark is not surprising. In 1934 Clark completed a University of Vermont Masters Thesis on Robinson Jeffers, a project he worked on after he had met the California poet at Tor House during the summer of 1932. During the time he was completing this scholarly work, Clark was also working on another project—a narrative poem in long lines that eventually filled almost sixteen pages of typescript. He called the poem "Strange Hunting," and though he did not publish it during his lifetime, he turned to it for material appearing in the third and final section of *The Track of the Cat*. The

poem's long lines, the spare character descriptions, and the mythic, archetypal cast of plot seem wholly in sympathy with Jeffers's own narrative works; however, readers should also acknowledge that Jeffers's influence is not absolute. Max Westbrook says that "Clark came to Jeffers as one comes in an unexpected place to a sudden friend. There may have been more recognition than influence" (31). Still, "Strange Hunting" clearly shows Clark's respect for Robinson Jeffers, how he was working out of similarly held attitudes, some of which appear in Clark's Masters Thesis.

In his thesis, Clark offers a good overview of Jeffers's poetry up to *Give Your Heart to the Hawks and Other Poems*, the most recent volume Clark had available at the time. He finds similarities between Jeffers and Wordsworth; he distills Jeffers's philosophy from the poetry; and he explores the influence of Swinburne and the Greeks upon Jeffers's poems. According to Westbrook, however, Clark's affinity for Jeffers is most clearly expressed when in his thesis he describes the values one should find in Jeffers's poetry. These include a recognition of an "inherent force" or a "scientific pantheism." Clark also believed that ". . . Jeffers must not be conceived as going beyond this conception of God to any belief in mystic unity of the individual with the central source, any unity, that is, beyond like physical basis. Death is death, with Jeffers, and the personality is disintegrated, though the physical components continue to exist" (qtd. in Westbrook 31). And so Clark's thesis can be read as an appreciation of Jeffers's literary values as they are derived from a personal experience of natural landscape, as a testimony to a shared belief that human beings need to see themselves as integral to the physical natural world—not apart from it.

Most memorable in the work, though, is not so much the academic analysis as are the descriptions that Clark offers of Jeffers and the central Californian coast, as if the sensibilities of the artist were eclipsing the analytical perspective of a scholar. Of Jeffers he writes:

He is a tall man, broad-shouldered, proportioned for power, and spare of flesh. His hands are large, well shaped, hardened with working earth, and his face avoids handsomeness only in favor of strangely contained masculine strength and intensity. His hair is dark and course and thin over the crown of his head, flared back in brief white wings at the temples. His gray, almost emotionless eyes, examine one with grave directions from within their deep setting. His bodily movements are so slow and even as to pass almost unnoticed, the movements of a man accustomed to watching birds and animals for hours at a time without startling even their tense alertness. He speaks little, and that little in a very low and almost uninflected voice, though each word is exactly enunciated. A sense of great will and considered restraint dominates his presence. (2)

Clark's description of the central coast is just as memorable, transcending the academic tone that often marks the work of apprentice scholars:

That same summer also gave me a chance to know the scenes of Jeffers' poetry, the California coast from Monterey to the south end of the Coast Range, a gigantic and still unhumanized beauty of pine woods, sand dunes, granite cliffs rooted with wind-bent Monterey cypress, offshore islands of stone where the seals and sealions sound in the fog or the white sunlight, and the gulls and cormorants eddy with sharp crying. The Coast Hills themselves go up bare and beautiful from the Pacific, sombre under cloud-run, shining in the sun, their deep gorges and back-canyons filled with strong green growth, and the shoreline constantly shot with spray where the great rollers ride in. (2)

Obviously the flesh and blood figure of Jeffers and the beauty of the landscape hit Clark's imagination even harder than did Jeffers's Inhumanist philosophy.

This early regard for Jeffers never left Clark, and he continued to think about Jeffers's poetry throughout his life. In a 1968 film interview, Clark described Jeffers's work as a vision "of oneness, but what concerned [Jeffers] most," said Clark, "was to be himself a proper part of that oneness, to be able not only to envision it but to feel it." Clark saw Jeffers's poems aiming at Aristotelian catharsis, a literary project that he valued and respected (Film Interview). But given his belief that "old truths take on new strength and meaning in changed circumstances when they have been rediscovered honestly and expensively out of one's own experience" ("Credo" xi), Clark could feel free to share many of Jeffers's themes while finding his own mode of expression and drawing upon his own experience of the natural world. Clark was too imaginative an artist to adopt whole cloth someone else's perspective, no matter how much sympathy he felt for it, a point that critics—notably Ann Ronald, Gerald Haslam, Susan Baker, and Westbrook—have clearly established.¹ Yet despite the differences—some of them already apparent in "Strange Hunting"—the similarities are worth remembering, especially for readers of Robinson Jeffers, accustomed to hearing all too often the tired and untrue tale of Jeffers's lack of reach.

Despite the importance of "Strange Hunting" as material for *The Track of the Cat*, not much has been written about the poem other than to note its relation to the novel. Perhaps the best commentary is offered by Robert Morse Clark, in a preface to a posthumous edition published in 1985. There, Robert Clark discusses his father's use of the mountain lion in other early poems that "seem a more willful effort to appropriate Jeffers than does 'Strange Hunting'" (viii). Robert Clark also points to an additional literary resource for the poem, two stories by Ambrose Bierce, "The Boarded Window" and "The Eyes of the Panther," concluding that "Bierce's panther has many of the attributes, as well as

the effects, of the black cat in 'Strange Hunting.' In both works it is the shining eyes that are the most malevolent and hypnotic aspect of the creature" (x). Though he doesn't develop the point fully, Robert Clark still finds "Jeffers behind the irregularity of the unrhymed lines, the imitations of Anglo-Saxon alliteration, the austere imagery, the humorless intensity, and even in the attitude of the poet, prophetic, tough-minded, and unshrinking in the face of cosmic bleakness" (viii).

For his part, Jeffers himself was apparently drawn to the work of the younger artist. In a letter to Raymond J. Pflug, whose main business seemed to be granting a request for permission to quote from Jeffers's letters to George Sterling, Jeffers mentions Clark approvingly:

Walter Clark's work interests me. I didn't know about his thesis at Vermont. I met somebody a few days ago who said Clark's latest book was not good—"He can write stories about animals, not about human beings." I said, "The Ox-Bow Incident"?

The book referred to in the letter was probably the collection *The Watchful Gods and Other Stories*, which had appeared in 1950 and presented together Clark's finest short fiction, including the 1940 short story "Hook," told from the point of view of a red tail hawk living in the Santa Lucia Range above the Central Coast. Jeffers must have seen that Clark—through his particular use of Jeffers's landscape and totem bird—had paid him a remarkable literary complement.² Though the two writers never met after Clark's 1932 visit to Tor House, their regard was apparently mutual. We can only speculate what Robinson Jeffers might have thought had he the opportunity to read "Strange Hunting."

ENDNOTES

¹ See especially Baker, who writes "that in reading Clark's poetry one is less interested in looking backward to influence on it than in looking ahead to its role in his development as a writer of fiction" (127). While it would seem that Clark's interpreters have hashed out for their purposes the relative importance of Jeffers's influence, the fact of that influence remains important for assessing Jeffers's true place within American letters.

² See Henry Nuwer's analysis of "Hook," which notes most of the symbolic resonances between the short story and Jeffers's work, but does not develop fully the thematic implications that they present.

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Terry Beers, author of ". . . a thousand graceful subtleties": Rhetoric in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (1995), has been co-editor of Jeffers Studies since its inception.