ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER

Number 11

Robinson Jeffers Committee
Occidental College
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Dear Members and Subscribers:

I am sure you will want to know that Judith Anderson is opening in Medea on October 12th for a two-week run at the Valley Music Theater (Woodland Hills). Friends in the Los Angeles area will be particularly interested in knowing of this forthcoming presentation.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to attend the Colloquium at Occidental College on June 28th, arranged by our secretary, Tyrus Harmsen, had a stimulating experience. Ann Ridgeway, Instructor at Michigan State University is, as you know, collecting the Jeffers Letters (over 300 to date). Mrs. Ridgeway came to Occidental College, at the invitation of the Committee, to speak at the Colloquium. Her paper was of such interest that we have asked her permission to share it with you in our next News Letter.

Following Mrs. Ridgeway's speech, Dr. Lawrence Powell led a discussion, the principle participants being Herbert Klein, Robert Ryf and Tyrus Harmsen. It would have made another book on bookmaking for the better-reading list! Ideas were running for cover--hard-backs--for two hours.

During a beautiful luncheon, as guests of Occidental College, Mrs. Hans Barkan (San Francisco) was persuaded to reminisce about her thirty years' friendship with Robin and Una Jeffers. She had a rich store of personal anecdotes to share with us.

And now for news of Donnan and Lee Jeffers who are still in Ireland but plan to return to Tor House before the end of the year. They made a trip to the Continent in June, visiting Eva Hesse in Munich, Mary de Rachewiltz in Merano (Italy) and Kamil Bednář in Prague. Mr. Bednář's translation of "The Women at Point Sur" has just been published. He has written us a most interesting report on the great success of Jeffers' poetry in Czechoslovakia which we have permission to print in a future issue of our News Letter.

Tematy, the Polish Language Quarterly, will include eight of Jeffers' poems (in translation) in the current issue. This magazine has carried other translations of Jeffers.

H. Arthur Klein, well-known author, who received his M.A. degree from Occidental College, and with whose critical analyses of Jeffers' poetry you are no doubt familiar, has written the following article for our News Letter.

--M.B.B.

THE POET WHO SPOKE OF IT...

[Corrections noted in RJN 12 have been incorporated in the web text. – ed.]

"Why do the poets of the present not speak of it?" asks a remarkable footnote in a remarkable book by a remarkable theoretical physicist, Richard P. Feynman of California Institute of Technology.

He had not been familiar with the works of Robinson Jeffers, as I learned when (after reading what follows) I felt impelled to call attention to Jeffers in answer to Dr. Feynman's question. (A magnificently rhetorical answer, in fact, to what was probably a rhetorical question!)

During heavy digging for my next book, on a scientific subject, I read with deep admiration in the first volume of The Feynman Lectures on Physics (Reading, Mass., 1963) the following--and I hope that others to whom Jeffers remains a living influence will agree that it is relevant to this Newsletter:

> "Astronomy is older than physics. In fact, it got physics started . . . the most remarkable discovery in all of astronomy is that the stars are made of atoms of the same kind as those of the earth."

Then in a memorable footnoted addition, Feynman expanded:

> ". . . Poets say science takes away from the beauty of the stars--mere globes of gas atoms. Nothing is 'mere.' I too can see the stars on a desert night, and feel them. But do I see more or less?
>
> "The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination--stuck on this carousel my little eyes can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern--of which I am a part--perhaps my stuff was belched from some forgotten star, as one is belching there. Or see them with the greater eye of Palomar (the 200-inch reflecting telescope), rushing all apart from some common starting point when they were perhaps all together.
>
> "What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why?
>
> "It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it. For far more marvellous is the truth than any artist of the past imagined! Why do the poets of the present not speak of it? What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were like a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?"
>
> --Vol. I, page 3-6

Space lacks here to review more than a small fraction of the concepts of science that Jeffers wove into his poetry with such power and understanding. The evidence for the "rushing all apart" of the galaxies, referred to by Feynman, is the so-called "red shift" revealed by spectral analysis of their light--an instance of what physicists call "the Doppler effect." Jeffers understood this, and understood too that some theoretical interpretations suggest this reddening of the far-travelled light

is somehow a result of the structure of space itself, rather than proof of actual motion by the light sources.

Thus in the posthumous volume, The Beginning and the End (1963):

> We have counted the stars and half understood them,
> we have watched the farther galaxies fleeing
> away from us, wild herds
> Of panic horses--or a trick of distance deceives
> the prism . . .
>
> --from "Passenger Pigeons," page 13

He knew it, too, thirty years or more earlier, for in Thurso's Landing (1932), in the poem "Margrave," p. 136, we find:

> The learned astronomer
> Analyzing the light of the most remote star-swirls
> Has found them--or a trick of light deludes his prism--
> All at incredible speeds fleeing outward from ours.

It is typical of this self-proclaimed "inhumanist" who was so acutely sensitive to the sufferings and the perils of humans (as witness his penetrating observations on nuclear weapons from 1945 on), that he should add--

> I thought, no doubt they are fleeing the contagion
> Of consciousness that infects this corner of space.

The two-word combination "learned astronomer" links Jeffers--and I suspect it was a deliberate use--with that other great American poet who seems in so many ways at the antipodes in basic differences of outlook. For in 1865 Walt Whitman had written:

> When I heard the learned astronomer,
> When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns
> before me...

and so on, in a poem that, for all its poignance, exemplifies the anti-scientific attitude that Feynman protested against.

The two pillars on which "modern" science rests are the quantum theory and relativity theory. Jeffers clearly comprehended both in his thinking and used them in figures of speech as "right" as any Shakespeare drew from his familiarity with the stage, the courts, or the countryside of his time and place.

The quantum concept that light and other radiation is emitted and absorbed in particle-like packets of energy (photons) clearly underlies lines such as:

> The heroic stars spending themselves,
> Coining their very flesh into bullets for the
> lost battle,
> They must burn out at length like used candles...
>
> --"The Epic Stars," (p. 24 of The Beginning and the End, (1963)

The equivalence and interconvertibility of mass (matter) and energy provides perhaps the most sensational demonstrated aspect of relativity theories. Many a man of letters, trying to be timely, has made inept mention of Einstein's short-hand statement: $E = mc^2$.

Jeffers, however, did not need the revelation of Alamagordo or the massive crimes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to invest that potent statement with meaning for him. He knew when he wrote in "Oh, Lovely Rock" (p. 125 of Such Counsels You Gave to Me, 1937):

> . . . this rock will be here, grave, earnest, not
> passive; the energies
> That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole
> mountains above . . .
> (Italics added--H.A.K.)

And again the conversion of substance (mass) into energy (radiation, in this case) is reflected in this bit from "Margrave" (p. 147, Thurso's Landing, 1932):

> . . . galaxies
> Scattering themselves and shining their substance away
> Like a passionate thought.

Einstein, so passionately devoted to music, inner integrity, and peace, concentrated in his last years of life on the search for a "Unified Field Theory." Though his social outlooks and Jeffers' were poles apart, it seems that he too could have sensed the poetic ;quivalence to the unified field concept in lines such as these from "The Inhumanist" (Part II of The Double Axe, 1948):

> . . . there is not an atom in all the universe
> But feels every other atom: gravitation, electro-
> magnetism, light, heat, and the other
> Flamings, the nerves in the night's black flesh,
> flow them together; the stars, the winds, and
> the people: one energy
> One existence, one music, one organism, one life,
> one God: star-fire and rock-strength, the
> sea's cold flow
> And man's dark soul.

How vastly prophetic appear lines in the lyric that Jeffers himself entitled "Science" (p. 103, Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems, 1925):

> Man, introverted man . . .
> Has begot giants; but being taken up
> Like a maniac with self-love and inward conflicts
> cannot manage his hybrids . . .
> . . . he's bred knives on nature, turns them also
> inward; they have thirsty points though.
> His mind forebodes his own destruction . . .
>
> A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,
> A drop from the ocean: who would have dreamed this
> infinitely little too much?

(Once again, the breadth of Jeffers' contacts amazes. This time in the phrase, "a pebble from the shingle" we find an echo of a great statement by Isaac Newton, " . . . to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and . . . now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier seashell . . . , while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.")

Jeffers' awareness of the working-out of science applied to destruction was keen and concrete. We have his portrait of a president reacting to the news that the test at Alamagordo had "worked" --

> Consider Harry Truman
> That innocent man sailing home from Potsdam--re-
> joicing, running about the ship, telling all
> and sundry
> That the awful power that feeds the life of the
> stars had been tricked down
> Into the common stews and shambles.
>
> --"Moments of Glory" (p. 137, The Double Axe, 1948)

Need one add that Jeffers' scientific figure was sound? The processes by which the sun and stars shine are known to be nuclear in nature--fusion rather than fission. The physicist Hans Bethe traced the steps by which "the awful power . . . feeds the life of the stars." Years later, in 1963, Bethe warned a Congress of Scientists on Survival against stockpiling of nuclear weapons, and the overkill concept. If once war starts, the typical military commander's reaction would be to "use the whole arsenal."

Jeffers, though "hidden away" behind walls of stone, had reached the same conclusion by that time or before. In "The Beautiful Captive," (p. 31, The Beginning and the End, 1963) he broods:

> . . . To pile up weapons on both sides of a ditch makes
> war as certain as sunrise . . .
> There have been two, there will be a third, to be
> fought with what weapons? Those that we test
> and stockpile...
> Do you think we'll not use them? When a great nation
> is in trouble . . .
> It will use the whole arsenal.
> So--be prepared to die . . .

But even to the last, the mind of the great inhumanist, misanthrope, and lord of language rebelled against this conviction of self-genocide:

> ...this fantastic third world-war and self destruction:
> curious I cannot feel them yet. The idea is logical
> but not intuitive: distrust it.

A great poet who resisted the idea and reality of war--a war that took his life --Wilfred Owen, said, "the poetry is in the pity" and by that test we must sense Jeffers' participation in the fears of a world beset by "the Bombs." In his last book, this shines through a strange visionary lyric, "Do You Still Make War?"--with its image like that of the great Bruegel painting at Naples, The Parable of the Blind:

> I saw a regiment of soldiers shuffling and stumbling,
> Holding each other's hands for guidance,
> Falling into the ditches, falling on the plain road,
> Under orders to garrison the empty city.
> The furious light of what had killed the city had
> killed their eyes
> At three hundred miles' distance. Oh faithful ones
> Do you still make war?
>
> --(p. 23, The Beginning and the End.)