ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER

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Robinson Jeffers Committee
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Dear Members and Subscribers:

We have good news for teachers and students who have found it difficult to secure Jeffers' books for class study. Vintage Books has just published Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems, a paperback which sells for $1.45.

The Sierra Club publication, Not Man Apart, which we announced over a year ago, is now in circulation. The beautiful photographs of the Big Sur country carry captions from Jeffers' poems. There are also several full-length poems included. The book sells for $25.

Herbert Klein reports on two programs which he and Mrs. Klein attended while on a recent trip to northern California. There was a presentation of "Poetry of War and Peace, by Robinson Jeffers" at the Academy Theatre in Oakland on September 16th. Mr. Klein reports, "...the finest readings of Jeffers I have ever heard ...his poetry after about early 1920's requires only the inherent speech-stresses and meaning-stresses in order to reveal its richness of rhythm..." The two narrators were Eric Vaughn and Patrick Omeirs. Three additional Jeffers readings are now in the planning stage by Mr. Vaughn. His address is Labyrinth Theatre-Club, 733 S. Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco, 10.

On September 12th, in the Carmel Forest Theatre, Mr. and Mrs. Klein heard the "Versymphony," two tape productions of poetry readings with musical background. "Big Sur" was selected and arranged by Warren Johnston to Gaston Usigli's "Humanitas." "Point Lobos" was selected and arranged by Mary Louise Schneeberger to Usigli's symphonic rhapsody, "Prometheus Bound." The narrator was Lloyd Jenkins who, according to Mr. Klein, "spoke with expression and sincerity." These tapes may be purchased from Fantasy Records.

KPIX-5 of San Francisco is preparing a half hour program about Jeffers, sponsored by Westinghouse and produced by Caryl Coleman of KPIX. This will be one of a series of ten programs on American literary figures. Release date has not been set.

We were fortunate to see the opening night of Medea at the Valley Music Theatre in Woodland Hills. Dame Judith Anderson received a standing ovation. Her interpretation of the role is as powerful as it was twenty years ago when she and Jeffers made theatre history with Medea. There was a strong supporting cast including Marian Seldes as the Nurse, and Henry Brandon as Jason.

We have some corrections to give you for Mr. Klein's scholarly article in our last Newsletter: page 3, the line should read, "I thought, no doubt they are fleeing the contagion..."; page 4, "...the nerves in the night's black flesh..."; page 2, a quotation mark should precede the paragraph that begins, "The vastness of the heavens..."; also, on page 2, the line should read, "Why do the poets of the present not speak of it?"

We have received word from Lee and Donnan Jeffers that they are homeward bound from Ireland and will be at Tor House by the end of November.

As we advised you in our last Newsletter, Mrs. Ann Ridgeway has given us permission to print her progress report on The Letters of Robinson Jeffers, which she so ably presented at the Jeffers Colloquium, at Occidental College on June 29th. We are proud to share this paper with you.

Happy holidays to each of you,

Melba Bennett, Chairman

THE LETTERS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS--A PROGRESS REPORT*

by Ann N. Ridgeway

Admittedly, ours is not an age of letter-writers and the recent collections of the letters of Frost, Williams, Joyce, and Pound are not to be compared with the letters of Madame de Sevigne, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Chesterfield, Walpole, or Crevecoeur. These were letter-writers of a consciously developed style in which an attitude or pose was adopted for the sake of an audience more or less public. The style of the journal, the personal essay, and the epistle merge in the compositions of the latter so that the best of them become polished representations of a unique, usually aristocratic society, culture, and point of view. The letters of poets like Gray, Cowper, Byron, Keats, Pound and Frost, however, are usually less formal, less elegant, less polite, and even more self-revealing. Aside from personal problems of physical and spiritual torment, and attention, however grudgingly given, to routine publishing matters, a poet's letters always include critical comments solicited from him by admirers who aspire to his throne, critical comments solicited from him by critics and scholars who, as often as not, use his word against him, and casual comments on environment, literature, and art which reveal, however unconsciously, his own aesthetics.

The letters of Robinson Jeffers reflect such concerns. What they tell us about the man will, as did Mr. Frost's, necessarily explode some of the myths most dear to the "lit" teachers' hearts. What they tell us about the critic-poet will at once certify the standards we see controlling Jeffers' poetry, the recognition of these same standards in the work of others, and the respect for poetic attempt, well or

ill-achieved, even when failure must be acknowledged. Finally, what they tell us about the poet-critic will supplement the evidence provided in the poetry itself: a dedicated craftsman is at work always, totally given to the creative act of the poem.

One of the warnings issued me at the start of my venture was, "Mr. Jeffers did not write many letters." Some 300 letters later (and information of at least two other significant collections not yet made available to me) has already exploded, to my satisfaction, at least, one part of the Jeffers myth. That he did not like to write letters, that he procrastinated to the point of vice, is sufficiently demon-strated--but write them he did. The respect he shows for the work of E. A. Robinson, Mark Van Doren, and Sara Teasdale and the warmth of his friendship with Arthur Ficke, Albert Bender, Benjamin de Casseres, and George Sterling may, initially, be colored by an awareness of the stature of these notables. But the gentle comments to C. W. Keppel and Ernest Hartsock who urged his comment on their poems, and the sincere interest in his apology for missing the visit of Henry Goddard Leach and in his answer to Mr. Plumb's question about the eucalyptus trees growing in his yard, strike a stunning blow at the mythical Jeffers-hater-of-the-human-race. The mythical Jeffers is, indeed, depicted as so barbarously anti-human that one critic has implied that the simplest solution offered by Jeffers to the human problem is suicide. Jeffers' deep compassion expressed at the time of de Casseres' brother's suicide and George Sterling's should stand as eloquent rebuttal to this supposed attitude. Finally, the notion that this stern neo-Jeremias lacked both metaphysical wit and Elizabethan and modern humor, if not gainsaid by the numerous puns to be found in his poetry (serious enough in intent, I suppose) will certainly be shattered by the succinct but vivacious prose narrating (in a letter to Mr. Ficke) a fiesta enlivened by home vintage donated by Mexicans, ending with its being poured through the gargoyles' heads on Hawk Tower.

To those who solicit appraisal of their work, Mr. Jeffers clearly strains, at times, to find some positive and encouraging criticism to make. What he is most zealous to find out is intensity and strength of expression; what he least approves is superfluous adornment, the modern counterpart of gongorismo. It is in the letters to established writers like Van Doren, de Casseres, and George Sterling, however, that the abiding integrity of Robinson Jeffers the artist achieves its finest equi-librium with Robinson Jeffers the man. At the beginning of each-acquaintance, Jeffers is clearly deferential and modest, but as each relationship grows firmer, he plainly grows more free and more generous in offering critical comment. Candid he remains always. What he appreciates is clarity of image and music, intensity and balance in emotional impact, a sense of the unique character of the verse line.

To those who query him on his own life, poetic technique, literary, political and social values, Mr. Jeffers is characteristically close-mouthed. Clearly he did not enjoy self-analysis for other people's eyes--though his manuscripts attest to a rigorous process of analysis and revision as he wrote. Again, what is demonstrated is Jeffers' obvious ability to discriminate between the casual and trivial inquiry and the serious, considered attempt to understand his work. Contrast the carefully composed letters to Dr. Carpenter, for example, and to Hyatt Howe Waggoner, with his terse, one-word affirmation that there is, indeed, current use for narrative poetry --an item from a questionnaire. It is also abundantly clear that he was just as discriminating in receiving criticism offered by Mr. Rorty and Mr. Van Doren--and Miss Monroe, with whom he was notably docile--but swift and sure in his unconcern with those who lost composure and merely indulged in tirades against him.

Mr. Jeffers' genuine love for the "beautiful god of the world" is discovered especially in his letters written on the visits to Ireland, but he also lovingly describes his coast in an invitation to E. A. Robinson to call at Tor House, in letters to Sterling, who apparently reciprocated in appreciation of the natural beauty of the Sur country, and in describing his preoccupation with tree tending to his friend Ficke. The letters written from Ireland are also engrossing revelations of Jeffers' deep interest in his ancestral origins--indeed, in racial origins almost in the Jungian sense of the "collective psyche"--in modern history, and in the small and unprepossessing natural object as well as in the grand and dramatic spectacle.

All, these aspects of Jeffers the man and the poet are revealed primarily through the contents of his letters. Their style as letters per se, however, is as important as their content. Though Mrs. Jeffers has cautioned that her husband's dislike for writing letters should lead us to suspect what we find in them, and, though Jeffers himself in "Self-Criticism in February" laconically offers "I can tell lies in prose," I think there is no insincerity intended in any of the letters I have seen. As a matter of fact, as Mrs. Bennett has pointed out, at one time he tried over and over to answer a latter-day Bluestocking's letter, finally abandoning the attempt as impossible without sacrificing either honesty on the one hand or tact on the other. I conclude simply that, while Jeffers' letters are always sincere and spontaneous of tone, they are also compositions suited skillfully to the individual demands of audience, circumstance, and personality of the writer.

Sentence structure, for example, is lightly balanced. Sentence style is generally loose and flowing with frequent modifications of tone. As in his poetry, line move - ment is the vehicle for units of thought. For example, a letter to de Casseres* be- gins, "You knew we'd be delighted to hear from you, and so we are, and thank you for the invitation to an affair that it took the continent's breadth to keep us away from." The sentence form, it seems to me, depends upon meaning and concern for its subject, so that its grace and courtesy obscure what might otherwise appear over-coordination and faulty prepositional usage. The very loose punctuation of the following sentence demonstrates a like tendency to allow meaning, and, in this case, mood to provide the movement of thought: "But at home it is practically impossible for me to write a letter, there are so many things to do and experience, and a pleasant hypnotic routine that is perfectly letter-proof."

The phrase "perfectly letter-proof" is an example of the surprising turn Jeffers can give to idiomatic patterns of speech and word choice. His diction is always clear, generally colloquial, and frequently makes use of sharply-chiseled figures of speech. From the batch of letters to de Casseres, for example, I can select at random: "Your letter came like a jet of fire," "a library of lightnings," "it's hard to set fire to too much thought," the gargantuan laughter of your best," and, referring to a com pleted manuscript, "I feel as if I'd fished for salmon and caught an octopus." Col- loquial tone and phrasing is most noticeable in such sentences as, "Having lived through another touristy summer here we can't persuade ourselves to spare the more blessed winter; so if we go to Ireland it won't be until next spring." And, "It's pleasant to think you've promised to come back here sometime and stay awhile--and will send the books for hostages--that also is something to look forward to."

*Examples quoted here must be selected from the de Casseres letters, since they are the only collection in public domain. Permissions granted me for the book would not pertain to publication of this report.

Jeffers allows himself some of the by-play of the poet in the internal rhyme of "Fortunately the sun hasn't shone all summer, and neither flies nor tourists like gray skies," and the alliteration of "If ever you happen up this way you could quite crown your kindness by stopping in...." A careful co-ordinating structure is often followed by a shorter, tersely stated concluding thought: "I'm very grateful and overcome with embarrassment by de Casseres' article about a visit to Carmel; you've given me everything, even conversation, which is more than nature did." And "My literary judgments are narrow, perhaps, and never enthusiastic; I wish they were, in this case. I'd give a lot to be able to say something splendid."

Jeffers' tendency to give his sentences over to a rhythmic pattern in which punctuation establishes caesural pauses provides interesting examples of his prose style:

1. "Point Lobos is still the same; and our five acres; but everywhere else is breaking out in a rash of houses."

2. "It is not the love of a horse for a woman, that poem, but of a woman for a stallion which is more reasonable if not more moral."

3. "George Sterling is here over night; you know he's an active person and I can't write more at present."

4. "We ride and watch the thunder-storms and swim in the hot springs; our boys practice their Spanish on the Mexicans and Indians."

Finally the occasional touches of humor stand out prominently in a context of generally serious topic treatment:

1. "That you date from Hollywood is astonishing too; we live rather solitary here and never know until we get letters from them what splendors are south of us."

2. Referring to Roan Stallion again: "Also the affection is platonic--which makes it perhaps less absurd."

3. "George Sterling was here the other day, and sorry to have missed you when you went through San Francisco, but remembered with pleasure the other time, parading arm in arm with you, singing old songs, himself (he said) entirely sober, and merry."

As you must guess, I should not have been so niggardly in my selection of illustrative phrases and sentences had I not an eye to whetting your appetite for the more solid fare of the book in preparation. In a different way from his poems, which as works of art must, necessarily, take on lives unique to themselves, Mr. Jeffers' letters have the restorative force of continuing his presence among us. "Letter sequences," found M. Lincoln Schuster in anthologizing The World's Great Letters, "could be as exciting as sonnet sequences...." And so Mr. Jeffers' are.

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