

ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER

Number 14

Robinson Jeffers Committee
Occidental College
Los Angeles, California 90041

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Dear Members and Friends:

We are at a loss to know if you wish us to continue with the publication of the Newsletter since for over a year we have had practically no reaction from any of you - either verbally or financially - and they do take effort and money. We are willing to continue only if you find them of any interest. Please take a minute to let us know.

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Frau Eva Hesse, R. J.'s German translator, did take the trouble to write us about H. Arthur Klein's essay, in our August Newsletter, and we share with you her interesting comments on the problems that a translator must meet:

I was particularly pleased to read H. Arthur Klein's splendid essay on Jeffers' effective use of scientific imagery in his poems, an aspect which has always interested me greatly and has even influenced my choice of poems for translation. It was an excellent idea of yours to include essays in the Newsletter and I hope you will follow up the one by Miss Ridgeway with others.

I wonder if Mr. H. Arthur Klein is identical with Mr. A. Klein whom you quoted in your last letter? In any case I am most grateful for his correction of my statement about all three plays having been written for Judith Anderson, whereas actually only the Acting Version of the Tower and not the original version was done for her, and also for his explanation of the difference between Mt. Carmel and Carmel. I wonder where I got hold of the Mount! As soon as one ventures outside of what a poet actually says on the printed page, facts become very hard to come by and even harder to verify.

It is quite true, as Mr. Klein deduces, that I regard Jeffers as a free-verse poet, but I should qualify this to explain that in this I concur with Eliot that 'no vers is libre for the man who wants to do a good job.' What Mr. Klein calls "'go-as-you-please' free verse" I therefore prefer to call blank verse, although this is rather arbitrary and one should really invent a third term

instead. My departure from Jeffers' 10-stress line in the plays is dictated by the exigencies of the theater - my first drafts doggedly reproduced the 10-stress lines, but I recognized in time that this would not do for the theater and so I abandoned it for a more natural German speech pattern, but which is still far from being very libre in Eliot's sense.

As soon as one ventures to translate a poem one has to decide right at the start which its most important elements are: scansion, melos, imagery, message. Personally I feel that scansion is the most expendable of these, because the speech patterns of one language cannot properly be duplicated in another except in very isolated instances, whereas the message always can be brought across, imagery mostly can, and melos frequently can. This does not mean that the poem won't scan in the translation, but only that the original scansion need not be imitated. Of course, one cannot render a 10-stress line into anything one likes; one must try to find a suitable equivalent. For instance, the equivalent of a 10-stress English line is generally a 12-stress German line, and vice versa. This refers to poems rather than to plays, where the actors have above all to be given lines which flow easily - so there the emphasis will lie on imagery, message, melos, in that order.

Naturally I would not dream of promulgating this theory as a dogma for translators; I think that every translator should be left to work out his own salvation according to his own lights and what he thinks it is more important to get across from one language into the other; this may very well depend to a large extent on temperament."

A NOTE ON JEFFERS AND MODERN SCIENCE

In Newsletter No. 11 (dated August, 1965) H. Arthur Klein's article, "The Poet Who Spoke of It . . ." referred to Jeffers' imaginative interpretation of the so-called "red shift" of light from distant galaxies which appear to be "All at incredible speeds fleeing outward from ours." (from the poem Margrave, p. 136 of Thurso's Landing, 1932).

Jeffers added, in a typical interpretation,

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

Mr. Klein now reports that, during research for a book soon to be published on the units and methods of modern science, he encountered a rather striking parallel in a popular science work by the eminent physicist Leopold Infeld: Albert Einstein -- His Work and Its Influence On Our World (Scribner's, N.Y., 1950):

. . . why do the nebulae ((galaxies -- H.A.K.)) behave as though they were running away from our galaxy?

If the red-shift and the running away of nebulae had been discovered in biblical times we might have had some explanation that appeared satisfactory. (The nonsensical character of this statement does not escape me! We could have assumed that in each galaxy there are some planetary systems and that our earth is not the only one populated by so-called intelligent beings. Since our planet is the one on which Adam sinned and the only one on which men kill men, therefore all the other nebulae have a deeply rooted complex toward our galaxy and try to get as far from us as possible.

Yet we can hardly be satisfied with such an explanation . . .)

-- pp. 77-78 of revised edition, SL43.

No implication is intended by Klein that Infeld, an associate and co-worker with Einstein during part of the latter's later years in the United States, was in any way influenced by what Jeffers wrote nearly a score of years earlier. Almost certainly, the theoretical physicist's imagination and the Poet's imagination arrived separately and independently at these comparable cosmic ironies . . .

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Kamil Bednář writes us from Czechoslovakia that his translation of Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years will appear in the Moravian writers' publication "The Guest in the House" shortly. The Return has just been successfully staged. His translation of The Beginning and the End will be published next year. The recognition which R. J. enjoys in Czechoslovakia, thanks to Mr. Bednář, is truly extraordinary. He recently gave two lectures in Bratislava and has had excellent reviews. Historians will no doubt look askance at the passivity of Americans, by comparison.

Mrs. Hasse Bunnelle of the Sierra Club informs us that the sales of Not Man Apart have gone very well - nearly 10,000 copies. She says that the book served as an introduction to Jeffers for many of their younger members, who are "very excited" about him.

Spend some time with your Jeffers' books this summer, and we'll hope to perceive some sign of excitement in you too, by fall.

Your rather frustrated and baffled chairman,

M. B. B.