

ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER

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Robinson Jeffers Committee
Occidental College
Los Angeles, California 90041

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Dear Members and Subscribers:

Next month, January 10th, 1967, will be the 80th birthday of Robinson Jeffers. It is our sincere hope that universities and colleges having sizable Jeffers collections will honor him with an exhibition of his work. Occidental College is, of course, planning an exhibition. Mills College, the University of California, Yale, and Wellesley College have fine collections. Others, with the help of individual collectors, could also do the poet honor.

Mrs. Hans Barkan and James Schevill are planning a Jeffers program at the Poetry Center of the San Francisco State College, including a symposium, a reading of Jeffers' poetry by Dame Judith Anderson, and the showing of a documentary film. The Poetry Center, in conjunction with Mr. David Myers, has been commissioned by National Education Television to make this film. Mr. Schevill writes, "Several weeks ago we filmed a scene from Tower Beyond Tragedy with Judith Anderson against the tower (at Tor House), a most exciting experience." The quality of the program at the Poetry Center on January 10th depends on the amount of money that can be subscribed.

Another film which would be available for a program is "Rhapsody and Requiem." Prints may be obtained by writing Mr. Caryl Coleman, 2655 Van Ness Avenue, San Francisco, c/o KPIX-5.

Another event to honor the birthday of Jeffers will be the release of Mary de Rachewiltz's Italian translation of The Cretan Woman.

From Ireland Donnan Jeffers writes that the unpublished, six-line poem "Rhythm and Rhyme" by R. J. has been printed in a limited edition of 500 copies by Hester Schoeninger at the Peters Gate Press, Monterey.* I had not included this poem in The Beginning and the End as I was unable to decipher the word "toggle," which appeared to me to be "tazzle" and, as such, had no definition. Fortunately Donnan, deciphered it correctly.

*Copies may be purchased by addressing Miss Schoeninger c/o Peters Gate Press, 50 Ave Maria Road, Monterey, California 93940 price \$1.00

Robert J. Brophy, S.J., is represented in the current issue of the Bibliographical Society of America Papers, with his monograph "A Textual Note on Robinson Jeffers' The Beginning and the End."

Our request for original poems written about R. J. for our March Newsletter has resulted in some fine contributions. We could use one or two others if submitted in January.

We are fortunate to have, as this month's contributor, William H. Nolte, a professor in the Department of English at the University of Missouri at St. Louis. Mr. Nolte's essay "Robinson Jeffers as Didactic Poet" appeared in the Spring 1966 issue of the Virginia Quarterly. He is also the author of the recently published H. L. Mencken, Literary Critic.

JEFFERS' "FOG" AND THE GULLS IN IT

Invisible gulls with human voices cry in the sea-cloud
 "There is room, wild minds,
 Up high in the cloud; the web and the feather remember
 Three elements, but here
 Is but one, and the webs and the feathers
 Subduing but the one
 Are the greater, with strength and to spare." You dream, wild criers,
 The peace that all life
 Dreams gluttonously, the infinite self that has eaten
 Environment, and lives
 Alone, unencroached on, perfectly gorged, one God.
 Caesar and Napoleon
 Visibly acting their dream of that solitude, Christ and Gautama,
 Being God, devouring
 The World with atonement for God's sake . . . ah sacred hungers,
 The conqueror's, the prophet's
 The lover's, the hunger of the sea-beaks, slaves of the last peace,
 Worshippers of oneness.

No perceptive reader of American poetry could mistake these lines for those of any poet but Robinson Jeffers. His unique stamp identifies them in such a way that they are unmistakably Jeffersian. But of all his poems, this lyric contains the most difficult knot to untangle. Since "Fog" expresses a leading element of Jeffers' Weltanschauung, I consider it important to unravel the knot. Moreover, Jeffers was himself the leading exponent of the belief that poetry must have meaning, that the poet must never "play games with words, /His affair being to awake dangerous images/ And call the hawks."

To begin with, the title of the poem tells us something of the poem's meaning. The "Invisible gulls with human voices" cry to us from the fog--that is, from the realm of illusion and, as we shall see, from self-delusion and egocentric vanity. The gulls are both the scavengers of earth and the deceived ones, the "gulled" humans, the "Worshippers of oneness" in the last line. From the sea-

cloud (fog) comes the cry, addressed to the "wild minds" (minds that are made "wild" by the desire to escape the confines or, rather, the indifference of Nature and her multitude), that in the ethereal realm may be found strength or power unattainable in the phenomenological world. The "web and the feather" constitute the natural or physical aspect of the "voices"; they "remember" the three elements of nature (earth, air and water). Which is to say, they empirically remember multiplicity. The voices, which seem to be nothing more than the articulated imaginations of men, inform us, however, that the subduing of "but the one" element is greater than subduing the plural elements of life. In other words, the contraction of all phenomena into one essence, or one Platonic godhead, will satisfy the desire of man to look upon himself as not just one of the parts of the natural world, but as the crown and source of all the parts--hence, the god of phenomena. Such reasoning will satisfy man's ancient urge to unify, to make all things One thing--in effect, to find a shelter against the world, against every this outside the "brain vault." It placates man's fear of being separate from the universe he inhabits by placing him in the god-like position of having created his habitat. It is, in brief, solipsism --one of the most injurious outgrowths, Jeffers believed, of philosophical idealism.

In another of his shorter lyrics, Jeffers elucidated his belief in the inescapable dualism of life. All things exist in themselves, even though all are interrelated, and all things are in constant flow--the mind as well as the rock and water. But only the mind endeavors to catch and make static life's flow. Cod is all things (man, being one of an infinite number of things), Jeffers believed; but when man claims that he is God (Jeffers always distinguished the man-made gods from the inhuman Cod) he reduces all things to nothing more than figments of his imagination. Observe Jeffers' remarks on this question in his "Credo" (the italics are mine):

My friend from Asia has powers and magic, he plucks a blue leaf from the
 young blue-gum
 And gazing upon it, gathering and quieting
 The God in his mind, creates an ocean more real than the ocean, the salt,
 the actual
 Appalling presence, the power of the waters.
 He believes that nothing is real except as we make it. I humbler have
 found in my blood
 Bred west of Caucasus a harder mysticism.
*Multitude stands in my mind but I think that the ocean in the bone vault
 is only
 The bone vault's ocean: out there is the ocean's;
 The water is the water, the cliff is the rock, come shocks and flashes of
 reality. The mind
 Passes, the eye closes, the spirit is a passage;
 The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the
 heart-breaking beauty
 Will remain when there is no heart to break for it.*

So long as the human mind is centered upon itself, so long as man considers himself as subject only and the world as object, just so long will he be victimized by the "sacred hungers," by the incest which Jeffers employed in his long narrative poems as symbolic of man's anthropocentric delusions.

After the speech of the "gulls" has ended in "Fog," the poet answers sarcastically: "You dream, wild criers,/ The peace that all life/ Dreams gluttonously, the infinite self that has eaten/ Environment, and lives/ Alone, unencroached on, perfectly gorged, one God." That is, the gulls imagine the oneness ("the peace") that all creatures desire, since all are captives of their own being, and man more than any other since he brings active imagination to aid in the building of his illusions. Furthermore, since man cannot escape his being, since he cannot climb outside his microcosm (as Jeffers constantly exhorted him to do), he takes revenge on nature, as it were, by attempting to drag the world of phenomena into his self, thereby quieting his uneasy sense of separateness. The "infinite self" expresses perfectly the concept of man as subject only, as solipsistic creator who has "eaten" the world, who has made environment his special oyster. As creator he thus lives alone, unencroached on, containing multitudes (as Whitman might say)--in brief, the source and end of all things--more briefly, "one God." That is to say, man the species, who really is a distinctive phenomenon amidst an infinity of phenomena, because he cannot or will not view the world objectively, insists that he is not only greater than all the parts but in fact contains all the parts in his self. An almost perfect instance of this anthropocentrism may be found in the early writings, especially "Nature," of Emerson. Indeed, almost the whole school of Romantics, both abroad and at home believes to some extent in the "infinite self." Some, of course, believed that reliance on the self was in effect reliance on the Over-Soul or the Weltgeist (different men called it different names). Others--Byron and Nietzsche are two examples--elevated the Ego to godly estate, thus bypassing the need for an outside source from which to derive godhead.

The last seven lines of "Fog" illustrate by the examples of two conquerors and two prophets the process by which men create their gods through dreams and gluttony. Unable to believe that all men are gods (which would deprive the elected "gods" of their uniqueness in any case), man delegates divinity to certain individuals--who are, needless to say, most desirous of wearing the divine plumage. Some of these "gods" or saviors visibly act "their dream of solitude"--the "solitude" being the oneness that the gulls (and gulled) crave. Such minor gods are embodiments of power, one of the attributes of God. Then there are those who desire more than just the active power of the dictator. Like Christ and Gautama, they desire power over the minds of men, as contrasted to the Caesarian power over men's bodies. To gain such power, they strive to become, in the eyes of men, God. To maintain post-humous power over the mind of posterity, they demand atonement from the world, which they in fact rejected when they rejected naturalism for idealism or supernaturalism. Which is to say, in order to possess men's minds it was necessary for them to reject the physical world, and the more memorably vivid that rejection the better--by hanging from the cross, for example. So long as the mind of man retains an image of the dead god and feels responsible for his death, the god will be mistaken by some for God.

The "sacred hungers" of the conqueror, the prophet, the lover (who appears for the first time in the poem, but it is obvious that the lover wishes to possess the mind and body of the loved one)--all are similar to the hunger of the scavenger sea-beaks. They are slaves of the "last peace"--which might be, as it is in many Jeffers poems, the final peace of extinction; but in this case, it is more likely "The peace that all life/ Dreams gluttonously," the oneness that the fog-bound dreamers find when removed from the earth--the earth being, for Jeffers, the "materiality" which makes possible and which precedes the mind and its imaginings of grandeur. "Worshippers of oneness" stands in apposition to "slaves of the last peace"--the only two phrases in the last lines that are not possessive case, that are not possessive of the sacred hungers.

A final word might be necessary concerning the phrase "ah sacred hungers," which has an ambiguous meaning. The hungers are perhaps sacred in the sense that they are ancient and perhaps even noble, but at the same time those hungers are precisely the ones that cause man to be the most destructive of all the beasts. After all, it was the hunger of the crucified Jew, as Jeffers tells us in "Theory of Truth," that has, unintentionally to be sure, "stained an age; nearly two thousand years are one vast poem drunk with the wine of his blood."

Jeffers was preëminently the poet of disillusion. Unlike many modern artists (Conrad and O'Neill were two) who insisted on the need for illusion in a slippery world, Jeffers exhorted man to act rationally, to cast out his illusions, to love outward rather than inward. He concluded one of his finest poems, "Meditation on Saviors," with lines that might be read as a positive answer to the dilemma of all those lost in "Fog":

But while he lives let each man make his health in his mind, to love
the coast opposite humanity
And so be freed of love, laying it like bread on the waters;
it is worst turned inward, it is best shot farthest.

Love, the mad wine of good and evil, the saint's and murderer's,
the mote in the eye that makes its object
Shine the sun black; the trap in which it is better to catch the
inhuman God than the hunter's own image.

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