



Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

Number 17

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Dear Members and Subscribers:

The 80th birthday of Jeffers has been fittingly observed. We particularly thank Miss Hannah French of Wellesley College Library, the Bancroft Library of the University of California and Tyrus Harmsen, of the Occidental College Library. Each of you received an invitation to the program at Occidental and we are sorry that more of you couldn't have attended. The two documentary films were particularly interesting and a great contribution to Jeffersiana.

Perhaps we should give even greater praise to a group who, without financial support, have, are, and will continue to present programs this year commemorating Jeffers' birth and death. It is the Labyrinth: Theatre-Club of San Francisco. Included in their repertoire are Dear Judas, The Loving Shepherdess, The Beginning and the End, Poetry of War and Peace, and Epic and Lyric Verse. They are a company of three persons: Eric Vaughn, Miss Jean Hochberg, and Glenn-Charles Musagetes. From all reports their presentations are of a very high quality, matching their dedication to Jeffers. Although to date they have presented their programs in Berkeley, San Francisco, and Carmel, they are available for those institutions who can use their talents and experience. They may be addressed to 3179 College Avenue, Berkeley, California.

Principessa Mary de Rachewiltz translated The Cretan Woman (La. Cretesse) into Italian as her tribute to Jeffers' birthday. A copy is at the Occidental Library -- a charming addition to their collection.

The Stone Mason of Tor House, in a first edition of 2,000 copies, is practically sold out, except for a few in book stores, though we were assured that only 400 copies would sell the first year. Who told us there was no interest in Jeffers? On all fronts interest is intense and several works in progress which should make us all grateful that we have kept our Society intact.

In this issue of our Newsletter we are presenting poems dedicated to Jeffers.

The first two, "Poet in Stone," and "Builder of Tor House," are by Ernest G. Moll of the University of Oregon. Jeffers himself said these were "good indeed." Next is "The Poet in the Stone House" by Don Gordon, author of two

books of verse, Civilian Poems, 1946, and Displaced Persons, 1958. Also there is the long poem "The Cleft Axeman," 1948, by H. Arthur Klein, one of our valued and erudite contributors. The last one is "To Robinson Jeffers" by Melba Berry Bennett, submitted only because the success of her biography of Jeffers has obviously gone to her head! It appeared originally in her book of verse In Review, 1946.

In our next issue we will give you a list of foreign translations of R. J.'s poems, in hopes that if you know of others not listed, that you will advise us.

Melba Berry Bennett

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Robinson Jeffers

I

POET IN STONE

I watch you write stone poems, build stone towers,
Gathering that mind into one point of light
That lay dispersed for aeons in the night
Before earth knew the gentleness of flowers.
Out of the rock a hawk. In him a soul
Too clean for passion. Out of the hawk a man
Whom thought defiles with vision and a plan
Futile in all save its own stern control.

The cold thin agony of stone bites deep
In flesh of those that feel it. The proud dream
Of stones stabs bitter music through the mind.
For you I fear not--even in that wild leap
Of seeing that lays bare the eagle's scream
And shows the gray stone anguish that's behind.

II

BUILDER OF TOR HOUSE

I think I'd know the marks upon our hands
That have grown firm with the cool touch of stone
And the slow surge of strength along the bone
What time you built a tower in empty lands.

I think I'd know the light in your still eyes
That, when the work was done and quiet came
About you, and the wonder of a name,
Looked from that height with something of surprise.

I knew you in the granite long ago
On hills you'll never see; but you were proud
Beyond my strength -- a spirit darkly met
In the faint glimmerings far beneath the snow. And
you'll go back, but round you like a cloud Will be
the memory of the tower you set.

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THE POET IN THE STONE HOUSE

(From Statement by Don Gordon, Bruce Humphries, Boston, 1943.
This poem appeared on page 86, in a section headed "Death Masks.")

The man is tall in his room
his space chosen in the world
between the ceiling and the floor.

The people are expected
to prove his words
with their lost lives.

This is a man
by the sea's witless beauty
wholly bound,

His speech locked
in the early worship, his eye
burned in the dead light of stars.

The worn shell
repeats the tide: but briefly
at the ear of the people.

The war is a bee
in a distant hive; yet peace
yearned for is beyond this room.

He longs for the warmth
of waters; but no certain mother
is among the moving weeds.

He turns to the last solid,
the immobile rock: the child
adores its permanent night.

Familiar to him
the weight upon the eyes,
and welcome.

This is the mask
assumed at birth, the child's wish,
the whole man's desire.

In these few decades
the helpless singers passed
from ivory to stone.

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THE CLEFT AXEMAN

by H. Arthur Klein

(On reading, 1948, Jeffers' The Double Axe)

Here is again the splendid shell of strength
Grown hollower, ringing dead and rotten,
But evoking old magic in its dulled reverberation.

Here is again decayed and doomed magnificence;
Here is the sidelong-staring inhumanist and tormented seer.

What does he see?

Why, look: himself, himself alone.
Strands of recognition worm now into the light
Out of his tangled wreckage of rejections.

With heavier and slowing tread, he pursues
What he himself most lacks and wants.
This deep and sickened spirit seeks out power,
Prostrates himself before it -- but not in silence.

Within the narrow stone walls he has raised
And locked inside the trembling self of pseudo-stone
He makes symbolic sacrifice -- to power.

Perishable paper, page upon page, takes symbols that are prayers . . .
Prayers to power, blind praise, abject adulation.

To power -- all to power. To force. To violence. To living
death.

In endless and compelling variation
He offers attributes of life -- to unlife.

What Poe feared in fascination, he cries out for--
Premature death. The burial may wait.

Paralyzed, inhuman are his parables now;
Monstrous images stride through them
With nightmare steps: all stone, no flesh:
Across the confines of his coastal world.

Waves shatter on that continent-ending shore,
Unending breakers, wearing down great rocks,
Grinding the boulders, pebbling the stones,
Powdering to sand, grain by small grain, against itself.

He too grinds himself in spirit, but his tides are locked:
Rigid, immobile, no gather, no recover, no release.

This agonized lord of language and images
Imagines himself marked by stoic silence
And timeless, stonelike reserve.

Maker and manipulator of tormented puppets --
Blood-gorged, pulsating, anthropoid dolls -
He insists on his achieved indifference to men . . .

Yet what survives of all this essence, without audience?
How could his thunder roll, lacking human echoes?

Aging word-wizard of the West,
He walks out, shouting after power,
Prostrates himself before it, and calls it
The wild inhuman beauty of our world.

His words, in strained and pained configurations
Lose ever more of former music
Yet still must find their way to men.

Gulls and cormorants cannot read;
Rocks and coastal peaks will not attend;
Nor the life-spawning sea and the enormous night.

So he must seek to woo unlife and unsense
With this, most human and most aware
Of all the means that men call "art."

Is it a wonder then
That distaste rushes out, overwhelming all
Like swash of winter waves threshing the sands,
The white and granite-powdered sands of Carmel Bay?

And that he insists on his indifference
In shriller, starker tones,
While leaner and less living become his verses?

They somber like a moonless night
Underlaid with dense clouds:
Frigid and sharp like winter rains of whipped sleet.

The lift is gone: the thrust alone remains.
Slow and pounding tolls the pulse. The blood moves
Thicker, colder, heavier . . .

Those wings that soared, rise no more.
They beat and dribble in the dust
And never take the sky. Earthbound,
Not airborne now, he lurches on.
Only the dragging doomed march remains.

But -- powerful the tread
Pounds like a funeral music
Made for one never born
Yet somehow not yet dead.

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TO ROBINSON JEFFERS

Unendurable ocean that presses against the mind
of a man granitic
And washes his words on its tides to a boggling world:
Words spelled from the lives of sickly mortals
Whose struggles against the harshness of this rugged coast
Have left them weak;
Word forms chiseled from the hard cold rock
Or scooped with cupped hands from the pools of sea-water
In shade-still coves;
And evening phrases left behind by the setting sun
To spill in colors from the pen of Jeffers.
But the man remains, standing above the sea, remote,
Worn slightly by the wash, but adamant.

--- M. B. B.