



Published quarterly by the Robinson Jeffers Committee of
Occidental College, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles,
California 90041. Editor: Melba Berry Bennett.

Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

Number 21

April, 1968

If you have not received a catalogue of spring publications from the Johns Hopkins Press, by all means send for one. It lists Ann Ridgeway's forthcoming book The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers (\$10.95), with a foreword by Mark Van Doren and photographs by Leigh Weiner. The cover of the catalogue presents an excellent photograph of Jeffers, and, included in a description of The Letters is a facsimile of a letter R. J. wrote to Van Doren, and a photograph of the Jo Davidson bust. [Note: Johns Hopkins Press is planning to send prospectuses about the book, scheduled for June publication, to all persons receiving the Robinson Jeffers Newsletter.]

The publisher refers to the sign on the gate to Tor House: "Not at Home." It may interest you to know that your editor has this little weather-worn board, through the generosity of Ted Lilienthal. On one side, R. J. has crudely printed "NOT AT HOME," with his signature; on the reverse side, he has printed "NOT AT HOME BEFORE 4 P.M." The lettering is in black, and the board painted in gray - the color of the boulders of which Tor House and Hawk Tower were built.

A news item of interest is the return of Lee and Donnan Jeffers from Ireland. They are again in residence at Tor House.

The Labyrinth Theatre group, under the direction of Eric Vaughan, continues with their excellent Jeffers programs in the San Francisco area. In February they gave seven readings in Berkeley, and in March presented three at the University of San Francisco.

In our Christmas mail we received a beautiful greeting from the Gleeson Library Associates, a reprint of Jeffers' "Only an Hour" and a reproduction of Una's silver unicorn brooch.

We have just received the first Slovakian translation of Jeffers' poems Prirodzena Hudba. The book, beautifully presented, includes selections from The Beginning and the End and Selected Poetry as well as Kamil Bednář's sketch on R. J., translated from Czech into Slovak.

This month's contribution to our Newsletter is a linguistic analysis of R. J.'s "Shine, Perishing Republic," written by Mr. Robert F. Steuding. Mr. Steuding is a member of the department of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University.

[Note: For web publication, all instances of "stanza" have been replaced with "line" in Mr. Steuding's article.]

Intensification of Meaning in "Shine, Perishing Republic":
A Linguistic Analysis

Robert F. Steuding

In his poem "Shine, Perishing Republic" Robinson Jeffers has bent syntax to his will, turned nouns into verbs, and loaded his sentences with assonance, consonance, dramatic repetitions and supra-segmental features. In short, Jeffers has used language to its utmost possibilities. One aspect of this poem's greatness lies in Jeffers' artistic control and use of these elements in the creation and intensification of the poem's meaning. A close linguistic analysis of the poem should reveal this feature and thus engender a greater understanding and appreciation of this work.

First a general word about "Shine, Perishing Republic." The mood of the poem is somber, while the tone is both cutting and mournful. Its theme is negative and deterministic. America in the view of Jeffers, is perishing because of internal corruption; the poet sounds its death knell and sardonically criticizes those responsible for the decay.

In the first three lines of the poem, Jeffers states this main theme. A compound adverbial phrase in lines one and two subordinated by the main clause in line three comprises this first syntactical unit. With the use of a metaphor, Jeffers compares corrupt America to a molten blob. It is a vulgar "mould . . . , heavily thickening to empire . . ." (italics mine). To produce this comparison and to intensify the reader's psychological realization of the despicable state in which the republic exists, Jeffers has carefully chosen the word "thickening." This term, negatively charged in this instance, not only conveys the sense of what the mould (America) is doing--that is, omnivorously devouring material possessions--but also, with the slow, measured pronunciation of the voiced apico-dental fricative [ð], recreates in the reader the sensation of tangible thickness, thus intensifying the meaning in this line. Onomatopoeia, combined with the tense voiceless bilabial stop [p] and the more relaxed voiceless apico-alveolar sibilant [s], is also used in the second line to relate the brief but dramatic "pop" of ineffective protest before it "sighs out" in a long deflated hiss. Here again, sound intensifies meaning.

Jeffers' artistic control of language for effect is also evidenced in his use of the voiced bilabial nasal [m]. It is employed three times in the second line, "molten mass . . . and the mass hardens" (italics mine). The hypnotic quality of the resonant hum, coupled with the repetition of "mass," creates a somber mood and intensifies the mesmerizing effect of the inevitable ossification of American society.

Metaphor is again used to convey the poem's main theme. In line three, a metaphor compares the republic to a dying flower. Within the metaphor, however, linguistic elements are operating. "Flower" is repeated twice, thus assigning early America such vivacious characteristics as life and beauty. In contrast, Jeffers emphasizes the reality of the contemporary situation with the use of consonance. Here, its use sets up a deterministic rhythm like the pounding of a funeral drum. The repetition of the voiceless dental fricative [f] in the words "flower," "fades," "fruit," and "flower" (italics mine) almost forces the reader to accept the inevitability of the decay and destruction of the republic. Also, the repetition of

the voiced and voiceless apico-alveolar sibilants [s] and [z] in the words "sadly smiling," "fades," and "rots" (italics mine) produces a strident sound and adds a sardonic quality to Jeffers' forceful premonstration.

Jeffers' artistic departure from the normal order of syntax in line three produces a paradox which intensifies the sardonic quality of the poem. By placing the adverb "sadly" before instead of after "smiling," he creates a verbal which requires a juncture after it, necessarily placing obligatory stress on "smiling." In this way, the idea of smiling about the decay of the republic is emphasized over the poet's more expected sadness. This reversal creates an apparent semantic contradiction. When one is sad, he does not usually smile. The reader, however, is made to realize by this syntactical maneuvering that the poet distains the corrupted republic and awaits with great expectation its inevitable decay and fall. This striking position, coupled with the hissing sound of the sibilant continued in these phrases, produces an unnerving effect on the reader.

Line four also evidences the departure of Jeffers' creative mind from the conventional in his creation of this poem. In this syntactic unit, Jeffers uses unconventional punctuation to good advantage. His seeming misuse of punctuation causes the perceptive reader to pause and think: Jeffers has used conventional punctuation throughout the poem. Why, then, should this line be different? It must have central significance, one decides. Certainly this is the case, since Jeffers' intended unconventional use of punctuation enables this line to perform a double syntactic function. In this line, Jeffers has used the semi-colon to separate what appear to be phrases. However, he has intended these apparent phrases to have clausal significance. Consequently he has not used the semi-colon as a conventional punctuation mark but as a diacritic of absolute modification. This liberty enables line four to produce an all-important break in the poem--the pause of the classical logician. In its strategic position in the poem, set off as it is, this line accomplishes a function similar to that of the syllogism in logic. It points out that if what has been said in lines one, two and three is granted, then all that is related in the rest of the poem must inevitably follow. Thus, through the unconventional use of the semi-colon, Jeffers has created a dramatic pause in the poem in which an individual line can make comment on all that has been said and will be said in the poem. In this way, the meaning of the poem is clearly expressed and emphasized.

In the next syntactical unit, composed of lines five and six, Jeffers has used word repetition to convey and intensify meaning. By repeating the word "haste," using it first as a noun and again as a verb, Jeffers plays on this important word and emphasizes the effect on the republic of society's corruption. It speeds up the process of decay. Continuing this idea, he likens the quick, "flash-in-the-pan" life of American society to a meteor which is seen for only a second in its brilliant but short-lived dash across the sky. To create its speed on the phonological level, Jeffers uses consonance. Eight sibilants (voiceless apico-alveolar [s] and frontal-palatal [ʃ]) are used in this syntactic unit: "stubbornly long or suddenly a mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains: shine, perishing republic" (italics mine). These sibilants are pronounced rapidly, and the hissing sound they produce recreates a sound similar to the rushing noise of a fast moving body. Assonance is also effectively used in this unit. Back vowels in such words as "long" [ɔ], "mortal" [ɔ], and "or" [ɔ] joined with retracting diphthongs in lines seven, eight, and ten in the words "caught" [ɔw], "walked" [ɔw], and "mountains" [æw] give the poem a mournful, elegiac quality in keeping with the inevitable destruction of a republic. (Jeffers was a Greek schol-

ar, and thus was quite familiar with this linguistic technique.) Contrasted with the frontal consonants mentioned above, these vowels and diphthongs produce the perfect correlation and fusion of meaning and sound. The republic perishes with appropriate wailing; the resulting mood developed again creates a striking dramatic effect on the reader.

Supra-segmental features are also used by Jeffers to convey and intensify meaning in the poem. In this respect, punctuation is again significant. Three colons, in this syntactic unit, are employed to make a comment on a comment of a comment on an original comment--to be confusedly specific. However, in the poem something more than commentation is achieved by using the colon. For the colon symbolizes, as we know, the intended intonation of the reader's voice. Thus, it affects meaning. Before each colon the intonation falls. A statement has been made, although formal comment will follow. Therefore, with the falling pitch, there is also obligatory juncture and primary stress. Thus, with the pause and stress, the words which carry the more important semantic significance to the poem--"decay," "splendor," and "mountains"--are emphasized. "Decay" is the state in which the poet finds the republic. The brilliant but short-lived "splendor" of the meteor is also indicative of the longevity of the republic. And this bad condition is contrasted to the permanence and natural goodness of the "mountains," the place to which an individual may retreat to escape corruption. Also, the juncture before and after "shine" places stress on "shine," thus pointing out emphatically that the dying republic should extinguish itself in its own meteor-like flash.

In line nine, the poet implies that man is the source of corruption in the republic. Thus, he cautions his boys (possibly Jeffers' sons Garth and Donnan) not to love man too much. To make his cautioning more emphatic, Jeffers has employed the seldom-used double appositive. As he says in these two noun clusters, love of man can be a "clever servant," when controlled and used to advantage. But if the situation is reversed and love of man takes command, it can be an "insufferable master." To portray the value and the corrupting ability of love of man, Jeffers has made use of this bit of unconventional syntax; thus again conveying and intensifying meaning at the same time.

Supra-segmental, phonetic, and semantic features combine in the last line to culminate the poem and to produce a final and permanent shocking effect on the reader. After a dash, which requires obligatory juncture and primary stress on the word following, and before a comma, which also affects a pause after the word, Jeffers has inserted a most perfect piece of diction. On the supra-segmental level this word is stressed heavily. Thus, the reader dwells on it. Yet, its meaning is also striking. "God," Jeffers points out, has been trapped by his love of man. And Christ, the reader realizes, was killed because he was not "moderate" in his love of man. On the phonetic level, also, "God" is a well-chosen word. The mournfully protracted sound of the low central unrounded vowel [a] intensifies the semantic realization of the reader that even God has perished because of the corruption the poem bewails. Surely, then, the reader realizes, the republic will inevitably fall. Thus, through the interaction of these three features, Jeffers has dramatically informed the reader of the corruption which exists in the republic and possibly shocked him into a full realization of its inevitable consequences.

"Shine, Perishing Republic," then, with its perfect correlation of phonological, supra-segmental, semantic, and syntactical features in the creation and intensification of meaning, is a work of supreme craftsmanship and singular greatness.