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Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

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NEWS AND NOTES

THE BEACH BOYS have recorded an arrangement of Jeffers' poem "The Beaks of Eagles" within the three part section, "California Saga," of their recent release Beach Boys Holland. The music and additional words are by Alan and Lynda Jardine, the narration by Mike Love and Alan Jardine. Recorded in Baambrugge, The. Netherlands, it is distributed by Warner Brothers Inc. (4000 Warner Blvd., Burbank, Ca., 91505).

AN ORIGINAL WOODCUT by Robert Baddock is available as a poster celebrating Jeffers as artist. In black on rose-beige, it depicts the poet's head with hawk wings and tail beneath an eclipsed sun in a stormy sky above a dark ocean. The flight motif suggests parallels of Jeffers and Daedalus. Above and below the woodcut are positioned the first five lines of Jeffers' poem "Still the Mind Smiles." This is fourth in a series of ten author broadsides by the Druid Press, Berkeley. It was printed in an edition of 250 copies of which 50 are numbered and signed by the artist. Copyright 1972.

THE SCRIMSHAW PRESS (San Francisco) has ordered a reprinting of Horace Lyon's Jeffers Country--500 clothbound and 4,500 paperbound (a thousand more than the first printing).

"PLACE FOR NO STORY" (sic; title from Jeffers' poem) is currently running as an hour special on educational television. It is billed as an "Aerial tour of California, from Mt. Shasta, redwood forests and logging camps in the north to Los Angeles, Malibu, Bel-Air and Long Beach in the south. Cinematic portrait

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of varied coastline and topography doubles as ecological documentary telling about man's attitudes and relationship to his environment." The film begins with a hawk over Carmel, moves through the various anomalies of the "continent's end"--hovering over Disneyland, San Onofre, etc., and superimposes musical background and (sometimes) ironic interview over the visual part.

AIR CALIFORNIA featured the Robinson Jeffers stamp on its January inflight magazine to illustrate an article on stamps celebrating California.

KAMIL BEDNÁŘ, Jeffers' Czech translator, is the subject of a beautiful bronze medal by Lumir Sindelar (width 21 cm., weight 5 lbs.). The original adorns Bednář's gravestone—a beautiful work, expressing the craft and sorrow in the man. A quote from one of his poems appears on it: "My fate was the word."

JEFFERS' "MEDEA" in the Czech translation of Kamil Bednář has been playing (February, 1974) in the Chamber Theatre of Prague. As portrayed in the handsomely printed theater programme, the set looks especially tastefully done, and the costumes are obviously the work of an appropriately talented designer. The lead role is taken by Irena Kacirkova. Also on the programme are photos of Jeffers, Bednář, Kaul Svoboda director, and actress Kacirkova. A large tricolor poster of Medea is used to advertise the play.

* * * * *

TWO REVIEWS: EVERSON ON JEFFERS

The Alpine Christ and Other Poems by Robinson Jeffers (Cayucos Press, 1973, 200 pages). Preface, Introduction, Afterword, and Notes on the Poems by William Everson.

Everson's Preface establishes the justification for printing the poems (most of which Jeffers decided against publishing)--as a bridging of the transitional years by presenting available materials in viable sequence structured so that the creative evolution is emphasized.

His twenty page Introduction comes out of a daylong reflection and synthesis--written from a cabin on Long Ridge by Bixby Creek. Everson first notes three parts into which the mostly unpublished material can be divided: the post-Californians period (including "The Alpine Christ"), the crisis period of America's entry into the war (centering on "Mal Paso Bridge"), and the post-war period leading up to Tamar. He details his fruitless search for "Peacock Ranch," "first of the powerful narratives of violence that were to become the singular Jeffers forte." Everson then relates Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" to "The Alpine Christ" explaining why Jeffers would prefer Shelley's version over Aeschylus's--the real hero being Demogorgon, primal power who effects the overthrow of the tyrant Jupiter. Jeffers' character Manual (Prometheus) is not liberated but "saddled with the immense responsibility of sustaining universal value alone." Everson finds the background of "The Alpine Christ" to be not Greek but Old Testament--Book of Job. In Jeffers' drama a new lease is accorded Satan to try mankind and he stirs up trouble in the Balkans which erupts into the First World War. Christ is reincarnated as a half-witted deaf-mute Manual Rüegg, to save mankind. In their encounter in the Alps, Satan is defeated, but the world is so shaken by the

encounter that victory goes to Fate alone. The Christ figure, without God, can only reassert the Christian ethic as a sort of residual value. Everson notes here the early perfecting of the semi-dramatic genre by Jeffers--later used so effectively in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," "At the Birth of an Age," etc. He notes Jeffers' intense involvement in contemporary affairs as revealed in the poem (which is full of political figures)--a specificity characteristic of Jeffers at time of war. He concludes from the intensity of the work that Jeffers' intellectual awakening must be "moved back several years."

Everson feels that the significance of "The Alpine Christ" in Jeffers' creative development lies in the deep identification between his father's death and the death of civilized values in World War I. Intellectually the erosion of Jeffers' belief in a personal god had already taken place, but this poem dramatizes the emotional realization and impact of that loss of faith. Even Jeffers' later downplay of the poem to Friede (letter of 12 March 1927) points up the effect of the war on his psyche and the close identification he still had with Christianity and the paternal image. Everson finds four strands relating the later poems in Californians to the poems of the Alpine Christ volume: the theme of the lost father and collapse of ethical values, tentative attempts at alternative values, prolongation of the traditional narrative form, and fascination with the new science of flight (a hope for new life on distant planets). He locates the writing of the title poem in Jeffers' return to Pasadena in 1916 with Una for the birth of the twins. There he was caught up in reminders of his father, his mother's presence, and his own approaching paternity--and in the more and more desperate brutality and carnage of the war as it was revealing itself.

In an Afterword Everson sets aside "Prometheus Unbound" as too unsubstantial an inspiration for "The Alpine Christ" and, taking a hint from a remark of Dr. Carpenter, finds in Thomas Hardy's "Dynasts" a much more persuasive source. He convincingly points out their striking parallels in theme and structure and then speculates why Jeffers would indeed be hesitant to make public his debt.

In a final two pages of "Notes on the Poems" Everson does the reader the practical service of placing the nine poems of the volume in what contexts can be established, commenting on their dating, relation to other poems, their revelation of the artist amidst frustration and partial solution, and the significance of imagery and emergence of themes.

R.J.B.

Robinson Jeffers by William Everson (Modern American Criticism Series, a 26 minute cassette, Order #826, Everett/Edwards, Deland, Florida).

This cassette is incredibly compressed and immensely rewarding in its insights. Everson approaches Jeffers as an "aboriginal artist," a break, in the cultural continuum. He sees Jeffers as facing the same modern existential world as Hemingway and Faulkner--a world which is incapable of tragedy and which both dwarfs man by its astronomic scale and unhinges him by its moral uncertainty. Jeffers is seen as unique in his religious solution, especially in his aesthetic strategy of liberating the godhead through violence. Everson sees Jeffers' lyrics as less problematic, as short meditations on the narratives they accompany. The anguish of the narratives, however, is felt intensely; human violence is made to

mediate the violence of nature and of the galactic system. Everson sees Emerson and Whitman as seeking to overcome evil by transcending it, Jeffers as groping to its heart, seeking resurrection in its very violence. Man's "original sin" is to Jeffers the turning from this violent cosmic beauty and creating civilization to screen that reality, "placating the self with softness and egocentricity"; salvation is outward. Everson sees Jeffers as no negator; indeed he recognizes marks of the Christian mystic in him, embracing the cross in order to enter the illimitable God. And yet the poet is more than mystic; he must use material content to externalize his vision; he must wrest the universal from the particulars of language.

The effect of the taped human voice (Everson's) is electrifying and all-involving. This review does it scant justice. The phrases echo after the cassette is finished. The listener has taken part in an exploration and discovery of a poet by a poet, both equally masters.

R. J. B.

* * * * *

T. S. ELIOT AND ROBINSON JEFFERS: A NOTE

Although they were roughly contemporaneous and faced the same disintegrating world, there are very few links between the careers or lives of two great American poets, Jeffers and Eliot. Jeffers' Selected Letters yields only two references to Eliot--one in a letter to Harriet Monroe ("T. S. Eliot seems to me not an American poet, but almost the only interesting English one"), the second in a July, 1937 letter to Frederic Carpenter, about power residing with the "destroyers" (in thought and in literature) and about the creative impulse as destroyer, culminating an age and preparing for another. He saw some writers as repenting and thus losing their creative power and significance ("One could multiply instances, even down to T. S. Eliot but I'll not go on"). In Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years Jeffers remarks: "The hypothetical great poet would break simply away from the directions that are fashionable in contemporary poetic literature. He would understand that Rimbaud was a young man of startling genius but not to be imitated; and that the 'Waste Land' though one of the finest poems of this century and surely the most influential, marks the close of a literary dynasty and not the beginning." It may or may not be significant that among the thousands of books preserved in the Tor House library (see RJN, No. 28) not one represents Eliot.

It is interesting, therefore, to hear Eliot speaking with like respect but more affirmatively of Jeffers. The following are some excerpts from William T. Levy's book Affectionatel Yours, T. S. Eliot: The Story of a Friendship, 1947-1965 (Lippincott, 1968), a grouping of seventy letters from Eliot to Levy along with notes taken from their meetings. From Levy's first meeting with Eliot in 1944:

"We talked about . . . Robinson Jeffers and his poems on Ireland."

From a later meeting:

"I showed Tom and Valerie the manuscript of Robinson Jeffers' poem 'Oh, Lovely Rock.' Jeffers, a friend, had sent it to me the year before.

I thought the Eliots would be interested in the three or four false starts on paper before Jeffers arrived at the final version. An individual word would be crossed out again and again in the search for the right word. Tom put on his glasses and questioned me about some of the handwriting that was hard to decipher. I handed him a printed copy of the final poem to put alongside it. As I expected, Tom was engrossed with the revisions. 'This is an extraordinary view into the creative process,' he commented. 'I don't work this way. I usually end up with a single clean copy, each of the other copies having been a retyping of the previous one, which had been thrown away. I can see this would be of real interest to scholars.'

Later, in 1962, Eliot commented:

"We were sorry to hear of Jeffers' death." Levy continues: "I wrote a tribute to Robinson Jeffers in the 'Speaking of Books' column in the New York Times Book Review and Tom commented: 'I like your piece about Robinson Jeffers. It is curious that he seems to have had less adulation than other poets whom I find less interesting. Jeffers and Conrad Aiken have never been adequately appreciated'"

R.J.B.

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DISTANCING IN JEFFERS' LYRICS

Robert Brophy

It is an unfortunate fact that Robinson Jeffers is often represented in anthologies by a haphazard assortment of lyrics which give a very limited and sometimes lethal notion of his philosophy and art. Most potent of these combinations is one that juxtaposes "Original Sin" and "The Inquisitors," thereby characterizing the poet, whether through ignorance or sly malice, as an angry misanthrope.

Jeffers frequently emphasizes the prophetic role into which his temperament and vision urged him. Prophets typically do not pull their punches (see the three major and twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament); they see the terrible doom of an idolatrous, self-satisfied, effete, and unjust establishment, and speak without any tempering qualifications. The word "speak" understates it; as Flannery O'Connor says in her own self-definition as prophet: To the deaf you must shout; For the blind you must write in huge letters.

But prophets are not all vituperation and hyperbole. The first of the literary prophets of the Old Testament is a prime example; Isaiah is often presented by exegetes and theologians as three voiced. To the "fat cats" who rule Judah just before the fall of Jerusalem and who crush the poor while glorying in their correctness of ritual form, he is excoriating. But to the fallen and dispossessed Judah (Chapters 40 to 50) he gives comfort and hope, and (thirdly) to the returnees from exile (Chapters 50 to 55) he speaks oracles of reconciliation--ways by which they might put things together again.

It seems just and even urgent that Jeffers be listened to in a parallel way--not that his audience has gone through distinct stages marked by affluence, degradation, and recovery, but that these "voices" approximate three moods which interlace all his poetry, answering three needs which may be operative simultaneously within the nation. These moods correspond to three "distances" which Jeffers takes from his subject matter. In the first grouping (e.g., "Summer Holiday," "Original Sin," "The Trap," etc.) the poet may be imagined as responding close-up. The voice is harsh; the statement, unrelieved; the resolution, ungiven. "I would rather / Be a worm in a wild apple than a son of man." In other poems, equally prophetic (e.g., "Apology for Bad Dreams," "Contemplation of the Sword," "Woodrow Wilson," "A Little Scraping," etc.), the poet finds himself in a middle ground--reacting with horror, disgust, anger, embarrassment but using the poem to work out an answer. "Apology for Bad Dreams" is an excellent example: The sadism of the woman and boy beating the horse is an evil to be reconciled with the beauty of landscape and sundown. Jeffers accomplishes this in the second strophe by exploring the proposition that beauty demands proportionate violence (having already begun the reconciliation in the first strophe's imagery by paralleling human gesture with the scene's dynamism in "beat," "cut," "purple," etc.). As unrelieved as it first may seem, even "Margrave" has its reconciliation (God must have his bad dreams and human life is a necessary experiment). In a third set of poems ("Natural Music," "The Answer," "Still the Mind Smiles," etc.) Jeffers begins with a stance of reconciliation, one in which he is far-distanced emotionally from his material. In "Natural Music" for instance, we are told that as ocean and stream "from different throats intone one language" so war and famine are voices "clean as a child's."

This distinction of stances or distances is crucial in hearing the poet in his complexity. It neither represents Jeffers in any progression toward mellowness nor does it reflect any changes in the public condition. Indeed it may at times simply reflect the poet in different moods--caught close-up in anger or sardonic rejection, troubled but working at acceptance, or philosophically turning to confront an evil which must be dealt with but which is not crowding his psyche. On the other hand, it may reflect a threefold stance, deliberately chosen and purposely varied, which speaks in all seasons and touches all hearts.

* * * * *

"BIRTH-DUES": AN EXPLICATION

Stephen E. Pascoe

Robinson Jeffers' short lyric "Birth-Dues" is a very personal poem, an expression of his most fundamental attitudes and ideas. It expresses his personal feelings about humanity in general, and his own role in life, and gives his personal theology. The personal feeling he communicates is indignation and resigned bitterness about the fact that few people can, or will even try to, recognize the truth of the prophetic vision which it is his role in life to articulate through poetry. His theology is about God being the reality which so far transcends egotistical concerns, and is such a basic fact of life, that it can never be fought or escaped but only loved. He concludes that a loving attitude toward reality, which includes both pleasure

and pain, is the stance which will bring peace in life. This knowledge gives him a measure of peace but at the same time alienates him from society, which does not understand his wisdom. The first stanza gives Jeffers' thoughts on joy, pleasure and pain. He says that "Joy is a trick in the air; pleasure is merely contemptible, the dangled / Carrot the ass follows to market or precipice." That joy is a "trick in the air" seems to mean that it is like a tricky dive from a diving board or the deceptive move of a bird flying. Such tricks may be emotionally satisfying because they involve temporary exuberance, but at the same time they trick people into believing that feelings of joy are all-important and should be pursued as the primary goal of life. Jeffers characterizes pleasure as contemptible, and shows why with the image of carrot and ass. To him it is asinine because when one pursues pleasure as an end in itself the abstract ideal of pleasure leads the seeker, who becomes compelled to blindly follow his desires, to the market to buy gratification or even to court disaster. Jeffers gives his counterpoint to the delusive search for pleasure in the next sentence: "But limitary pain -- the rock under the tower and the hewn coping / That takes thunder at the head of the turret -- / Terrible and real." This sentence gives both an image and an example of Jeffers' point of view. The image of rock and coping is an image of great natural strength, strength to endure the painful storms that are always part of life. Part of this image is the idea that the rock and coping can shed the storm's furies because of their strength. It is an example of his vision because he merely states that "limitary pain" is "terrible and real." His statement is without adornment or excuse as an explanation of reality because from a prophetic point of view reality is beyond "normal" human conceptions of good and evil; it just is, like Yahweh in the Old Testament. Included here is the idea that pain is limited, suggesting that it can be overcome. He concludes the first stanza with an image of false prophecy: "Therefore a mindless dervish carving himself / With knives will seem to have conquered the world." A dervish is a member of any of various Moslem orders taking vows of austerity and poverty, but this particular image is of escape from pain. The dervish seems to have conquered the world because he seems beyond fear of pain and death. But he is mindless because he must lose touch with reality in order to do his trick. So, he is only indulging in a display to impress people and escaping pain in a perverse way. The dervish escapes pain, but the true prophet conquers it. The irony of this image is that the dervish will be more impressive to humanity than a true prophet because he puts on a dramatic display.

The middle and concluding stanzas are basically further explication of the ideas and attitudes Jeffers presents in the images of the first stanza. The middle stanza is an explanation of his theology. He says that "The world's God is treacherous and full of unreason; a torturer, but also / The only foundation and the only fountain" This sentence is another example of Jeffers' prophetic point of view because it presents reality as something which both includes and transcends the contradictions of evil (treachery, unreason and torture) and good (foundation and fountain). The rest of this stanza presents different human approaches to the God who is reality: "Who fights him eats his own flesh and perishes of hunger; who hides in the grave to escape him is dead; who falls in love with the God is washed clean of death desired and of death dreaded." So, from Jeffers' point of view, to fight seeing reality (presumably by looking only for the "good" things in life) leads to self-destruction, because one cannot fight life itself and still live; to commit suicide rather than face reality

is only escape and needless death; to accept a philosophy which denies reality in hopes of finding some "Nirvana" (the Indian Recession) is childish and also leads to self-destruction; but the one who falls in love with the God who is the reality of this world will be able to see beyond good and evil, and so will be "washed clean" in the "only fountain" that can renew life. There are several implicit ideas in this theological stanza. First is that there is no escape from reality because it is "That Which Is," the essence and ground of being. Second is that people always have an overbearing desire to escape reality, especially the reality of death, by searching only for the joy and pleasure in life. Third is that learning to love reality brings acceptance of pain and death, consequent release from desire for personal immortality, and from fear of the fact that death is inevitable. In other words, people are always aware that death is inescapable but they try to hide that fact from themselves by pushing it into the subconscious. Realizing death consciously, as the prophet who falls in love with God does, releases one from the self-imposed contradiction of knowing one truth but trying to mentally construct, believe in and live by another. This realization brings acceptance of personal death because it also brings reconciliation with God, the reality that encompasses and controls all living things.

The concluding stanza expresses Jeffers' most personal feelings about himself and humanity. Carrying on from the end of the second stanza, he says of the one "who falls in love with the God" that "He has joy, but joy is a trick in the air; and pleasure, but pleasure is contemptible; / And peace; and is based on solidier than pain." The irony here is that the prophet has the joy and pleasure that others seek but he sees joy and pleasure for what they really are, contemptible and tricky. Joy and pleasure are tricky and contemptible because they never last. Whenever the seeker finds them he will soon lose them, which will bring him sorrow and pain, starting him again on his vicious-circle search. A prophet and seer has gone beyond childish desires and has found the peace of reconciliation with reality. His life is on a solidier base than the pain which is necessarily the fate of pleasure seekers. They cannot conquer pain because they are always trying to escape from it. They are limited to the vicious circle, but "He has broken boundaries a little and that will estrange him; he is monstrous, but not / To the measure of the God. . . ." He is strange and monstrous to "normal" people because he seems inhuman to them, caring nothing for the joys and pleasures that are their whole life. However, he sees that God is greater than all human conceptions or labels, and is at peace with God because he knows his place in the totality of things. Jeffers concludes with the poem's most personal statement: "But I having told you -- / However I suppose that few in the world have energy to hear effectively -- / Have paid my birth-dues; am quits with the people." By articulating his truth in the poem he has fulfilled the obligation to instruct and help mankind that possessing a prophetic vision entails. He knows that few people will hear his message effectively because, ironically, they are expending too much energy in their delusive search for joy and pleasure. This knowledge, though, is just another aspect of his view of reality, and so his mood is not wrath about the fact that few will hear, but rather indignation and resigned bitterness. He is "quits with the people" primarily in the sense that he will not live their ignorant way because he is beyond fear and pity. He is doing what he can to save mankind by writing poetry and will no longer feel responsible for the ignorance and consequent suffering of people who will not or cannot see the truth.

The title of "Birth-Dues" introduces the mood by the connotation of "dues" as an unpleasant obligation, a debt required by circumstances beyond one's control in this case. The dues incurred by being born can be the obligation to take a prophetic role in life or the obligation to express his prophetic vision, or both. The irony is that there are these obligations, which will inevitably be misunderstood or ignored but must still be fulfilled. Like "Fog," this poem is primarily about Jeffers' prophetic vision because it is an example and explication of that vision. It is also about the natural strength inherent in life, the difference between false and true prophets, the reality beyond human ideas of good and evil which is God, the different ways people react to reality, the self-destructive result of delusive struggles for joy and pleasure, the necessity of accepting the fact of personal death, the ironic difference between selfishness and love of God, the estrangement between prophets and those they feel obligated to help, and the reaction this causes in prophets in general and Jeffers in particular. The poem expresses both Jeffers' theology and personal feelings, so there are literal, psychological, metaphysical, mystical and ritualistic levels of meaning. He speaks with the voices of prophet, seer, teacher, mystic, philosopher, and even as the individual who happens to be prophetic poet, mostly ignored by people who are still essentially like himself. The dominant imagery of the poem as a whole is "all-inclusiveness." That is, it includes so many different levels of meaning and personae that it becomes an image of prophetic vision, seeing the reality of both pleasure and pain and thereby gaining a stronger, more objective view of life. Key images are joy as a "trick in the air" to show joy's tricky nature and effect, "the dangled carrot the ass follows" to show the nature of blind selfishness, "the rock under the tower and the hewn coping" to exemplify enduring strength before life's storms, "a mindless dervish carving himself with knives" to show the nature of false prophets and the recognition they achieve, "The world's God" who is "a torturer but also / The only foundation and the only fountain" to show the transcendent nature of the reality the true prophet knows, and "broken boundaries" to show the difference between the point of view of true prophets and "normal" people. The diction is simple but harsh enough to communicate Jeffers' vision of the importance of pain and death, and to express his mood. The structure is interesting. The first stanza contains the only visual images in the whole poem. The second stanza is phrased generally and philosophically, an example of the objectivity that the words express. The third stanza continues with the philosophical phrasing but stops abruptly, as though Jeffers had suddenly tired of objectivity. He concludes the poem emotionally and abruptly, in effect asking "What's the use?" The structure and development bring out two sides of Jeffers, one philosophical who writes theology and the other emotional who writes poetry. The effect is to make the poem seem first just an expression of bitterness, and later an expression of prophetic vision. He uses no rhyme but does use alliteration. He makes good use of parallelism and repetition, especially in the second stanza with repetitions of "who" and by repeating "joy is a trick" and "pleasure is contemptible" at the beginning of the third stanza. One unresolved problem is what Jeffers fully means by the abstract words "joy" and "pleasure," because he characterizes their abstract nature rather than giving examples from life. More visual images might help that, but the poem still works well as an expression of Jeffers' prophetic vision because the visual images of the first stanza catch a reader's attention, the more philosophical middle part explains his underlying theology, and the abrupt

conclusion expresses the intensity of his feelings, ending the poem with a sense of strong emotion truthfully communicated. "Birth-Dues" communicates on both emotional and intellectual levels Jeffers' prophetic vision, that of the wise man who, being conscious of both pain's and pleasure's reality, is fully conscious.

* * * * *

THE WORLD-AS-GOD-AS-NET IN JEFFERS' UNPUBLISHED POEM "OH HAPPY ASTRONOMER"

Robert Ian Scott

The Tor House Collection at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin includes an undated one-page manuscript catalogued as "Oh Happy Astronomer." It reads

~~We turn away from ourselves, we cannot bear ourselves,~~ x x (1)

Weakness and filth. Therefore we turn away from

ourselves--to what? To our neighbor's

Weakness and filth? Or to politics, to weakness and filth

On a world scale? Landscape, I say, is better;

look up to the mountains and contemplate

The endless ocean; water and rock will make clean and glad

All that man soiled. ~~Or even higher Oh happy~~

~~astronomer the stars and God.~~

Humanity was latent in them,

spewed it out

and they ~~produced it,~~ They are ~~quite~~

quit of it.

gaze at the manless glory, the

~~All~~ Or higher--O happy astronomer--~~worship the inhuman stars.~~

The inhuman stars, the fire-net that has the earth

in its meshes but is ~~guiltless~~ [^]guiltless guiltless of man. (2)

Oh Happy Astronomer (3)

~~Oh happy earth! Why did you do it? What demon~~

~~demon raped you?~~

The animal that despises itself--is man's distinction

~~Oh happy astronomer~~

Jeffers dated some of the poems the second world war provoked; he wrote some poems on letters or envelopes someone else had dated; and some poems allude to events which let us date the poems as written during or after those events. For example, "The Dog in the Sky," which says "now a new age begins," may refer to Laika, the dog in the sky in Sputnik II, launched November 3, 1957 and down April 14, 1958; presumably Jeffers wrote that poem between or soon after those dates.¹

But "Oh Happy Astronomer" offers no such obvious clues. The handwriting resembles that on some manuscripts of Jeffers' poems about the second world war, and that of the "Sincerely, Robinson Jeffers" also written with a fountain pen in the copy of The Double Axe published in 1948 that I bought the spring of 1950. But trying to date Jeffers' handwriting by its style may prove unreliable, because it apparently changed more with his choice of pens or pencils than it did with time; it became more angular and distinct when he wrote with a pen or a freshly sharpened pencil, and less so when he wrote on with increasingly blunt pencils, as he generally did. His choice of language changed little between Tamar in 1924 and his last poems almost forty years later, and his choice of subject-matter, the world's enormous beauty as making mankind unimportantly small but ugly by comparison, hardly changed from his first published poem, "The Measure" in 1903, to his last poems sixty years later, with the exception of Flagons and Apples in 1912. But a near-duplicate of the phrase "the animal that despises itself--is man's distinction" occurs in The Double Axe, II, 29 (page 82: "There is only one animal that hates himself"), which leads me to suspect Jeffers wrote "Oh Happy Astronomer" at about the same time, between Be Angry at the Sun in 1941 and some time just before his death in January, 1962.

Whatever its date, the manuscript suggests that Jeffers had already composed most of the poem when he started writing it on this piece of paper, because he made so few changes:

1) he apparently considered reversing the order of the first line's two sentences and then decided not to, perhaps because it is the "weakness and filth" that starts the second line that we cannot bear. The first line ends with two x's, decidedly skewed, apparently a colon: in other manuscripts, Jeffers sometimes wrote single x's for periods.

2) Jeffers wrote "guiltless" three times, crossing it out twice, the first time so quickly, apparently, that he did not wait to finish the word, yet found no other word he liked more, and so wrote in "guiltless" a third time. Did he have his doubts about "guiltless" because it presumes to judge the inhuman universe in human terms, or because it ends the poem with an unexplained and possibly crippling paradox, that the universe includes and produced mankind, and therefore cannot seem "guiltless" of us? Either reason might explain why he left the poem unpublished.

3) And only then--if we may assume that Jeffers wrote down from the top of the page--did he select "Oh Happy Astronomer" from the sixth or the seventh of the eight lines he had written so far as the title,

and distinguished it as such by drawing a box around it.

4) Then under the title, he began a second draft, or a first draft of a second stanza, or possibly lines to insert before the first line "We turn away . . ." In any case, "why did you do it?" seems to mean "Earth, why did you produce life, and especially why mankind, the only 'animal that despises itself'?"

Eliminating what Jeffers crossed out and the isolated, unconnected line "The animal that despises itself--is man's distinction" at the bottom of the page produces this single stanza:

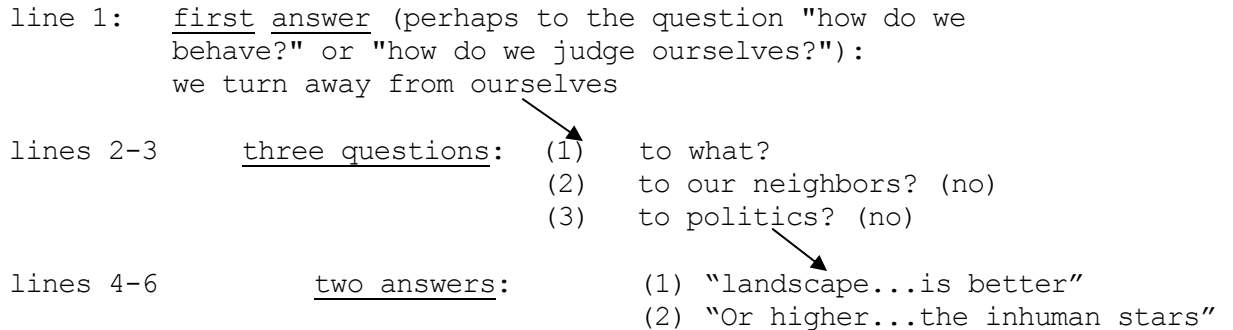
Oh Happy Astronomer

We turn away from ourselves, we cannot bear ourselves:
Weakness and filth. Therefore we turn away from
ourselves--to what? To our neighbor's
Weakness and filth? Or to politics, weakness and filth
On a world scale? Landscape, I say, is better;
look up to the mountains and contemplate
The endless ocean; water and rock will make clean and glad
All that man soiled. Humanity was latent in them,
and they spewed it out, they are quit of it.
Or higher--oh happy astronomer--gaze at the manless glory,
The inhuman stars, the fire-net that has the earth
in its meshes but is guiltless of man.

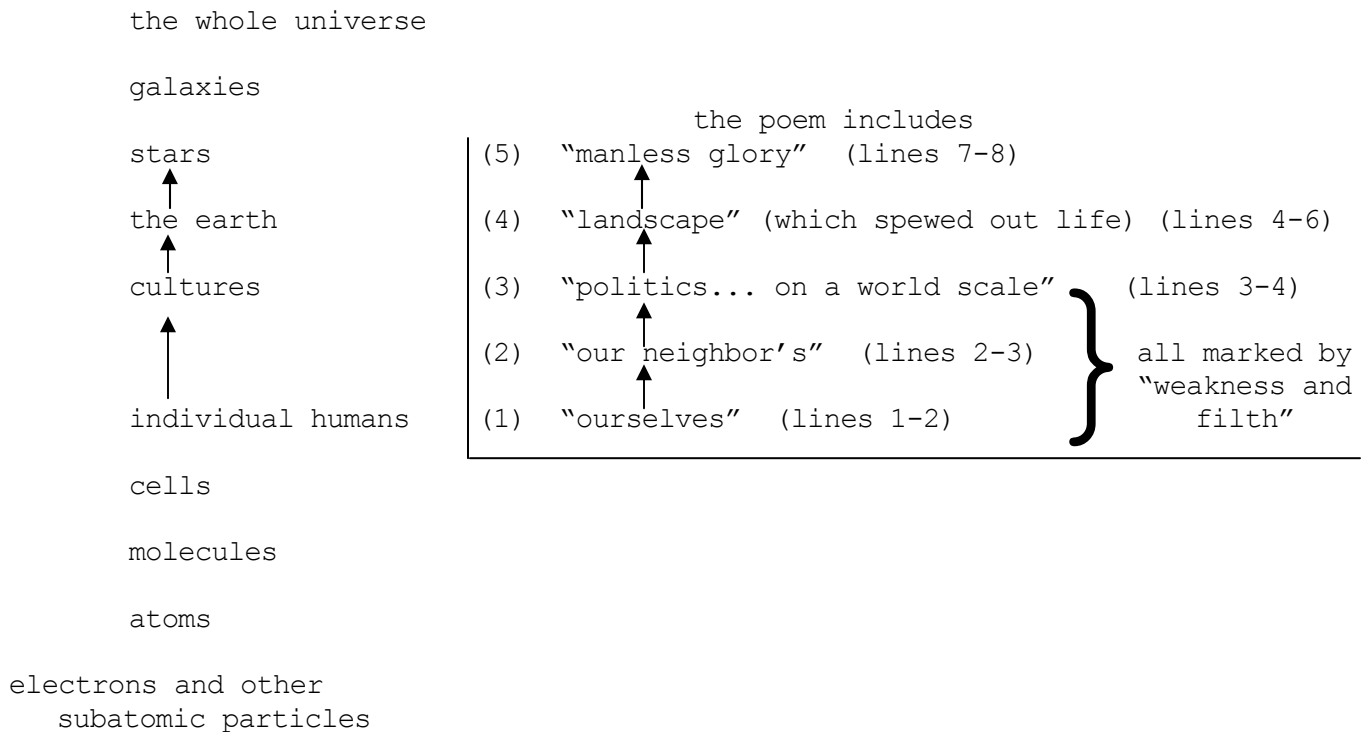
The poem has four pairs of lines, with the first line of each pair having 13, 13, 14, and 16 syllables, and the second, 19, 21, 24, and 22 syllables, making each second line predictably about half again as long as the line before it². Such a regularity and the alliterating g's and h's from the word glad on suggest that Jeffers heard the poem in his mind's ear or said it to himself before he wrote it down, unlike those of us who write something down and only then see why we need to rewrite it completely.

The poem's rhetorical structure works step by step, both from a single answer to three questions to two answers, and from mankind to the universe of

stars. The answer-questions-answers progression seems to echo the way a man might think by trying out one answer after another, as each answer leads to more questions:



We can also see the progression from our neighbors to politics to landscape to the inhuman stars as an ascending scale of four answers, to which the poem responds no-no-yes-yes, apparently because each answer represents a larger, less egocentric step up, as we escape from seeing or responding to only the human middle of this scale of cosmic sizes:



The poem's structure proceeds from one answer to questions to a pair of answers, and these questions-and-answers proceed from (1) ourselves (the lyric poet's subject?) to (2) our neighbors (including families and their troubles, the tragic and comic poets' subjects?) and (3) politics (and cultures generally, the satirists' subjects?) and these first three levels all involve humanity's "weakness and filth," and so, to make ourselves less egocentric, we should turn to higher things--to (4) "landscape," the mountains and oceans of our planet, which admittedly did produce life, us included, but "spewed it out" (a purgation we might admire?), or (5) "higher" and better still, to the "manless glory" of "the inhuman stars." With each step up we see more, and see it less personally, thus escaping from Narcissus'

mistake as we ascend from the morally as well as physically small to the greatness of the universe of stars, whose enormous emptiness may remind us of the Buddhist nirvana and produce a similar calm yet impersonally compassionate awareness in us. In this ascending, we transcend our own "weakness and filth," and reach heaven: the poem provides not a Platonic ladder into an abstract world of such Ideas as the Good, True, and Beautiful, but a post-Copernican one, which lets us see a concretely real and lovely world--the only world, all that actually exists, as Jeffers or an astronomer might add--and in thus seeing the world, we also see our place in it and thus who we are, as well as knowing what limits us--which we may take as the moral of tragedy, and as an antidote to the fear and self-pity which may cripple us and the paranoia which deludes us, all of which cause tragedies.

The stars shine out, and here by "glory" Jeffers may have meant the majesty, beauty, shining out of God as well, as in the glory of God (see the Oxford English Dictionary's definitions 2b, 5, 6, and 7 of glory as a noun, which include "an effulgence of light such as is associated with our conceptions of heaven"). Saying that "humanity was latent" in the earth's rock and water reminds us that life began in and from these inorganic materials, and evolved step by step into humanity and other species; changing the neutral "they produced it" to the more vividly concrete "they spewed it out" makes the inorganic world seem nauseated by this evolution, us and our actions included, and makes us seem only what the world vomits up, only "weakness and filth," which leads to comparing the first and last steps of this progression side by side: ourselves as vomit in line six, seen against the stars in lines seven and eight; we lack and need the stars' "manless glory." That glory, their "effulgence of light," results from the stars' temperatures, far too high to permit the complex, weak (and thus unstable, sensitive) chemical bonding that makes our precarious lives and consciousness possible. The title poem in The Beginning and The End and Other Poems describes the origin, chemistry, and evolution of life in much more detail; here the comparison simply puts us in our place as only a product of that chemistry and evolution, and as only the stage from which to start our ascent towards seeing more than ourselves, thus escaping our "weakness and filth" to see the world as God and the opposite of ourselves, as well as including all opposites and smaller parts, ourselves included: not-weak or filthy or small or something we can ever control, but as unimaginably large and pouring out the energy, the "glory" on which our lives most literally depend, as everything--all of which may explain what Jeffers may have meant in this often discussed, but not often understood passage in Roan Stallion:

Humanity is the start of the race; I say
 Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust to break
 through, the coal to break into fire,
 The atom to be split.³

If we start from our human limits, we may begin to see beyond ourselves, to see the power and the glory of God (and nuclear reactions do fuel the stars). For Jeffers, "There is no God but God; he is all that exists," all the universe of stars and atoms, and

to see the human figure in all
 things is man's disease;
 To see the inhuman God is our health.⁴

Jeffers saw the universe's almost totally "manless glory" as "the inhuman God" we need and as "the fire-net that has the earth in its meshes," a world-as-God-as-net metaphor he apparently first used in his first known poem in his mature style, The Alpine Christ, in 1917, perhaps as a result (so William Everson suggested to me in August, 1973) of reading Hardy's The Dynasts, which refers to the world and men as controlled by God's "web of will." But Jeffers could also have taken the metaphor from his knowledge of astronomy and physiology. Having taken a course in astronomy at Occidental College,⁵ he would have known of Newton's law of gravity, in which every particle of the universe attracts every other, binding everything into all one net of forces, and he may have seen diagrams of Clerk Maxwell's fields of forces (1864) which make the electrical, magnetic, gravitational, and radiant energy fields in which we live and the planet earth moves strikingly visible as variously distorted nets--hence the accuracy as well as the vividly concrete imagery of

the fire-net that has the earth in its meshes.

And his experience as a medical student would have made him aware of nervous systems as networks of intricately interconnected nerves and mutually influencing electrochemical forces; in a conversation in the summer of 1969, Hamilton Jeffers mentioned Robinson Jeffers bringing home a length of human nerve from an autopsy. Such astronomical and physiological knowledge may explain why in "At the Birth of An Age," on page 559 of The Selected Poetry, Jeffers has his self-trapping, self-tormenting God define himself in terms of the interconnecting bonds and strains between stars, atoms, and their "particles" as his "anguished nerves," with the radiant energy (light and fire) and gravity as his consciousness, as pain, vivid against the night of empty space, of nothingness, and valuable in contrast to it: hence perhaps the word fire in "Oh Happy Astronomer"'s use of this world-as-God-as-net metaphor, although of course the planet earth does move around the sun and through space balancing between these forces, including the inward pull of the sun's gravity and the outward push of its radiation (its fire, to speak metaphorically), forces we can visualize as nets; we need not personify the universe as having nerves like our own to use this metaphor, which also occurs in The Double Axe, II, 22 (page 67) in which the self-netted universe-and-God seems a tragic victim like Oedipus or Lear, and also at the end of Jeffers' career, in the title poem of The Beginning and The End, where he speaks of all the parts--rocks, earth, stars, galaxies, animal lives--of the "whole glittering universe" as totally interconnected, as like a net, without using the words net or web or mesh, so that

all things have their own awareness,
As the cells of a man have; they feel and feed and in-
fluence each other, each unto all,
Like the cells of a man's body making one being,
They make one being, one consciousness, one life, one
God. (pages 7-8)

Here, too, Jeffers went on to mention tragedy such as that of Prometheus or Lear as the most intense, i.e., painful form of consciousness. This net-metaphor may remind us of the world's total interconnectedness of cause-result relationships, which may seem to us a trap we would rather escape, but of course cannot. The metaphor parallels the ancient Hindu metaphor of Indra's net--the Hindu god of the heavens and universe seen as a network of jewels, each of which reflects and connects with all the rest. But Jeffers' writings mention only one Hindu god, Shiva, and only in the poem of that name on page 611 of The Selected Poetry, which Jeffers probably wrote two or three years after he met Krishnamurti, and about twenty years after Jeffers first used his world-as-God-as-net metaphor in The Alpine Christ.

When "Oh Happy Astronomer" completes this progression from ourselves to the universe, it completes itself as well, as Jeffers may have realized after making two more starts, and abandoning them after only thirteen lines and eight words. He may have felt that repeating "weakness and filth" (our weakness, our filth) three times or the metaphor defining us as what the world vomits up (as if we poisoned it) made the poem more apt to antagonize readers than convince them, but it does present the philosophical attitude he called Inhumanism in vividly concrete, coherent terms. In his "Preface" to The Double Axe in 1948, he defined Inhumanism as

a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence.

We may need some such humility before we start to shift "from man to not-man," a readjustment of values advocated from the very start of his career, in "The Measure," and here in "Oh Happy Astronomer," that shift or progression also becomes the structure of the poem as well as its moral.

¹The Beginning and The End and Other Poems (New York: Random House, 1963), 42.

²Such syllable-counts depend in part on whether such complex vowel nuclei as those in our and soiled count as one or two syllables.

³The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (New York: Random House, 1938), 149.

⁴The first line of "He Is All," and the last two of "See The Human Figure," The Beginning and The End, 51, 66.

⁵Melba Berry Bennett, The Stone Mason of Tor House (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1966), 32.

I want to thank those who helped make this research possible, and pleasant: William Everson (who let me read his proof sheets of The Alpine Christ before its publication by Cayucos Press, Aromas, California); Hamilton Jeffers; Robert Brophy (and his book, Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973); J. Robert Harris (now of

the Department of English, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton) whose unpublished M.A. thesis, "Robinson Jeffers' Poetic Definition of God" (University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1969) explains just that; the staff of the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas in Austin; and the American Philosophical Society, whose funds got me to Texas and California in July and August of 1973.

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JEFFERS SCHOLARLY MATERIALS: UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

The two manuscripts, four pages each, are first and second drafts of the poem "An Artist"; they provide an interesting study of Jeffers' method of composition and revision. The first draft, in pencil, is unusually criss-crossed, corrected, and disjointed. Its first page, entirely cancelled by Jeffers, contains tentative versions of verses 10, 8, 14, 20, 1, 2, 3, along with six cancelled lines concerned with the artist's background and career decision. The second page, verses 4 to 18, shows five cancelled verses and much addition, deletion, and revision of phrase. Page three, verses 19 to 29, again is much cancelled and revised. Its final six lines, an earlier, cancelled version of verses 19 and 20, were written before the page was reversed and therefore appear upside down. Page four, verses 30 to 42, is sectioned by three horizontal lines, one of these sections being a cancelled version of verses 39 to 42 (the poem's ending). The narrative's second draft (typed) is singularly clean, with only slight alterations. The title is changed from "The Artist" to "An Artist." There are twenty-two changes in word choice or phrase, five in punctuation. The differences between this second draft and the text found in Selected Poetry (pages 192-94) are minimal--five changes in punctuation and one new word choice.

For the publication history of "An Artist" see Alberts, A Bibliography, pages 45-50. The corrections on the second draft noted above seem to be changes from the version printed by John A. Mayfield, Austin, Texas, 1928, to the version that appeared in Cawdor and Other Poems that same year.

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