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Occidental College, 1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles,
California 90041. Editor: Dr. Robert J. Brophy, Department
of English, California State College at Long Beach,
6101 E. 7th, Long Beach, California 90840

Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

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CONTENTS

NEWS AND NOTES	Page	2
WHAT MADE JEFFERS WRITE SUCH POEMS: A REVIEW By Robert Ian Scott	Page	4
A NOTE ON JEFFERS' "THE REMEMBRANCE" By Robert Kafka	Page	5
AN UNPUBLISHED POEM OF ROBINSON JEFFERS By Edward Nickerson	Page	7
POETRY AND POLITICS: RANDOM HOUSE & THE DOUBLE AXE By Dorothy Commins	Page	10
ROBINSON JEFFERS' INFLUENCE ON URSULA K. LE GUIN By Patrick D. Murphy	Page	20
ROBINSON JEFFERS: RECOVERING A SPIRITUAL LEGACY By Scott B. Stevens	Page	23
"JEFFERS" By Charles Bukowski	Page	30

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Address subscriptions to: Tyrus G. Harmsen
Occidental College
1600 Campus Road, Los Angeles, CA 90041

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NEWS AND NOTES

A near disaster you may have missed: THE LOS ANGELES TIMES, TIME MAGAZINE and other news media last April reported the following -- which should qualify for "Most-Revulsive-Suggestion-of-the-Centennial-Year Award." The Granite Rock Company (of California) has received federal go-ahead to quarry scenic Mt. Pico Blanco in the Ventana Range by Big Sur. The mountain contains 600 million tons of limestone, one of the largest deposits in the United States. It is on federal land. The California Coastal Commission sued to stop the quarrying operation. In late March 1987, the Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 for the Coastal Commission, upholding the right of states to enforce environmental requirements even on federal property. Reread Jeffers' poem "Return" (SELECTED POETRY, p. 576) and imagine what the poet would have to say. Another poem on humanity as THE environmental disaster? Anyone for damming up the Colorado; the Grand Canyon would make such a wonderful reservoir for Arizona agricultural water needs!

Patrick Murphy has an article, "Sex-Typing the Planet: Gaia Imagery and the Problem of Subverting Patriarchy" in ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, which includes a brief discussion of Jeffers.

The Tor House Annual Garden Party, a gathering with poetry readings, will be held 7 May 1988. For those interested in giving the Tor House Foundation much needed support and in being notified of events and general Tor House news, associate membership is available at \$25/year (P.O. Box 1887, Carmel, CA 93921). The Foundation issues an informative NEWSLETTER, the most recent issue being February 1988. Tor House tours are Fridays and Saturdays, 10 AM to 3 PM; reservations: (408) 624-1813.

The RJN regretfully notes the passing of Adrian Wilson, San Francisco book designer and printer, who was responsible for the special 5 copy edition of Jeffers' MEDITATION ON SAVIORS in 1951 (RJN No. 65, pp. 5-7).

RJN also notes the death in August of Jake Zeitlin, Southern California's famous and well-loved rare book dealer, who with his wife ran the "red barn" (Zeitlin & Ver Brugge Booksellers) on La Cienega in Los Angeles for many years and to whom Jeffers wrote the famous letter (SL pp. 224-5) on his pessimism.

The NATION magazine, 16 January 1988, presents an article "Strong Counsel," by Dana Gioia (pp. 59-64). Ostensibly a review of the new Jeffers anthology, ROCK AND HAWK (Random House), it presents a literary overview of Jeffers' career and reputation insightfully and with balance.

The Sierra Club's WILDERNESS CALENDAR for 1988 features monthly quotations from Jeffers.

The PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER ran a review by Robert Zaller of ROCK AND HAWK 24 January 1988 (p. 4-I).

The San Francisco EXAMINER for Thursday, 1 October 1987, carried a piece by Kevin Starr (pp. E1 - E5) titled "Recognition at Last for Our Greatest Poet," on the occasion of San Jose State University--Tor House Foundation centenary activities. The article was followed by "Portfolio of the Poet and His Coast" by Karen Evans, reviewing Peter Rutledge Koch's limited-edition portfolio of 15 Jeffers poems, "Point Lobos," with William Everson's introduction (RJN No. 70, p. 5.)

The NEW YORK TIMES Travel Section (pp. 14 & 27) for Sunday, 14 February, carried an illustrated article by Thomas Simmons, "Two Literary Lions' Dens: To the Homes of Jeffers and London."

Carcenet Press has recently communicated that their ROBINSON JEFFERS: SELECTED POEMS, THE CENTENARY EDITION, edited with introduction by Colin Falck (Manchester, England, 1987, 109 pages £6.95 RJN No. 70, pp. 16-18), is not available for general sale in the United States because of copyright regulations. Copies can be acquired through Blackwell's or other suppliers of United Kingdom books.

Ward Ritchie will print Una Jeffers' BOOK OF GAELIC SONGS for the Book Club of California. A collection of Gaelic aires for Una's melodeon, it was (believe it or not) illustrated by Robinson Jeffers.

Gloria Stuart is designing an edition of Jeffers' inscriptions on beams, cabinets, and doorways of Tor House to be published this summer.

Jeff Hudson, one of the Tor House docents, points out an unfortunate breach in the printing of the poem "Hungerfield" in the new Random House ROCK AND HAWK; A SELECTION OF SHORTER POEMS BY ROBINSON JEFFERS, p. 241. Fifty-nine verses which appear on pages 4 and 5 HUNGERFIELD AND OTHER POEMS (Random House 1954), are omitted, beginning "A great skein of white swans . . ." and ending "Saying that you looked well." The loss is especially unfortunate since the poem is such an important and rare autobiographic revelation, is Jeffers verse at its most powerful, and is generally unavailable otherwise (uncollected since 1954).

* * * * *

WHAT MADE JEFFERS WRITE SUCH POEMS: A REVIEW

ROBINSON JEFFERS: POET OF CALIFORNIA. By James Karman. The Literary West Series. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987. 151 pages and eight illustrations. \$5.95. One Hallidie Plaza, San Francisco, CA 94102.

How does anyone's times, place, education, and family shape his life and what he writes? In his book ROBINSON JEFFERS: POET OF CALIFORNIA, James Karman describes "every human life" as weird in that word's earlier sense, "controlled by fate." Apparently Jeffers thought so. He saw California as the place our culture ends as it confronts its fate, the circumstances beyond its dreams, circumstances that create and control every individual in that culture and every culture. These circumstances and the disasters caused by not understanding them gave Jeffers his subject and much of the reason why he went on writing for more than sixty years.

Karman compares Jeffers' poetry with THE WASTE LAND, but might have added that while T.S. Eliot looked inward as he described the disintegration of a sensibility retreating from its experience of its circumstances, Jeffers looked outward to describe all humanity as a part and product of those circumstances, the universe as a whole. In FOUR QUARTETS, Eliot continued to hope that some Word would magically save him from the universe; Jeffers regarded words as merely human, and the universe as God. Had Karman made this difference clear, he might have considered Jeffers' name more skeptically, though it does seem weirdly appropriate: Jeffers came from Godfrey, meaning 'God's peace' (as Jeffers said in one late poem, "Patronymic" in THE BEGINNING AND THE END). Once Jeffers had found that peace in the world's often violent beauty, he had the "mystical illumination" on which (as Karman says) he built his career. But that poem and Karman offer no proof that this coincidence, the name Jeffers had, helped shape his life; as the poem suggests, others have had the same name with no such effect on their lives.

What might have happened to Jeffers, had he had less education, discipline, and detachment, Karman suggests by describing George Sterling's frustrated life and career in much the same time and place. Sterling made much the same choice of subjects and philosophy that Jeffers did, but it was Jeffers who understood tragedy, found peace, and wrote almost every morning, getting 30-50 lines written on good days, not Sterling. Jeffers also manifested his tough intelligence by having his home built of granite rather than of the soft cream-colored stone used in the Carmel mission nearby, and by deciding not to call his house "Tour d'Ivoire;" consider the fun that hostile critics could have had with that name!

Karman includes many such fascinating details while tactfully avoiding such speculation as to what degree of envy Jeffers' success may have motivated some of his critics; he was someone George Gershwin, Charlie Chaplin, Lindbergh, and even such skeptics as Dorothy Parker came to see. Some readers seem unable to forgive Jeffers for reminding them of their (and our) ultimate unimportance; as Karman begins to say, Jeffers raises some painfully important questions, such as, if the world must go on as it does, and we can do so little to change it, what can and should we do about it or about ourselves instead? Karman begins to provide Jeffers' answers by quoting his poems, without paying much attention to the possible results of those answers or to how Jeffers said what he did, the structures of language that make poetry and understanding possible; if Karman had done so, he would have produced a much longer and more difficult book. But by making Jeffers' life so fascinatingly vivid, and quoting his poetry to let Jeffers speak for himself, Karman provides a commendably readable introduction to the poet, his poetry, and why he wrote it.

Robert Ian Scott
University of Saskatchewan

A NOTE ON JEFFERS' "THE REMEMBRANCE"

By Robert Kafka

The July 1986 issue of RJN carried a notice of the publication in broadside form of "The Remembrance: To E.G.K." by Quintessence Publications. There it was stated that the poem is "purportedly by Jeffers."

There is no doubt that Jeffers wrote "The Remembrance." A typescript of the poem is held in the Jeffers Collection at the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas. It is an early attempt of the FLAGONS AND APPLES variety, of a piece stylistically with other occasional verses Jeffers wrote in his youth. But what makes it interesting is its dedication. It is not, as the broadside suggests, written to Edith Greenan Kuster. This writer made the identical error some years ago when he sent a copy of these verses to William Everson, who gently pointed out that Edith's name was never "Edith Greenan Kuster"; Kuster was her first husband's name and Greenan her second husband's.

The "E.G.K." of the dedication is rather Edward Gerhard Kuster. The verses commemorate a visit that Teddie Kuster and Edith paid to the newly-wedded Jefferses in La Jolla -- a location congruent with the internal references. In her book OF UNA JEFFERS, Edith speaks of just such visits. Una and Robin spent several months in La Jolla in 1913 and 1914 before the birth of their daughter Maeve; surely it was during this time that these verses were written. What clinches the identification are the lines in the last quatrain:

The cello wove into one tune
 All its male notes, and then was still.

Teddie Kuster was an accomplished cellist, and in fact was at this time beginning to move away from his career in law and toward something -- he didn't know quite what -- in the arts. A few years later he was quite active with the L.A. Symphony, and eventually became one of Carmel's most prominent theatrical producers.

Edith's involvement with Teddie had squared the triangle, and doubtless made easier the formation of his unusual relationship with the Jeffers family. These verses, written only a few months after both couples were married, remind us of how naturally this relationship seemed to come to them -- "lover and lover, and friend and friend."

Editor's Note: See the striking photograph of Una at the piano, Kuster at the cello on page 11 of WHERE SHALL I TAKE YOU TO: THE LOVE LETTERS OF UNA AND ROBINSON JEFFERS, edited by Robert Kafka.

THE REMEMBRANCE. TO E.G.K.

By Robinson Jeffers

Who from the cliff-brow gazes
 Into that calm deep-azure bay
 Sees golden fishes in the mazes
 Of the brown sea-weed play.

The currents from the tidal caves
 Pour, and return, and turn
 The brown weeds and the green; the waves
 With marvelous color burn.

We had played in the sweet waves; we had lain
 Under that wealth of sun
 On golden sands; and now again
 Stars glimmered one by one

Into the veil of eventide,
 In which she wraps her face
 Hiding the sunset, as a bride
 Her blushes in an open place.

In candle-twilight quietly
 We sat: the open door
 Gave on a narrow reach of sea;
 And on the farther shore

Lights gleamed; the hill rose over them
 Silhouetted, curving far
Below the eastern sky, whose gem
 Was one large star.

Between the hill's foot and the sea
 Gleam after gleam, with lighted lamps
The motor-cars ran silently
 Between the shore and the salt swamps.

They had travelled from Los Angeles
 And now approached the journey's end:
A longer way had led to this
 Lover and lover, and friend and friend.

And all was wonderful to me:
 The lights below, the star above,
The evening, the music, the dark sea,
 The friendship, and the love.

The cello wove into one tune
 All its male notes, and then was still.
With flame the rising of the moon
 Crested the quiet hill.

AN UNPUBLISHED POEM OF ROBINSON JEFFERS

By Edward A. Nickerson

Robinson Jeffers, the sombre, apocalyptic Californian poet, found little to smile about in his verse, yet Yale's Jeffers collection contains an unpublished poem written to cause smiles at a celebration of the thirty-eighth birthday of another poet, Langston Hughes. The poem is contained in a letter of Jeffers' wife, Una, to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Mortimer Clapp. A graduate of Yale, Mr. Clapp was a poet himself, an art historian, and the man responsible for transforming Henry Clay Frick's mansion and art collection in Manhattan into what the NEW YORK TIMES called "one of the world's most jewel-like museums." Mr. Clapp and his wife, Maud, were virtually lifelong friends of Una and Robinson Jeffers, and more than a hundred of Una's letters to them, with numerous enclosures, were bequeathed to Yale when Mr. Clapp died in 1969.

Una's letter of 1 February 1940, written from the Jeffers' home in Carmel, explains the context and gives the text of the poem:

Tonight is Langston's birthday and we are going to dinner. Just heard we must each write a poem for him and read it. I can't write poetry or even verse so Robin just did mine for me. It is so comical and true to my feelings I will copy it for you; you remember Langston Hughes is a communist and yet dear to my heart. Also, he has made some excellent translations of the Spanish Loyalist Lorca's poems--the best of which Langston entitled "Green as I would Have You Green." So this title:

"Red as I wouldn't have you red."
Una to Langston

"Red is a lovely color
Most pleasing to the eyes,
But politically obnoxious
To me and Martin Dies.

Browder is red like a boil,
Stalin like red fire glows
But I am white like a lily
And Langston red like a rose.

Therefore as flower to flower,
In spite of prejudices
I give him my affection
And birthday kisses."¹

Hughes, one of the outstanding black writers of twentieth-century America, had been a friend of the Jeffers since the early thirties. He lived in Carmel in 1933 for about a year as a guest of Noel Sullivan, a wealthy San Franciscan who was a friend of many artists. In the autobiographical I WONDER AS I WANDER, Hughes explained that when he told Sullivan in 1933 that he was looking for a place to complete a series of short stories, his host offered him "a cottage at Carmel-by-the-Sea, which he said I might occupy for a year, with a houseboy in attendance." The Negro poet had recently returned from a trip to Russia and was openly admiring of the Soviet experiment, though with reservations. As Una's letter suggests, some people considered him a Communist (Una used a small c). In fact, Hughes never joined the Communist Party. In a summary of the information he gave to the late Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations committee in 1953, Hughes said he was "Strongly attracted by some of the promises of Communism, but always with the reservations, among others, of a creative writer wishing to preserve my own freedom of action and expression--and as an American Negro desiring full integration into our body politic."² Hughes' manuscripts and correspondence, including a few letters from the Jeffers, are in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of Negro Arts and Letters.

When Hughes first came to Carmel, it was a center of literary and artistic life. In his autobiography Hughes mentions seeing Lincoln Steffens and his young wife Ella Winter, also a writer, Krishnamurti the Indian mystic, the sculptor Mabel Dodge Luhan, the writer and chief literary publicizer of Taos, New Mexico, and John Steinbeck, who lived in nearby Pacific Grove. And, of course, the Jeffers:

In the late afternoons, I would often take a walk along the ocean with Greta [his dog]. Sometimes I would stop by to say hello to the Jeffers, Robin and Una, and their twin sons, Garth and Donnan.

. . . Tor House had no electricity or gas, and its rough exterior belied the cozy fireplace comfort of the tiny rooms within. Una Jeffers, in contrast to the grave and taciturn Robin, was a dynamic, talkative and beautiful little woman, gracious to friends, but protecting her poet husband from strange intruders with a sharp tone-- and a rifle, if need be. Old Carmelites say she once fired point-blank at some curious tourists who climbed over the rocks to the very windows of Tor House (I WONDER AS I WANDER, p. 284).

"Red as I wouldn't have you red" seems to be a conscientious attempt by Jeffers to present his wife's point of view, rather than his own. While he once described his politics as "ideally, aristocratic and republican," he wrote on another occasion that "as a matter of right and justice I sympathize with radicalism . . ." In practice, his conviction that all efforts to improve the human lot were vain caused him to take a detached view of political movements, though cruelty and war moved him to rage. On the other hand, Una, as her letters to various correspondents show, seemed to have a visceral dislike for the Left and its supporters, though she numbered some of them among her friends.

Just who was at the dinner when Una recited the poem is unknown (it is quite possible that she went without her husband, who attended parties only reluctantly). Almost certainly the company included Sullivan, who spent a great deal of time in Carmel at his Hollow Hills Farm, where Hughes again occupied a cottage in 1940. But all would have recognized the topical references in the verse: Martin Dies, of the first stanza, was the first chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and "Browder" was Earl Browder, long head of the Communist Party, U.S.A. "Lorca" of course is Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936), whose "Romance Sonambulo," a serious poem, is often remembered for its first line, verde que te quiero verde, or as Hughes translated it, "green as I would have you green." Only the first line of the birthday poem is patterned after the Garcia Lorca verse. The rest is purely atypical Jeffers.

¹ Both letter and poem are printed with the kind permission of Donnan Jeffers.

² "The Crisis," quoted in GOOD MORNING, REVOLUTION (New York, 1973), p. 144.

Editor's Note: Nickerson's article is reprinted here with acknowledgement to the Collection of American Literature, The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. It first appeared in the YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY GAZETTE, Vol. 42, No. 2 (October 1974), pages 231-233.

POETRY AND POLITICS: RANDOM HOUSE AND THE DOUBLE AXE

By Dorothy Commins

The following sequence of correspondence and commentary is taken from WHAT IS AN EDITOR? SAXE COMMINS AT WORK (University of Chicago Press, 1978) by Dorothy Commins. It puts together the exchange between Random House and Jeffers regarding his 1948 volume of verse in a new way -- with Random House's point of view rather fully stated. In this context, the letter from Commins to Cerf, 13 October 1947, seems particularly significant and has not been quoted in discussions on the topic so far. It is jolting to see a longtime, devoted editor writing:

"In all charity, I can only explain this melancholy book as proof of early senility. What the provocation for all these maledictions in our time and the insane hatred of Roosevelt, I can't guess. Well, we've marveled at Jeffers's brooding hatreds before, but they were disguised in horses and hawks and incestuous relationships."

Letters from Jeffers, the parts of the correspondence as they appeared in James Shebl's IN THIS WILD WATER: THE SUPPRESSED POEMS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS (Pasadena, CA: Ward Ritchie Press, 1976) are noted in parentheses. The editor is grateful to Robert M. Kafka for referring the material to us. The text appears in mid-chapter eight, "Adlai Stevenson and Other Writers," pages 120-131. The University of Chicago Press is to be thanked for its permission to reprint the excerpt.

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In the fall of 1947 Saxe had before him a new manuscript by Robinson Jeffers, consisting of a long narrative poem, THE DOUBLE AXE, and twenty-seven short poems, all written during World War II. The collection was to be Jeffers's fourteenth book of verse. In it Jeffers advocated complete political isolation. He saw American participation in World War I as a grave mistake and our entry into World War II as even more disastrous. He maintained that we had not been forced into World War II but that our national leaders had misled us.

It is obvious from his memo to Bennett Cerf that Saxe found the manuscript upsetting.

13 October 1947

To: Bennett Cerf
From: Saxe Commins

Robinson Jeffers's new manuscript, THE DOUBLE AXE, raises questions of policy that must be considered with the utmost care. That the tone and purport of the poems themselves indicate a bitter malevolence toward man in nature, a kind of dying howl of pessimism into a black sky in the presence of death, is the poet's view and can be argued endlessly for its validity. Agree or disagree with him in his central argument that mankind is not important in the universe and is the only blemish in nature, no one can deny that Jeffers has earned the right to deliver his last dicta on man, no matter how sophomoric some of them may be.

It is on other counts, however, that his pessimism must be examined (1) for the impression it will leave of his tight and narrow thinking as a Cassandra-like prophet, and (2) for our tolerating angry and irresponsible statements about America and more particularly about Roosevelt. The first makes him an out-and-out champion of isolationism, and the second a wildly prejudiced slanderer.

In a rather loosely thought-out preface, Jeffers's second sentence runs: "it had long been evident that our government was promoting war--not with threats, like the Germans, but with suggestion and pressure and personal promises--and would take part in it." This is the opening statement of the theme that torments him through the poems, long and short: America has been committed by its leaders--notably Roosevelt--to an insane power dream.

Hoult Gore, the dead soldier whose ghost returns to haunt and torture his mother, declares on page 26:

He [Roosevelt] had already duped us
Deep into war, he'd fooled us into doing everything
Except declare it and send armies abroad: but if we were
blooded,
Then we'd be mad. Germany wouldn't attack
Although we sank her boats and supplied her enemies:
He needled the touchy Japs and they did his business for him.
And don't for God's sake,
Pretend that we had to fight while we still had friends
In Europe: what do we want of Europe?

(Bear in mind that Hoult is Jeffers's mouthpiece)

Pages 28-29

Be sorry for the decent and loyal people of America
Caught by their own loyalty, fouled, gouged and bled
To feed the vanity of a paralytic and make trick fortunes
For swindlers and collaborators.

Again page 47

Destruction's bride. "Curious," he said, "the power-mad vanity
Of one paralytic politician--"

Roosevelt and Tojo are linked on page 51, and without preference.

Page 57

. . . beseech God
Forgive America, the brutal meddler and senseless destroyer;
Forgive the old seamed and stinking blood-guilt of England.

Page 91

. . . Human antics, human antics:
Or Roosevelt's if he really believed the enormous phrases
He buttered his bloody work with, while Churchill grinned

Among the shorter poems, there is "Fantasy" (page 122)

On that great day the boys will hang
Hitler and Roosevelt in one tree,
Painlessly, in effigy,
To take their rank in history;
Roosevelt, Hitler and Guy Fawkes
Hanged above the garden walks,
While the happy children cheer,
Without hate, without fear,
And new men plot a new war.

Page 125 (dated December 1941)

The war that we have carefully for years provoked

For his position on isolationism--Page 126

You knew also that your own country though ocean-guarded,
nothing to gain, by its destined fools
Would be lugged in.

Page 129 "Wilson in Hell" (dated 1942)

Wilson accuses Roosevelt of "having too much murder on
your hands"
Calls him liar and conniver and by his presence [Roosevelt's]
makes heaven a hell for Wilson.

Page 135 "Historical Choice." Here is-the explicit statement for
isolationism.

. . . we were misguided
By fear and fraud and a great tricky leader's orotund
cajolerias
To meddle in the fever-dreams of decaying Europe. We could
have forced peace, even when France fell; we chose
To take sides and feed war.

Page 136 "Teheran." (Teheran is seen as a plot by "attendants on a world's
agony")

. . . there will be Russia
And America; earth-power and air-power; earth is the
breeder --
But what was poor hopeful ambitious Germany
Doing in this squeeze!

(Shocking to see Jeffers weep for the Fascists)

Page 137 "What Odd Expedients." (The repetition of phrase is most damning
to Jeffers)

The crackpot dreams of Jeanne d'Arc and Hitler; the cripple's-
vanity of Roosevelt . . .

Page 139 "An Ordinary Newscaster." (Again the obstinate isolationist
speaks)

We are not an ignoble people, but rather generous; but
having been tricked
A step at a time, cajoled, scared, sneaked into war; a decent
inexpert people betrayed by men
Whom it thought it could trust: our whole attitude
Stinks of that ditch.

Page 142 "So Many Blood Lakes." (Again)

But we were tricked

Page 143 "The Neutrals"

I praise thee Ireland . . .
And high Switzerland . . . and Sweden . . . these three hold
all but all
That's left of the honor of Europe.
I would praise also
Argentina, for being too proud to bay with the pack,
But her case is a little clouded.

(Peron should be pleased!)

Page 150 "War-Guilt Trials." (Tribute to Ezra Pound and a slap at us!)

Page 151 "Moments of Glory." (So that Truman should not feel neglected, he comes in for a slap on the wrist)

Consider little Truman,
That innocent man sailing home from Potsdam - rejoicing,
 running about the ship, telling all and sundry
That the awful power that feeds the life of the stars has been
 tricked down
Into the common stews and shambles.

.

In all charity, I can only explain this melancholy book as proof of early senility. What the provocation for all these maledictions in our time and the insane hatred of Roosevelt, I can't guess. Well, we've marveled at Jeffers's brooding hatreds before, but they were disguised in horses and hawks and incestuous relationships. Now he personifies his bitterness in Roosevelt and in the whole human race.

"The human race is bound to defile . . . whatever they can reach or name; they'd shit on the morning star if they could reach." Page 59

I don't see how we can do anything else but protest to Jeffers about the Roosevelt and isolationism passages that are manifestly obnoxious. If we can't make him see reason, we'll have to take a strong position on principle. If he does take out the objectionable passages, we will then have a book obscurantist enough to please the dwindling Jeffers following. This book has made me dwindle!

Two days later, Saxe was writing to the poet himself, setting down his misgivings about Jeffers's politics but not mentioning a word about his poetry. In saying he was writing on his own responsibility, Saxe was primarily trying to protect Random House from any accusation that it was frightened of unpopular opinions; yet he was also motivated by a desire to protect the poet.

15 October 1947

Mr. Robinson Jeffers
Tor House
Carmel, California

Dear Robin:

During all these years--and it is now over twenty--I have been writing to Una, knowing, of course, that you would realize that my letters were meant equally for you. Always I must have made it plain enough how meaningful and important every word you wrote has been to me. Ever since ROAN STALLION, and in book after book in which I was so honored to have a hand, mine was a labor of love.

And now, before anyone else has had a chance to see the manuscript of THE DOUBLE AXE, I made a lunge for it, as a matter of earned right. Once again I was made to feel your elemental force and could only wonder at your endless resources in creating images and symbols of overwhelming power. Hoult, as the spokesman of the young dead in war, is indeed a daring and frightening conception, and his brutality grows out of the brutality on which he was nurtured.

But I am disturbed and terribly worried, and that's why I can do no less than be completely candid about my misgivings. I want to put them down here without even mentioning the matter to Bennett, or anyone else, and I do so entirely on my own responsibility, counting on you to understand my motives.

I refer, of course, to the frequent, damning references to President Roosevelt. Manifestly he cannot defend himself, and on that score there arises the question of fairness and good taste. But what is worse, in my opinion, is the conviction that these bitter charges will feed the prejudices of the wrong people, especially those, with the worst motives in the world, who have tried so hard and so vindictively to discredit him. It is startling indeed to find that time after time you lash out at his memory, as if the need to do so had become almost obsessive. On page 26 indirectly; on page 29-- "to feed the vanity of a paralytic"--on pages 91, 122, 125, 126, 129, 135, 137 (and here for the second time you used the phrase "the cripple's-vanity of Roosevelt"). And so on, page after page, to the end.

Frankly, I cannot make myself understand it. This may be because I do not share your bitterness toward Roosevelt and his historic role; nor do I believe, as you reiterate so frequently, that this country was drawn into the carnage by fools and treacherous men or that a better destiny would await us if we had isolated ourselves from the rest of the world.

As I said, I am writing this letter on my own responsibility, and with the hope, for the sake of your book and the effect it will have, that you can temper these references before we think of beginning composition. Please understand that this is in no way, and I can't make this too emphatic, an attempt to intrude upon your rights as a free artist. It is meant to be the friendliest of suggestions, made with the hope that you can be persuaded to my strongly personal view. I would hate, above everything else, to have you, of all people, linked with the most reactionary elements in America. That would be unthinkable!

Please give this your most serious thought, and write me privately about your own feelings, as you would to an old friend.

Always,
Saxe Commins

[Shebl, p. 39-41]

4 December 1947

Mr. Robinson Jeffers Tor House Carmel, Calif.

Dear Robin:

I keep wondering why there has been no word from you on THE DOUBLE AXE. Our Spring catalogue is being prepared now, but I cannot make an announcement in it until I hear from you. May I have word soon as to when the revised manuscript will be coming my way?

I can tell by the difficulties my wife and daughter have had in getting seats for MEDEA that it is a tremendous hit. On your account I am happy indeed. Who deserves such a success more than you?

Best,
Saxe Commins

12 February 1948

Mr. Robinson Jeffers
Tor House - Route 1, Box 36
Carmel, California

Dear Robin:

At long last I have been able to go over the script of THE DOUBLE AXE. I noticed, of course, all the changes you have made and in almost every instance they are immense improvements. There are two, however, which give rise to misgivings on my part. I refer to page 25, where you changed the line

To feed the vanity of a paralytic and make trick fortunes

to

To feed the power-hunger of a paralyzed man and make trick fortunes.

This is hardly a change at all. Would you consent to a further revision to make it read

To feed the power-hungry and make trick fortunes.

I do wish I could persuade you to take out the word "little" describing Truman on page 136. To me it seems that the adjective, referring to size, is as gratuitous an insult as if you described a man by a physical defect, as "boneless hunchback Steinmetz." It would be hitting below the belt in that instance. As it is, your poem, without the adjective, is contemptuous enough.

Otherwise I can make no specific recommendations for changes, although in general I still disagree--and vehemently--with some of your interpretations of recent world and political events and the causes underlying them. But that is a matter of opinion and consequently open to debate. Certainly I can't subscribe to your apologia for Peron, when you say on page 132, "I would praise also Argentina, for being too proud to bay with the pack," nor your defense of isolationism in "Historical Choice" and in "Fourth Act."

I cannot subscribe to the mildness with which you chasten Hitler (Cf. page 101) and with the scourging remark with which you flay England and America, and their war leaders. Because these are matters of opinion and you hold yours so firmly, there is a moral obligation to present them in your terms and on your responsibility.

Lest there be any misapprehension about the difference of views between us, it occurred to me to write a publisher's note to appear on the flap of the jacket and also in the front-matter of the book as a statement of our position. Here it is as I have written it for that purpose. Tell me candidly how you feel about it. At best it is an honest statement of my viewpoint and at worst it will seem to underline certain passages which otherwise might even go unnoticed. Since both of us are responsible for our convictions and must stand by them, why not have them out in the open?

A Publisher's Note

THE DOUBLE AXE AND OTHER POEMS is the fourteenth book of verse by Robinson Jeffers published under the Random House imprint. During an association of fifteen years, marked by mutual confidence and accord, the issuance of each new volume has added strength to the close relationship of author and publisher. In all fairness to that constantly interdependent relationship and in complete candor, Random House feels compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet in this volume. Acutely aware of the writer's freedom to express his convictions boldly and forthrightly and of the publisher's function to obtain for him the widest possible hearing, whether there is agreement in principle and detail or not, it is of the utmost importance that difference of views should be wide open on both sides. Time alone is the court of last resort in the case of ideas on trial.

Best to Una and you,
Saxe Commins

P.S. By the way, you did not provide a dedication. Did you want one? To whom?

[Shebl, p. 42-43]

Tor House Carmel, California
Route 1, Box 36

19 February 1948

Dear Saxe:

(1) If you insist, let the verse read "To feed the power-hunger of a politician"-- instead of "paralyzed man." And I hope you will always protest when Caesar's epilepsy is mentioned. Or Dostoevski's--though it influenced his genius, just as Roosevelt's paralysis influenced, and to some extent excuses, his character. This is my reason for speaking of it.

(2) As to "little Truman"--the adjective cannot possibly refer to physical size, since Truman is a bigger man than either Churchill (except the fat) or Hitler. But you will admit that he is "little" in a historical sense (and also "innocent") compared to either of them. However--to show you what a good fellow I am--write "Harry," if it really matters to you, instead of "little."

(3) As to other things, I'm sorry we don't agree completely. And I do agree that Hitler deserves worse than he gets--but you know the whole world is full of people cursing Hitler.

(4) As to the suggested "Publisher's Note"--it will certainly make every reader think of politics rather than poetry, and is therefore deplorable. But put it in, by all means, if it is a matter of conscience. I shall probably in that case have to add a short paragraph to my own "Note," saying that any political judgments in the book are not primary but part of the background, the moral climate of the time as I see it; and perhaps ending with a sentence from Shaw's preface to HEARTBREAK HOUSE--I quote badly, from memory--"Only a man who has lived attentively through a general war, not as a member of the military but as a civilian, and kept his head, can understand the bitterness..."

(5) No--I didn't think of any dedication.

Thanks for your clear and fair letter. And for your not complaining about the dirty manuscript--I didn't have time or energy to type it over again. It was a joy to see you recently; and I hope to repeat the pleasure if we go to Ireland this spring, as appears likely.

Yours --

Robinson Jeffers

[Shebl, p. 43-44]

24 February 1948

Dear Robin:

First of all, let me tell you how much I appreciate the friendliness of your letter. It is heartening to know that mere differences of opinion need not affect a relationship tried by the years. If only the same tolerance could exist where other differences of view separate whole peoples. All moralizing aside, I can only say that I was made happy by your letter.

The changes have been incorporated; the Publisher's Note will appear and I await your addition of a short paragraph to your own "Note." If it comes before we get into galleys, you will see it in proof; otherwise it will be added to the galleys themselves. Please prepare it as soon as you can so that your statement will get as prominent a place in the Note as you want it to have.

I look forward to seeing you this spring. Best to you and Una.

Yours,

Saxe Commins

March 2, 1948

Dear Saxe:

Will you please substitute the enclosed page for the "Note" that I think is page 1 of the manuscript?--As you can see, it is practically the same thing, except one paragraph added in response to your "Publisher's Note." And since there are now three paragraphs I call it "Preface"!

Best wishes,

Robin

[Shebl, p. 50]

Preface

The first part of THE DOUBLE AXE was written during the war and finished a year before the war ended, and it bears the scars; but the poem is not primarily concerned with that grim folly. Its burden, as of some previous work of mine, is to present a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence. It seems it is time that our race began to think as an adult does, rather than like an egocentric baby or insane person. This matter of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimistic, though two or three people have said so and may again. It involves no falsehoods, and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.

The shorter poems that tail the book are expressions, in their different ways, of the same attitude. A few of them have been printed previously; three in POETRY MAGAZINE, one in the UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS REVIEW, two in the SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE; several in some recent anthologies.

As to the Publisher's Note that introduces this volume, let me say that it is here with my cheerful consent, and represents a quite normal difference of opinion. But I believe that history (though not popular history) will eventually take sides with me in these matters. Surely it is clear even now that the whole world would be better off if America had refrained from intervention in the European war of 1914; I think it will become equally clear that our intervention in the Second World War has been--even terribly--worse in effect. And this intervention was not forced but intentional; we were making war, in fact though not in name, long before Pearl Harbor. But it is futile at present to argue these matters. And they are not particularly important, so far as this book is concerned; they are only the background, or moral climate, of its thought and action.

R.J.

4 March 1948

Dear Robin:

Many thanks for sending me the new Preface. I am really happy that you have stated your position so clearly and precisely. Even though we differ, it is certainly reasonable that our opinions should be stated forthrightly. It will be interesting to watch the reaction of a jury of readers.

Best to you and Una.

Yours,
Saxe Commins

[Shebl, p. 50]

[Editor's Note: For web presentation, typographical errors have been corrected, including one each in the excerpts from "Fantasy" and "Teheran."]

ROBINSON JEFFERS'S INFLUENCE ON URSULA K. LE GUIN

By Patrick D. Murphy

It is a curious fact that the critics who pride themselves on knowing Ursula K. Le Guin's fiction ignore her poetry, and the influence of poets on her writing. If they looked at her poetry, they would find poems that reveal much about that key symbol of stone in her latest novel, *ALWAYS COMING HOME*. More specifically, they would find one poem that would reveal a key figure behind that symbol, Robinson Jeffers. In Le Guin's first chapbook of poetry, *WILD ANGELS*, appears "For Robinson Jeffers' Ghost." In the images it employs, this poem tells us much about Le Guin's understanding of Jeffers, as well as about her own perception of stone that would continue to expand in her later poetry and prose. In addition, *WILD ANGELS* and *ALWAYS COMING HOME* reveal a deeper affinity between Le Guin and Jeffers, that of the California landscape. Le Guin's early poetry and her novel are set in Napa Valley, California, on the ranch her parents owned and where she spent a significant part of her childhood.

"For Robinson Jeffers' Ghost" begins with Le Guin demonstrating her knowledge of Jeffers's work and respect for his political attitude toward these United States:

Thicken, harden, clot, scum
of the mind sold cheap, still perishing
Republic still shining, O damned
beloved land! No words will save you.

Le Guin suggests that here she, like Jeffers, finds it necessary to criticize the nation state without hope of seeing it change. At the same time she praises by imitation Jeffers's diction and cadence.

Then, in the second half of the first stanza, Le Guin depicts her own image, one remarkably similar to that of Jeffers:

Nobody listens. But look out for the Coast.
At seventy I'll show you;
a skinny old woman performing solo
the Dance of the Late-Comer, the Fore Runner.
And the deaf will shudder.

Le Guin takes pride in her stubborn willingness to stand alone. Like Jeffers, she too cultivates the role of a poet of prophecy in an age of decadence. There is something of the "I told you so" quality here that Jeffers expresses in those closing lines of "The Inhumanist," as the old man of "The Double Axe" prepares for the red dawn of the day after. At the same time, there may be an undercurrent, in that image of a lone female dancer, of Tamar on the beach seeking to transcend her humanity, although this is one who has survived into the tough old age of the mother in "Thurso's Landing," or the one in "Fawn's Foster-Mother."

But then in the second stanza Le Guin softens and speaks words of sympathy as well as respect for the Point Sur poet in his solitary stance:

Yet I would rather (you too, ghost?)
 have danced not alone, the word-dance,
 the rhyming remembering praises, the play
 of light and surrounding of darkness,
 feet pounding earth growing firm,
 resilient:

The willingness to stand alone should not be confused with desire. Le Guin, following Jeffers's lead, seeks her readers but not by pandering to them, meeting the expectations of critics, or saying the appropriate political words. The poem then turns on that word "resilient," which acts as pivot, connecting back to describe the strength of Jeffers who danced "the word-dance" alone in his own way, and connecting forward through the colon to the source of that resilience:

rock in the sunlight
 planet in sunlight
 spirit in sunlight
 hand taking hand in the long
 dance by the edge of the Ocean.

While Tamar turned back to the Indian ghosts of the Coast to seek purgation but failed to transcend her own limitations, Le Guin turns back to Jeffers's ghost to seek not purgation but support and community, recognizing that the bonds binding her and Jeffers are rooted in the physical reality of the world. This reality lets them both admit the "surrounding of darkness" and the pessimistic prognosis for the "Republic" and, at the same time, stand in sunlight and "dance by the edge of the Ocean." That ability to stand in the sunlight depends upon a decentering recognition that humanity is not at the center of the universe, but at the edge. While rock and planet are at the center of human life, they too are spinning around an even greater center of light. The "spirit in the sunlight" is the sharing in that greater center, which can only be appreciated once humanity has recognized its position on the edge, transitory and ephemeral beside rock and the sunlight that bathes it.

While this poem pays tribute to Jeffers, it in no way indicates the extent of his influence. This can be revealed only through tracing Le Guin's fascination with, and reverence for, stone and her deep commitment to the same human-decentering process. The fascination with stone appears in other poems, such as "Mount St. Helens/Omphalos" in WILD ANGELS, "The Mind is Still," "The marrow," and "Hard Words" in HARD WORDS, in "This Stone" in ALWAYS COMING HOME, and finally, in "The Basalt" and "Flints" in BUFFALO GALS, her most recent work. "Flints" ends: "Bones of England, single stones / thit mean the world, / that mean the world is old." Stone signifies for Le Guin, as it did for Jeffers, that ancient, lasting world in which we participate, that world which is not an object to be dominated or exploited. Le Guin writes in "An Exhortation From The Second And Third Houses Of The Earth" in ALWAYS COMING HOME: "Come gather yourself from the grass, the branch, the earth. Walk here, sleep well, on the ground that is not yours, but is yourself." And further, in "At Three Rivers, April 80" in HARD WORDS, she speaks of that world which can go on without us:

A tree that blossoms in the wilderness
 in some April beyond History
 and farther west than all the pioneers
 is in no way less
 though there be none to bless
 and no woman stand in tears
 under the whitening flowers.

Only the tears were ours.

The couplets emphasize the contrived essence of human efforts to make the world a thing-for-us rather than to recognize the world as a thing-in-itself, which can include us.

I should also mention the ways in which Le Guin has in her decentering efforts developed beyond Jeffers. I see these as occurring in two crucial areas, Le Guin's clearly articulated feminist anarchism and her adaptation of Taoism to a Western American perception of the world. The anarchist feminism is most extensively developed in her prose, while the Taoism appears in its most explicit and concentrated expressions in her poetry. One sees this not only in such poems as "Tao Song" in WILD ANGELS but also in "Smith Creek" in HARD WORDS. Surely Jeffers would welcome Le Guin's extending of the poetic and philosophical legacy that he has left us.

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Editor's Note: Patrick D. Murphy is a member of the English Department,
 Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

ROBINSON JEFFERS: RECOVERING A SPIRITUAL LEGACY

By Scott B. Stevens

On meeting Robinson Jeffers for the first time, Loren Eiseley felt as though he "stood before another and nobler species of man," to which he added, "I have never again encountered a man who, in one brief meeting, left me with so strong an impression that I had been speaking with someone out of time."¹ I doubt that Eiseley could imagine the prophetic nature of his impression or conceive how very far removed from the Modern period Jeffers would become. Look into any anthology of Modern verse and you will no doubt find a few pages devoted to Jeffers' work located somewhere near the more celebrated poets that shared the age: Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Williams. But Robinson Jeffers is curiously and consistently disaffiliated from his contemporaries, seen mostly as a cultural aberration, remaining out of time, isolated, and perpetually misunderstood and disliked by the critical establishment.

That Robinson Jeffers be accepted among the literary aristocracy of his time for his sake is unimportant -- he cared nothing for critical-acclaim and derived, I think, a certain vindication from the wide disapproval of his work -- but Jeffers' bastard status has amputated a limb of poetic verse and it is essential that the relationship of his work to that of his contemporaries be recognized if there is to be any understanding of the poet's work, or any direction for contemporary poetry to follow.

M.L. Rosenthal has said, "It is interesting to note that, intellectually, our poetry is still just about at the stage of thought Thomas Hardy reached a long time ago: jammed up against the tragicomedy of human circumstance."² Given the humanistic tradition that has prevailed since the Enlightenment period, I think Rosenthal is correct insofar as the critical eye has been focused primarily on that intellectual aesthetic tradition that is so much a part of our literature. Though the post-war chaos of the Twenties has been heralded as a time for breaking away from the conventional, underneath the apparent formlessness was a strong traditional framework. "Make it new" may have been the maxim for the Modern Age, but the resulting extravagant variations were ultimately nothing more than new body styles created to conceal a very old and rusty engine.

The engine of which I speak is, as I mentioned earlier, the humanistic tradition that became the driving force during the Enlightenment. At the risk of over-simplification, the Enlightenment paradigm asserted the supremacy of mankind in the universe and the doctrine of perpetual advancement, what C.S. Lewis called "The Myth of Progress."³ Amid the alienation and lack of identity experienced in the Twenties, the rebellion against the prevailing wisdom focused the poetic energy towards the past -- a tone set forth in T.S. Eliot's TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT -- and despite the remarkable

innovations that grew out of the Modernist movement, the "historical sense" left us with nothing more than a reaffirmation of the Enlightenment paradigm. I think the work of Eliot and Stevens to be particularly representative of the kind of humanistic ideal of which I am speaking, but they are by no means the only poets singing again the old song. My intent is not to denigrate the fine work of these two poets, but merely to show that the "traditionalists, fronting a post-war chaos localized in the spasm of indictive cynicism, soon cut back toward the measured norm." Other poets could be used to build an equally strong case, but since Stevens and Eliot are the most celebrated of the age, they will serve best to establish Jeffers' place within their company.

No one articulated the despair and confusion of the Twentieth century quite like T.S. Eliot, and as a result he became the cynosure for the entire Modern Age. "The Waste Land" was the anthem for modern man, for all those who had, in the words of Pound, "walked eye-deep in hell."⁵ The use of primitive mythology in "The Waste Land," as borrowed from the works of Weston and Frazer, provided a vehicle by which the poet could reach the primal reality that lay beneath the desolation of the period, a way, as Eliot saw it, to regain the meaning missed in the experience. The proposed solutions were not to be found in the current wisdom, but rather in the primordial wisdom of the distant past. But instead of reaching to the very depths of primitivism for permanent solutions as Robinson Jeffers did, Eliot relied upon the story of the Grail to bring hope to the age.

Though there be mystery and magic in the Grail myths, the way out of the wasteland is predicated upon human effort, upon the success of the Grail knight, which roughly translated reads, "Somehow we'll find a way out of this mess," and again in keeping with the humanistic tradition, it is man overcoming. Later, in "The Four Quartets," Eliot moved away from the emotional whining of his earlier works and asserted that the salvation of mankind could be found in Christianity, a religion that espouses the ultimate perfectability of man and the linearity of time, both of which are very humanistic proposals. Against this sort of human measuring tape Jeffers commented:

" . . . when they look backward they see only a man standing
at the beginning,
Or forward, a man at the end; or if upward, men in the
shining bitter sky striding and feasting,
Whom you call Gods . . .
It is all turned inward, all your desires incestuous,
the woman and the serpent, the man the rose-red
cavern,
Both human, worship forever . . ."⁶

Few will deny that T.S. Eliot was a traditional poet, but say the same for Wallace Stevens and you will not meet with such broad agreement. Stevens' relativistic and phenomenological poetry, a poetry of "impenetrable surfaces,"⁷ appears at first glimpse a new breed, but his replacement of the traditional wisdom ended in really nothing more than a new set of propositions. Like Twain's *Mysterious Stranger*, Stevens essentially urges us to "dream other dreams, and better."⁸ He hints at an escape from the ugliness of the Modern Age with seemingly spiritual urgings to "step barefoot into reality,"⁹ yet his verse seldom, if ever, moves beyond the intellectual relativism that places man solipsistically at the center of each individual universe. Residing forever within the mind, Stevens is unable to grant the physical world any luminous power, and has, in Nemerov's twisting of one of Eliot's famous lines, "missed the experience, but had the meaning."¹⁰ Exchanging the corporate Humanism for four billion private "humanisms," Stevens never moves beyond the realm of the intellect, beyond the Enlightenment paradigm that prevents us from fully experiencing true reality. Said Jeffers,

"I think . . . that beauty of things may be felt without any mystical recognition. But in that case it seems to me to be felt incompletely, however keenly. It seems to be that the mystical experience grows out of the aesthetic experience, naturally, almost logically."¹¹

As a mystic, Jeffers was intimately familiar with the spiritual experience, and it was his continual repudiation of the humanistic aesthetic that disturbed critics and caused his estrangement from his contemporaries. For a time after the First World War everyone wrote poetry of doom, but when it came time to come back indoors -- Eliot to his Anglican Christianity, Stevens to his solipsistic philosophy -- when it came time to come back to the humanistic norm, Robinson Jeffers remained alone outside the culture. On Jeffers' exclusion from the ranks of the great Modern poets, William Everson commented, "What Jeffers preaches is utterly unacceptable not only to our prevailing temper, but more especially to our desperate hopes, and all the presence of power will not compel us to jeopardize the future we desire by celebrating a work that repudiates it utterly."¹²

Robinson Jeffers' refusal to partake in the intellectual charade placed him in opposition to his contemporaries, and led to his being labeled "the poet of inhumanism,"¹³ a term which is most often misunderstood. The spirit behind Inhumanism is not an anti-human sentiment, but rather a trans-human consciousness that moves the mind of man away from himself. As Arthur Coffin has written, "Robinson Jeffers saw society as incapable of achieving and maintaining a sense of genuine identity because it is doomed to be self-corrupting and disappointingly inferior to the endless magnificence of nature."¹⁴ Living within the same wasteland experience, Jeffers directly opposed the couched optimism of the time and abhorred the "cerebricized substitutes of authentic existence found in our culture and our intellectuals."¹⁵

"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."¹⁶

For Eliot, trapped within the Apollonian consciousness and smothered beneath the Christian myth, there was a need to justify existence while Jeffers saw with utmost clarity man's animalistic primacy, and felt it was the departure from the natural state that brought about the ills of civilization:

"A severed hand
Is an ugly thing, and man, dissevered from the earth and
stars and his history . . . for contemplation or in
fact . . .
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,
the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things,
the divine beauty of the universe."¹⁷

Robinson Jeffers knew well that the price paid during the Enlightenment was the forfeiture of Dionysian consciousness, and during the mass alienation of the Twenties he tried to reintegrate man with his primal origins:

"A little too abstract, a little too wise,
It is time for us to kiss the earth again."¹⁸

And this is the terrific beauty of Jeffers' work: that his tremendous vision transcends the human element and gets to the heart of existence as revealed in nature and the mythology of the past. In his study of symbolism and mythology in Jeffers' poetry, Robert J. Brophy makes the point that Jeffers' purpose was not to revive specific myths from the past, but rather to "grasp below our rootlessness and recover for us the ancient resources of the race."¹⁹ No dried tubers here, to coin a phrase from Eliot, rather, Jeffers resorts to the old magic, to the spirit in the primitive myths, so that when we come upon the incestuous Cauldwell household, or upon California in the moonlight wishing to consummate her worship of the stallion, or upon the lunatic priest Arthur Barclay, we are transported beyond the characterizations and into the heart of humanity to face the questions that have plagued mankind since the dawn of consciousness: namely, "Is there a God and of what nature? Second, whether there's anything after we die but worm's meat? Third, how should men live?"²⁰

These are questions of epic proportion no doubt, "large time-worn questions"²¹ Jeffers called them, but questions the poet addresses time and time again throughout his verse. His answers are, however, not within the boundaries of the comforting, placating humanistic tradition. They are instead derived from what Robert Bly has called "the night-intelligence . . . the old non-human or non-ego energies the ancient world imagined so well."²² They seek to restore to life the mystical and magical qualities of existence.

As to God in the universe, quite simply, it was the "organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe,"²³ that Jeffers worshipped, not the corporate fictions that prevailed. The wholly transhuman God is the elemental vibrancy of things, whose "signature is the beauty of things,"²⁴ whose face is the "enormous invulnerable beauty."²⁵

Consequently, it should come as no surprise that after we die we become nothing more than worm's meat. What greater divinity could men hope to achieve than to reappear as the windy grasses growing up out of the burned-out rubble of the Cauldwell home? If there is to be a hope to be entertained about what awaits us after death, for Jeffers it was that he would again merge with the "cosmic 'Beauty' which he so reverently worshipped."²⁶

"I admired the beauty
While I was human, now I am part of the beauty.
I wander in the air,
Being mostly gas and water, and flow in the ocean;
Touch you and Asia
At the same moment; have a hand in the sunrises
And the glow of this grass."²⁷

I suppose the answer to how men should conduct their lives is the most disconcerting to the purveyors of the humanistic fiction. The key to the race is to "uncenter the human mind from itself,"²⁸ to "climb the great ladder out of the pit of yourself and man."²⁹ Jeffers urges each member of the tribe to

" . . . 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."³⁰

Make no mistake, this is not a clever rewording of the humanistic doctrine to provide hope for the future. Robinson Jeffers, to the end, believed in the cyclic nature of existence, that it is inevitable that our Apollonian civilization collapse in favor of a Dionysian chaos. Prophetically, the poet felt our culture was "coming to the end of a bad story, that needn't have been bad only we fools botch everything."³¹ The imperative is to live honestly and wisely by not surrendering ourselves to false hopes of redemption in the fashion of Eliot, or to new and artificial realities as in the work of Stevens. Summed up by Brophy, "This is the whole thrust of Jeffers' poetry --- to arrive at the divine 'Beauty of Things,' unhindered and uncompromised by human desire and delusion."³²

Robinson Jeffers moved beyond the thin solutions offered us by his contemporaries, providing us with much more permanent valuations. His was an eternal vision that ranks with the iconoclastic mysticism of Whitman. It is possible that the transcendent nature of Jeffers' verse could perpetuate his dissociation, but his is a poetry that grew out of the aesthetic tradition in which his contemporaries found themselves, and deserves, if nothing else, an equal respect.

We are at a point in contemporary poetry where the humanistic, aesthetic tradition is running out of fuel and the intellectual left-brained consciousness is failing to yield satisfactory solutions for the continuing alienation. There is a movement afoot to reinstate the night-intelligence to our consciousness, but until the poets "rediscover" Robinson Jeffers and reattach the limb of poetry amputated by his critical exclusion, there will be insufficient force to propel us towards the consummate existence in union with the eternal, inhuman "Beauty of Things." Until then, we remain silently mutinous in the ship of the humanistic spirit whose rudder, stuck left, drives men in spiraling circles ever inward on themselves.

. . .

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12. Antoninus, R.J.: FRAGMENTS OF AN OLDER FURY, p. 12.

13. Coffin, R.J.: POET OF INHUMANISM, p. 3.
14. Coffin, p. xxiii.
15. Antoninus, R.J.: FRAGMENTS OF AN OLDER FURY, p. 15.
16. Jeffers, "The Roan Stallion," SELECTED POETRY, p. 149.
17. Jeffers, "The Answer," SELECTED POETRY, p. 594.
18. Jeffers, "Return," SELECTED POETRY, p. 576.
19. Robert J. Brophy, ROBINSON JEFFERS: MYTH, RITUAL, AND SYMBOLISM IN HIS NARRATIVE POEMS (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Univ. Press, 1973), p. x. Note: Though the quote is from Everson's foreword, I think the point is carried throughout by Brophy.
20. Jeffers, "Theory of Truth," SELECTED POETRY, p. 614.
21. Jeffers, p. 614.
22. Robert Bly, ed. NEWS OF THE UNIVERSE: POEMS OF TWOFOLD CONSCIOUSNESS (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), p. 80.
23. Jeffers, "The Answer," SELECTED POETRY, p. 594.
24. Jeffers, "Look, How Beautiful," NOT MAN APART, p. 68.
25. Jeffers, "Nova," SELECTED POETRY, p. 597.
26. Brophy, R.J.: MYTH, SYMBOL AND RITUAL, p. 5.
27. Jeffers, "Inscription for a Gravestone," SELECTED POETRY, p. 480.
28. Coffin, R.J.: POET OF INHUMANISM, p. 10.
29. Jeffers, "Signpost," SELECTED POETRY, p. 574.
30. Jeffers, "Meditations on Saviors," SELECTED POETRY, p. 204.
31. Jeffers, "Tamar," SELECTED POETRY, p. 47.
32. Brophy, R.J.: MYTH, SYMBOL AND RITUAL, p. 298.

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Charles Bukowski

JEFFERS

his blood-smear'd horizons
his hawks forming shadows of
doom

his stallions greater than
men

or

if not that

then certainly more life-
enduring and endearing
standing in a lovelier
light.

his voice was dark
a slab-rock pronouncement
a voice not distracted by
the ordinary forces of
greed, cunning and
need

he was on a hunt
listening to life

he knew the caution of a moment
given

the futility of useless
demand

he would never be a popular
creator: people need to be
cajoled,
not notified of ancient
curses

still true to this
untuned
actuality.

he was closer to beast than
man

yet more man than
man.

D.H. Lawrence might have been
a spiritual

cousin

but Jeffers had gone

one link further
dropping that last
bound

which held Lawrence
entombed in standard
dismalness, a servant of
implanted
needs.

Jeffers knew about hell and
about the secret of
hell: it could be later
or now could be
later

but hell or no

he positioned the
moment--that swoop of
eternal pain, the way we go
curiously on
within that magic and
horrible
fix

Jeffers through the side
of a mountain, Jeffers
angry at the
sun

his gigantic crushed earth
bellows
against dumb
time.

Editor's Note: This poem appeared in POETRY LA, No. 14 (Spring/Sumer 1987), P. 1-2. It is reproduced here by permission of Mr. Bukowski and POETRY LA.