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Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

ISSN: 0300-7936

Number 73

June 1988

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NEWS AND NOTES

CENTENNIAL NEWS. In September of 1987, the State of California Joint Committee on the Arts and the California State Senate issued a resolution honoring Robinson Jeffers. In December, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors voted a resolution honoring Jeffers' contributions to the Peninsula area and cited Tor House Foundation for its accomplishments.

TOR HOUSE AND TOURS. The Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation offers memberships (\$25 associate, \$50 sponsor, \$100 patron, \$15 senior citizens and students, \$1,000 lifetime). THF, P.O. Box 1887, Carmel, CA 93921.

Medea was staged at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in October and at San Joaquin Delta College (CA) in November.

The Book Club of California 1987 KEEPSAKE in December included articles on William Everson's gathering of Tor House poems in GRANITE AND CYPRESS and William Van Wyck's ROBINSON JEFFERS (Ward Ritchie, 1938).

Pierre Lagayette of the University of Paris has an article "Mort et Creation Poetique Chez Robinson Jeffers: L'Exemple de 'Tamar'" in ETUDES ANGLAISES, vol. 40, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 1987), 400-412.

Tyrus Harmsen has a very comprehensive illustrated article on Jeffers' canon of publication, "Robinson Jeffers and His Printers," in PRINTING HISTORY, vol. ix, no. 2 (1987), 13-23.

Sidney Temple has a chapter on Jeffers, "The Towering Poet of the Tower" in CARMEL BY THE SEA: From Aborigines to the Coastal Commission" (Monterey: Angel Press, 1987).

A new ANTHOLOGY OF IRISH AMERICAN POETRY (Franconia, N.Y.: White Pine Press, 1988) reprints "The Broadstone," and "Delusion of Saints."

ZYZZYVA Magazine (Summer 1987) has an article about Peter Koch, printer of POINT LOBOS, a portfolio of fifteen poems by Robinson Jeffers and fifteen photographs by Wolf Von Dem Bussche (see RJN No. 70, News and Notes). An exhibition celebrating the poet-photographer "collaboration" was held at the University High School, San Francisco, and a publication party at the Gleeson Library Special Collections Department, University of San Francisco, October 15, 1987.

Robert Brophy, in close collaboration with Tyrus Harmsen, is editing an anthology of articles and other items from the first 25 years of the ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER with support from the Occidental Jeffers Centennial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Robb Kafka is finishing an exhaustive index to the Jeffers manuscripts at the University of Texas--to be offered as a special supplement of the ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER. Kafka also expects to make available a database-on-disc for use by scholars. Eventually he hopes to include other collections--Occidental, Yale, etc.

A POSSIBLE SOURCE FOR THE LOVING SHEPHERDESS

The Fall Into Eden, Landscape and Imagination in California, by David Wyatt.
Cambridge University Press, 1986. xviii + 210 pages

California produces so much regretful writing, this book by David Wyatt claims, because California keeps being a paradise no sooner found than lost forever, ruined by those it keeps attracting. The ecological damage certainly exists, but Wyatt overestimates human powers. Perhaps as a result, he misses the consolation that Jeffers found in realizing how small and temporary humanity proves, once seen in terms of geological and astronomical discoveries of the universe.

In the second of his eight chapters, Wyatt considers John Muir, 1838-1914, apparently without realizing how much like both Lucretius' and Jeffers' view of the universe as all one intricately interconnecting, evolving, fascinatingly beautiful organism Muir's view is. On page 34, Wyatt describes Muir as bringing "much of the California landscape into being," as if parts of that universe exist because humans think of them or write about them. In doing so, Wyatt implies that some human's mental map of it is that part, thus repeating Barclay's mistake in The Women at Point Sur and demonstrating that he has not understood Muir or Jeffers or the most basic point of semiotics and semantics, that our signs only indicate what they mean, without being or creating it.

Such mistakes seem a part and product of the egocentric Platonic belief that what we think or want has what Wyatt calls a "timeless significance," a reality transcending the merely material universe--a belief Wyatt seems to share when, for instance, he regrets that Muir found no such significance in Yosemite's granite and so took no "more visionary possession" of it, as if the universe exists as a part of us we can possess. It seems more modest to suppose, as Jeffers did, that nothing exists outside time or the universe, and that we remain only temporary parts of it.

Wyatt begins his last chapter by noticing that both Jeffers and Gary Snyder had their homes built on California granite, but does not explain what granite meant to either poet or to Muir. To describe Jeffers and Snyder as Wyatt does, as concerned with the "ended world" -- the California coast as ending our culture's migrations, our culture's decline -- misrepresents both poets. Jeffers described our culture as going on beyond that coast to Asia, Alaska, other planets, and looked forward to that decline as giving our species a new beginning in which it would (he said in "November Surf" on page 360 of the Selected Poetry) regain "the dignity of room, the value of rareness." Snyder and Jeffers gave themselves such a fresh start by rejecting our culture's Platonic egocentricity, by choosing to live quietly, outside cities, and becoming genuinely original writers; Snyder also fulfilled Jeffers' prediction by going on beyond the California coast to Asia. There is in this a metaphorical death and rebirth, possibly the most-used and most profound pattern of meaning in Jeffers' poetry, and one obviously basic to tragedy, but not one Wyatt seems to understand.

In his fourth chapter, Wyatt describes Mary Austin's writing, including her story "The Walking Woman" in her book Lost Borders, published in 1909, apparently without noticing The Walking Woman's resemblance to Clare Walker, the protagonist of Jeffers' The Loving Shepherdess, first published in 1929. Austin's walker wanders in the San Joaquin Valley and the hills and deserts east and south of it, sometimes alone and sometimes with a shepherd and his flock, meeting various cowboys; Austin describes her as free because she has loved, had a child, and walked away. Jeffers describes his shepherdess as wanting to be free but doomed by her need to love; she wanders north along the Sur coast, meeting various cowboys, and then, having lost her last sheep, walks east across the Coast Range to the San Joaquin, where she dies in childbirth. In her loneliness, Clare Walker calls her sheep by individual names, 'humanizing' them, as Austin says a shepherd does in "The Last Antelope," another one of her stores in Lost Borders.

Mary Austin lived in Carmel when the Jeffers moved there in 1914, and was still there as late as 1920; did Jeffers read Lost Borders? His "Foreword" to his Selected Poetry mentions as a source for The Loving Shepherdess only "a footnote in one of the novels of Walter Scott, which I was reading aloud to our sons. I cannot remember which novel it was. The note tells about a half-insane girl who wandered up and down Scotland with a dwindling flock of sheep, that perished one by one."

Nothing in that precludes the possibility that Jeffers also read and was influenced by Lost Borders, but Wyatt leaves this unmentioned, as if he has not read The Loving Shepherdess, as if he knows about Jeffers mostly by reading books about him, without having much first-hand knowledge of Jeffers' poems or their subjects.

Robert Ian Scott
University of Saskatchewan

ROBINSON JEFFERS' OPERA LIBRETTO: "THE SONG OF TRIUMPH"

[The following text is taken from THE MECHANICAL ANGEL by Donald Friede (New York: Knopf, 1948). It gives a context for a manuscript which is to be found in carbon copy at Occidental College, a scenario written as for an opera and here synopsized thoroughly. To do Jeffers justice, as Robert Kafka has pointed out in forwarding the piece, the poet's letter to Friede (SELECTED LETTERS No. 111, 12 March 1927) suggests that the outline of "The Song of Triumph" was an example, and not what Jeffers would in the end have sent. We are grateful to the estate of Donald Friede for permission to reprint from pages 230-231.]

And then there was the time that I decided that George Antheil was the man to compose the first great American opera, and that Robinson Jeffers was the ideal choice as librettist. I did not meet him until many years later, but we had been corresponding for some time, ever since the first publication of his poetry by Boni & Liveright. I wrote him at once and asked him if he had ever thought of writing an opera. His answer came a few days later, and with it a two-page outline of his plan for a work entitled THE SONG OF TRIUMPH. He was most enthusiastic about the whole idea, he wrote, and he felt that the libretto he had in mind would lend itself perfectly to our purposes. Besides which, he pointed out, it would not be too difficult a production: all that was needed would be four singers and a chorus.

It was not exactly a cheerful opera he suggested. The world, he wrote, is desolate and dead. Wars, pestilences, famines, weariness of life--all these have taken their toll. And not only is the earth dead, but other planets are too. When the earth failed, these other planets were colonized in a desperate attempt to save the human race, but for a thousand years now no ship or message has returned. But in a desert valley live Marah and her old father and mother, the sole human survivors on the earth. And to them comes Attis, Prometheus and Jesus reincarnate, mocked at by the dead for the failure of his promises and attempts.

That set the scene, and from there on it was pure Jeffers: Marah decides that her only hope of fruitfulness lies in Attis, but he resists her and finally mutilates himself and dies to avoid yielding to her. Next she turns to her father, but he is too old for her purposes. She builds a fire in the graveyard and begs the dead to fertilize her. But her father, imagining her to be pregnant, stabs her out of jealousy and then kills himself. And Marah dies of her wound, singing the song of the triumph of humanity, and only the old mother, gone mad, is left on earth.

I knew enough about opera to feel that this was not exactly what the Metropolitan was looking for at that time. I put the outline carefully away among my papers.

[For web publication, the date span in the following title has been adjusted from 1937-1947, as it appeared in the print edition. See Corrigendum, RJN 74:2].

UNA JEFFERS CORRESPONDENT--LETTERS TO RUDOLPH GILBERT, 1937-1944

The following correspondence from Una Jeffers to Gilbert has been generously made available to the RJN by Stanley Willis, who wrote a memoir on his own visit to the Jefferses, late in 1947, for RJN No. 53. Mr. Willis has provided a note on Gilbert.

Rudolph Gilbert, born in 1892 in the Crimea, came to America shortly after the Russian Revolution. The fourth Rudolph Gilbert born in Russia (a forebear by that name had come from England), Rudolph served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps in World War I.

In 1947 I first met Rudolph in Santa Barbara, to which he had moved from New York about 1939 or 1940. He was then serving as assistant director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and later he acted in a similar capacity on the staff of the Santa Barbara Art Association.

Rudolph first visited the Jefferses in April 1940 (his book on R.J., Shine, Perishing Republic, had been published by Bruce Humphries, Boston, in 1936). After Rudolph joined the Roman Catholic Church he sent me letters he had received from Robinson (see Selected Letters) and Una Jeffers. However, he never really lost interest in the Jefferses, and he often denounced the church visible and its hierarchy.

Rudolph died on 4 April 1979, about two weeks before his eighty-seventh birthday. A mystic, he was a sensitive, cultivated gentleman and a warm friend.

Stanley Willis

June 24, 1937

Dear Mr. Gilbert - We are sailing July 10 from N.Y. for Ireland. It would be pleasant to see you if you are in town. We shall be staying with Bennett Cerf of Random House, July 9 & part of July 8.

Sincerely, Una Jeffers

Dec. 26 [19]37

Happy holidays to you from Tor House where we arrived ten days ago after many stops. One of two weeks at Taos, N.M.

So very sorry we missed you in N.Y. The Brian Curtises once spoke of you in such friendly fashion.

Our trip was happy & interesting--this time we went to many islands--way up to Orkneys & Shetlands most remote.

Hope to see you here sometime.

Una Jeffers

April 12, 1940

Dear Mr. Gilbert: It will be very nice to see you & your friend here -- Tuesday the 23rd. We shall be home all the afternoon--come any hour you like. We must go to Los Angeles on the 24th so don't be a day late!

Very sincerely Una Jeffers

I am told that the coast road, Highway No. 1, is open now (via San Simeon). It is a few miles shorter than 101, the regular route, but is a little slower driving. You ought to go or come by it if possible. I think going south on 1 is a little more beautiful than coming north on it. The scenery is magnificent. Highways 1 and 101 come together at San Luis Obispo.

April 29, 1940

Dear Rudolph Gilbert: I am glad you and Mr. Swazy liked us and your visit here, and I am not surprised, really, for our hearts went out to you so warmly that it would be queer and wrong if you hadn't felt we made a very congenial party. We hoped we would get a glimpse of you on the way down the San Simeon Highway but we started very late, almost noon, so you probably were well ahead. The B K initiation and dinner were interesting but exhausting as things like that are. Robin got through the reading of his paper very well-- he loathes public appearances. His reading seven minutes--not long. It was an expansion of the prose notes that precede his "At the Birth of an Age." It will be published shortly in "The Personalist," the quarterly of the Univ. of So. Calif. Philosophy Department. At the initiation there was a man named Benj. Miller who is on the faculty of the Theology Dept. of Pomona College. He has written numerous papers on Robin. I think he was doing his M.A. thesis at Harvard or Yale on R.J. when we first began to hear from him. Then he came west again and graduated at a theology school, then went to the faculty at Pomona. I hope I did not do wrong to tell him to ask you if he could call upon you if he goes through Santa Barbara. He has read your book and I believe disagrees with you in some particular I don't know what. He is young--(well under 30 I imagine) and hasn't much charm but he has a mind of singularly metaphysical cast which with his power for hard work may carry him far.

The Irish novelist is Margaret Barrington: her book is "Turn Ever Northward." She has caught the feeling of the glens of Antrim & Donegal. The phrase at the end of a chapter in her book which caught my attention was "Our ship is set, love, for a full due" --reminiscent of the writing on the tomb, "Your ship, love is morred (sic!) head & starn (sic) for a full diew" (diew is a variant of due).

The poet is Oscar Williams; his book "The Man Coming Toward You." I am not certain yet how good I think it is but it is arresting. I do recommend to your attention, though, "New Poems" and "Said Before Sunset" by Frederick Mortimer Clapp. Robin, too, regards these poems with utmost admiration. It has seemed to us for a long time that this man has the finest mind we know. Both pub. by Harpers. In the later book is a poem to R.J. You remember Clapp is head of the Fine Arts at Pittsburgh U. & organizing director of Frick Collection. --Oh, see "Who's Who"---

We liked your article so much in the Pine Cone and don't give a thought to misprints. We always expect them in our local papers. ["Robinson Jeffers' High Background," 12 April 1940, page 5.]

The lovely camellia has put forth new blossom already.

With friendliest thoughts from us both. Una Jeffers
I had a charming letter from your friend Mr. S. I like the cards!

July 25, 1940

Dear Gilbert: We have never heard of the poet de Boulliers. As for Mr. Swan, he came here with his wife to call one morning several months ago, a curious person. A Scandinavian by looks & with a definitely foreign accent though he may have been born in this country. Very earnest, very energetic, a health

faddist, a person who studies hard, transcendental and dreamy and a bit fanatical. Without knowing him further would hesitate to accept his opinions, though he had such enthusiastic admiration for R.J. that I ought not to distrust him! But the oddest thing, he told us that someone had become so interested in his work and career that the person had arranged an income for him so that he could travel & write & feel no financial care. We have received books & clippings from him from Sea Gate, N.Y. Harbor.

R.J. has consented after repeated invitations to do so to give an hour's reading of his poetry & discussion of it at Columbia Univ., N.Y.C. Nov. 11th. (For the last ten years he has been asked at intervals.) This was to have been one of a course of 12 lectures by different writers, but owing to financial fears, the course has been abandoned except for R.J. I have to go East in the fall & this will pay for our trip!

R.J. has been asked to allow the recording of his poetry--read by himself but has not yet consented.

If you still wish to read "Of Una Jeffers," I shall be glad to lend you a copy. It isn't an analytical or a pretentious thing but has a certain freshness and warm sincerity about it.

I wonder did you like Timmie Clapp's poetry?

Our best greetings.

Faithfully, Una Jeffers.

Mrs. Curtis spent several days in Pebble Beach, but I did not see her--she did not go out. She was in great anxiety about one of her sons driving an ambulance in France. I believe he has since been heard from.

August 5, 1940

Dear Gilbert: I said to Robin today "Are you a mystic?" He hedged and I gathered that he felt a certain--shall I say embarrassment--he didn't call it that but said--"That is as uncomfortable to answer as if you said 'Are you a poet?' I would feel very queer to make the bald answer, 'I am a poet.'" So I told him you might like to write an essay on the subject, & he liked the idea & felt that whatever you wrote was certain to be intelligent & sensitive.

You didn't ask what I thought, but I'll tell you anyway. I think there is a distinctly mystical & transcendental strain in him. And I believe, in a way, this quality influences him somewhat in the long-range impersonal views he holds about world affairs. (And this militates against momentary popularity since he cannot easily show agreement & enthusiasm for isms.)

I hope to see you again & hope to call on Swazy in his new house.

You spoke of Yeats. I don't know whether you are particularly interested in him. He's my subject, but I recently read the best article I have ever seen on his mystical ideas. It was published perhaps two years ago in The Virginia Quarterly Review, (sometime before Yeats' death) by Sean O'Faolain, the Irish novelist, & entitled "AE & W.B." a distinctly interesting & sane appraisal of the differences in the mysticism of these two men.

Yours faithfully, Una Jeffers

August 28, 1940

Dear Rudolph: I lent you the article--sorry I have no clue to the year--probably four years ago.

We know nothing of the old man W.[illiam] L.[loyd] except an exchange of letters years ago--probably as far back as 1927. He seemed to model himself on Walt Whitman & Edward Carpenter. Too expansive & soft for my taste, & old fashioned decadence in him too.

I am worried about Alberts. He must have cracked up. Not a sign out of him except weird cards at Christmas for the last two years.

O I forgot to say about Lloyd that after forgetting about him for years, some months ago when we saw the crack-pot John G. Moore (for the first & only & I trust last time!) he began to talk of his great friend Wm Lloyd.

Yes, I know Alex Tiers & we see each other sometimes. I like him. He is certainly a very curious person. Extremely nervous & sensitive--& generous! I believe a very honest sincere person. He bought an old adobe here in Monterey & is having great pains taken with its reconstruction, gardening & furnishing. It would be hard to say whether he is suffering or enjoying more the process--nothing short of perfection will do & he isn't sure what the perfect thing is.

Both of our sons are here and the house is a riot! so I shan't attempt a real letter.

Faithfully, Una

June 13, 1941

Dear Rudolph: I received the Yeats book & agree with your words about it. I am reading now "Scattering Branches," a group of sketches about him (edited by Stephen Guyers). A puzzling man in many ways--his character & personality, I mean. I was extremely interested in Maud Gonne's article.

I enjoyed seeing you again & hope you liked it here. If one is really settled down in one's own life, it's much the best.

Our Pebble Beach friend = Margaret Ingalls. Address: Mrs. Frederick Ingalls, "Strawberry Hill," Pebble Beach, California.

Let us hear from you again.

Affectionately, Una

Can't resist, even though hurried, to note a sentence in one of the sketches about Yeats. He apparently did not allow himself to be afflicted with the presence of tiresome people--dull ones--and so L. A. G. Strong says "He preserved himself from the dusty attrition." I am not quoting exactly--but isn't attrition good, there.

January 14, 1942

Dear Rudolph: Thanks for your wire of Jan 10. Robin appreciated it. I am glad to know you have the museum job. I hope you continue to like Santa Barbara. I don't know when we shall get down that way. We went twice last month to spend a few days at "Stockdale," the old Tevis estate just out of Bakersfield. Garth was there too. He is managing the ore-reduction mill at the little gold mine Lloyd Tevis is developing seventy miles up in the mts. above Bakersfield. But now the tire situation makes us hesitant about traveling. Our rear tires are fine but our front ones have already gone 24,000 mi. We managed to get our spare retreaded. With care these will last perhaps last out until they devise some ersatz.

Alex Tiers has rented or otherwise disposed of the Boronda Adobe & lives in Santa Barbara--perhaps you see him. He was in Ojai for several months listening to Krishnamurti. We have had various excitements with blackouts partial blackouts & an incomplete & unauthorized evacuation & a few hysterical spinsters. Now all are settled down to some sort of war-effort or to just enduring.

We often speak of you. With friendliest greetings.

Faithfully, Una Jeffers

N.D. [Fall 1941]

Dear Rudolph--Just a line to say that you should investigate the man you spoke of before undertaking anything with him. He was in many ways completely unsatisfying to my [illegible word] here. --No, I do not know his point of view or attainments.

We are in a great scramble to away Sun. morn early. I have had a great deal of work the last few weeks collecting & getting off the things they wanted for the Congressional Library exhibit: pictures, Mss. articles, books by and about RJ. I will tell you more later.

Always faithfully, Una

May 24, 1942

Dear Rudolph: I am sending you herewith a tentative list of items for the exhibit, which you must inspect, & check what you wish sent. As I do not know the size or form of your place, I did not attempt to select the material. The items enumerated here are the most important of the things sent to Lib. of Congress. There were many other little things like Kodak pictures of trips to British Isles & of R.J. & friends, & diplomas, & special clippings about him which their plan included.

One item which I think I can get, if you wish it, is a portfolio of 37 photographs by Horace Lyon for a proposed book, "Jeffers Country," with a foreword by Robinson Jeffers & 2 trial proofsheets by Grabhorn. Lyon is now in Seattle on war work but I think he has these pictures with him & would lend them. These pictures created much interest in Washington but of course people in Santa Barbara know this region & might not find the scenery so exciting & unusual as they did there.

I think I omitted to thank you for the catalogue of the exhibit of Ancient American Art which I have enjoyed having so much! I am very much interested in old stone carvings & in very old gold work I know a little about these two branches in the Irish museums. They excelled in both & I have seen many items of ancient American but have no scholarly knowledge at all and find the concise comments on the different early cultures in the Americas very valuable.

Affectionately, Una

June 24, 1942

Dear Rudolph: I sent you yesterday by express, two boxes of books, 1 box of phonograph recordings & 1 sealed parcel of Mss. (The parcels by Noel were a portfolio of photographs--and the bust.) I enclose a complete checklist of same. Mr. Baer indicated that I should say what the insurance should be. \$2,000.00 for the material exclusive of the bust. You must add what is proper for that. As I told you before it was purchased for us by a group of friends and I have no idea of its proper value. Except that I think highly of it for its extraordinary likeness.

With the photographs, I enclosed one of Robin at 5 yrs of age, inspired thereto by the request from the Academy of Arts & Letters & the National Institute. They have recently had a month-long exhibit of work by their members. (Mss, musical scores, bound books, paintings, etc.) They asked also for a recent photograph & a childhood one. I have just had a letter from them asking to keep the material for a further exhibit of two months in autumn as it created much interest in N.Y.

I had dinner with John O'Shea last night & mentioned your proposed exhibit & he asked me to give his very friendly greetings to Mr. Baer whom he admires.

Good luck for the exhibit, and thanks for your interest & work on it.

Affectionately, Una

July 25, 1942

Dear Rudolph: I meant to have written you immediately on receipt of your note, but have had an extremely busy week. Not only the Bach festival with its guests but other friends arriving in flocks. Blanche Matthias & Charlotte Kellogg, two that you know. The Pine Cone did not use your clipping--perhaps the Bach kept them busy! If you have another copy you might send it to the Monterey Herald, Monterey.

I had a letter from James Daly praising the exhibit & your work about it. Robin & I do appreciate all you've done about it!!

Great excitement in our village today. A colossal statue of Bach was being exhibited in our little park. It was thrown down & the head stolen last night. It is horrid to have hoodlums loose. But perhaps the sight of it has driven someone crazy. It was quite the most hideous object I ever saw. By Buffano. A stainless steel body shaped like a ninepin with a head that looked like no one at all, made of bright blue composition stone.

Don't forget the photographs if any are taken.

September 8, 1942

Dear Rudolph: I suppose the exhibit is over now &, if so, please send the things along back. Of most of them I have no duplicate & I need some--particularly the Bibliography--quite often to answer requests for information.

I hope, it went well & repaid your trouble. Several people told me how carefully it was arranged.

We go along quietly--and anxiously. Garth was still in Hawaii when we heard last three weeks ago. We spent two days in Napa Co. recently, the first time we've been away from home since April.

Benj. Miller who so often writes articles about Robin called here a few weeks ago & left with the intention of calling on you. He has read your book & wanted to talk with you.

Best wishes from us both. Una

Isn't the new information about the origin of the Unicorn tapestries fascinating! I had a bulletin from the Metropolitan Museum this morning with a long article all about it.

September 22, 1942

Dear Rudolph: The bust & other material arrived yesterday in good condition. Thanks again for all your care & attention in this exhibit. Will you also thank Mr. Baer for me.

Our Garth is still in Hawaii. We had begun to think he had been sent further away--somehow his letters, which had been coming quickly by clipper, got held up for a month. Yesterday a letter came & I breathe more freely again.

We have been walking a good deal lately. Several days ago Noel, Jean Kellogg & we walked all day in a beautiful canyon down coast. Very refreshing.

Send us a line now & then to say how you are. I am glad to think of you in so beautiful a place as I hear that museum is.

Affectionately, Una

Thank you sincerely for the very good photographs of the exhibit. I wish we could have come down to see it.

A nice picture of you with the bust. I like having it.

October 21, 1942

Dear Rudolph: I suppose you have heard from Carleton Smith ere this. Look in Who's Who for much data about him. He is agent for A & S Lyons Inc. 356 North Camden Drive, Beverly Hills. We had never met until he was here with Judith but I liked him very much. Kitty Carlyle is an actress. We do not know her. There has been talk of Judith & others doing "The Tower" on tour. I do not know what will come of it.

Carleton is a friend of Charlotte Kellogg also.

Garth surprised us by stopping in Sept. 27. He had brought some prisoners of war over. Looked fine. He left again Oct. 2 from San Francisco where he stayed a few days.

This is just a note to give you what information we had of C.S. I'm sorry I delayed so long in answering. I've been tremendously busy & have had a friend from N.Y. staying with me who took all my time.

Affectionate greetings from us both. Una

May 9, 1943

My Dear Rudolph: I know I haven't written for a long time. We have often thought of you & have duly rec'd several announcements & pamphlets from you, all interesting. I seem to have less time than ever these days. It's hard to get any help of any kind now--even most of our washing we do ourselves. (The only first class laundry hereabouts, the Del Monte, is completely given over from now on to the Pre-Flight School which took over the Del Monte Hotel.)

I write constantly to Garth--still overseas & to Donnan. He & Patty have just presented us with a granddaughter Candida. I cannot remember whether I wrote you that I visited there briefly a few months ago. He was married into a completely charming family & lives in a wonderful old house by the river--one of a half-dozen quite famous colonial houses in Zanesville.

Carmel is full of people--officers' wives & families. Luckily for us, gas rationing keeps cars from our road. Very few cars except on an occasional holiday or weekend. We are completely remote in our courtyard. At this moment a dozen fat quail are picking away with the pigeons & golden bantams just outside my desk window and night herons roost in our trees all day.

Robin hasn't done anything to Dear Judas. I agree that will be up to Michael Meyerburg. A letter from him some weeks ago said he would be on the coast soon & come to see us. He is wildly enthusiastic about the play.

I am not too keen about Hone's "Yeats," although it is pretty good as plain facts go. But much seems to be held back. Perhaps because of Mrs. Yeats & the rest of the family didn't allow all of the material to be used. Lacking details of his various love affairs makes some of his passionate verses hard to understand. I think on the whole that Hone's "Moore" is better.

Robin still does air-warden duty one night a week down coast. I give one full day a week to Red Cross office as staff assistant.

We hope you continue well & prosper.

Affectionately, Una

September 21, 1943

Dear Rudolph: I seem to find it impossible to get at my letters any more but will take the last few minutes here today to write a few lines. I am a staff assistant here & give at least all day Tuesday each week--sometimes more. Sometimes there is little to do at the end of the day. This is the hottest day I have ever known in Carmel. Makes me long for the Hebrides.

It seems a very long time since we saw you. Our son Garth has been in Hawaii for 18 mo. M.P. Corps & Ranger work. He is due for a furlough but I hardly dare count on it until I see him or hear his voice over the phone from San Francisco as we did one morning a year ago now when he suddenly arrived with some prisoners of war--from Midway I guess. Donnan who was deferred for a slight heart-murmur, is married & lives in Ohio & has a baby Candida 4-1/2 mo. old. A grandchild delights Robin & me. Perhaps I told you I visited him in Dec.

Our friends the Clapps came here from N.Y. for their holiday in June, July, Aug. but soon left for Santa Barbara. They found it too cold here & too much going on. We are crowded with army & navy & every kind of maneuvering going on about us on land, sea & in the air. I do not know whether they looked you up. He was very tired & very intent on some writing he was trying to finish.

Did you read Yeats' Life by Joseph Hone? Not very exciting but full of material which may be used more vividly later.

I agree with all you said of Pound. Pompous creature. I am amazed that Yeats & he were such close friends.

If Daly's book comes out soon, I'll urge Robin to write him. We are very very sorry to hear of his plight. --If Robin were to write him just out of the thin air with no apparent excuse, I think it would startle him as he knows Robin's temper about letter-writing.

Do you ever hear from Sweazy--is that spelled right? [Swazy]

We hope all goes well with you.

Affectionately, Una Jeffers

January 15, 1944

Dear Rudolph: I do apologize. I have had a letter, a book & 2 post cards from you. I have been working up to the limit of my waking hours for weeks & weeks. This is the second (only) personal letter I've written this week (the other to Garth). I have taken over the chairmanship of the Staff Assistance Corps of our Red Cross Chapter here. We have a corps of sixty. We keep several busy constantly at the chapter house here & three or four every day at Ft. Ord. There has been so much sickness here & also shifting of army families (many of our staff are officers' wives or daughters--) that our schedules have needed incessant rearranging. The details of our work are countless.

Then our Garth arrived home suddenly on an 18 day furlough. Robin & I felt rejuvenated by that! He left us Jan. 3. We took him to the train at 8:00 in the morning. It was raining & wind blowing. I felt let-down when we came home & simply undressed & went to bed by the sea-window, wrote some letters & read for several hours two books of poetry. Daly's & Clapp's new one. I haven't read any poems of Daly's lately until this book & felt a start of surprise & pleasure at their excellence. They are so sensitive, sometimes so tender & so aware of natural objects around us & of their beauty or powers. They are modern in the best sense of being in the stream of new experiences & using words that evoke contemporary experience. In a few I see a similarity to my dear Rilke--tell me whether Daly likes him? I haven't time to refer to the book now or to write really competently of it as I should like. One poem that I reread several times because it pleased me so much was called "Stone-steep the Pier." Another I thought realized itself completely was "The Asker." Some of the poems--and this is an adverse criticism I also make of Rilke--seem needlessly involved but, as in the case also of Rilke, Daly is able to surround them with a poetic enchantment. I wish I had time to say more, and more thoughtfully but I have an enormous mail here to answer. I hope Robin will write soon about this book but he still is afflicted with a paralysis about letter-writing that seems to me partial insanity. The Rainer (?) picture on your card--lovely.

Connie Flavin spoke of talking to you--with great pleasure & Jean Kellogg speaks of you with interest too.

Affectionately, Una

April 29, 1944

Dear Rudolph: I'm awfully sorry I didn't write at once about your little book, but I can't apologize too much either because I am working terribly hard & never write letters to friends any more. I just today wrote the first letter in six months to the Clapps in New York & Timmy Clapp is my dearest friend in the world.

But I did read your articles with utmost attention. I like the Daly one almost as well as the one on Robin. You write as if you had the background of a scholar--meaning a man who has a very wide range of reading which he has had the time & the wit to weigh & assess, and it makes your opinions valuable & arresting. Thank you so much for this book.

Our dear Jean Kellogg wrote an article on Robin for her mother's friend, Vinal, in "Voices." She was very shy about it but it has a very nice quality & she did it from a painter's standpoint which makes it different from most articles. Do you ever see "Voices?"

A rather new book, "The Heritage of Symbolism," I saw very well reviewed in several papers but it isn't very good. Have you seen it? By an Englishman named Bowra.

Garth is at present stationed at Ft. Sam Houston, San Antonio, a very pleasant old brick barracks. He is training men in judo, etc.

I am chairman of the Red Cross Staff Assistance Corps here & am very busy--both here & at Fort Ord. My house is often in a turmoil of disorder. Robin helps a lot. He is writing very busily these days. --I don't know what.

The other day a woman Greek professor from Stanford came to call. She is head of Greek archeology dep't & also teaches a top class in ancient Greek & modern Greek. A most interesting person who has been to Greece twelve times, living there four years one time. She has a house on the island Scyros. She came to beg Robin to write some more Greek poems--or a play, came to find out how much he had lived in Greece to be so accurate & to beg him to write something about her own great pet Achilles. I had received her reluctantly being particularly busy but found her very exciting. She had much to tell us of Schliemann & some of his diaries & notebooks she had charge of for a time & of the treasures the U. of Athens (is that its title--) has (& buried for the duration).

Don't forget us, & if we can just come through this hell & really live again.

Affectionately, Una

Up & down writing! I'm in bed this morning with a writing board--must up & at it now!

[The following three messages were written on postcards to Stanley Willis. See erratum in RJN 74:2].

April 18, 1947

Thank you sincerely for your letter & enclosures. This interested us very much & I wish we were not so harried & pushed about by tasks of various kinds which hinder any sort of adequate response.

Sincerely, Una Jeffers

October 5, 1947

Thanks for your note & interesting snapshot! We hope to see you here again. Best wishes.

Una Jeffers

May 25, 1949

Dear Mr. Willis: Thank you so much for the clippings--it was thoughtful of you to send them. We have never subscribed to a clipping bureau & have to depend on our friends & thanks for the magazine & poem. Rudolph is said to be ecstatically happy in his church.

Sincerely, Una Jeffers

PASSIONATE, UNTAMED, A FALCON: A MEMOIR OF UNA JEFFERS

Editor's Note: Shortly after Una Jeffers' death in September 1950, Stanley Willis wrote this tribute, which he submitted to several poetry magazines (where it was seen by editors as too personal). He sent a copy to Jeffers which elicited a note of response which here immediately follows the tribute.

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"Passionate, Untamed . . . Like a Falcon . . ."

Her husband described Una Jeffers with these words. Together with greatness and nobility (which the falcon rather implies) they succinctly epitomize her essential nature. She did not possess these qualities because her husband was Robinson Jeffers, a renowned poet, but because she was a towering person herself. I cannot conceive of her having been other than great just as I cannot conceive of the sea's appearing anything but endless; greatness was her destiny and role. Probably no one who ever met her forgot the meeting because she had that rich and seldom found attribute. Jeffers has said that she "excited and focused" his nature and "gave it eyes and nerves and sympathies." She had been with him constantly since 1913, the year of their marriage, acting in almost every capacity conceivable. Not until 1924 did Jeffers appear in print with a book that began to build his fame--TAMAR AND OTHER POEMS. In the years between their marriage and that time Una Jeffers was evidently influencing him decisively, unconsciously if not otherwise.

Una Jeffers gave his life a course and his art a singular vitality. She saved him from the people who could come to look at a curiosity, she directed the house and raised their twin sons without servants, she answered his mail; in spite of all these tasks she found time to sing and play the organ at home and be an active member of the community (she was chairman of the American Red Cross Chapter and a director of the Carmel Music Society)

I met her but once. I gained an invitation to visit them at Tor House one sunny August afternoon in 1947. It must have been boring for them to receive a young stranger, however strong his enthusiasm and interest. But if so the fact was concealed well by Una and Robinson Jeffers; one could not have wished for more charming or gracious hosts.

She was an heroic woman of beautiful energy and simplicity, and such a person lives on like the Pacific and old ballads she loved, and will be celebrated by word of mouth and in print by those who never knew her through time to come.

Stanley Dutton Willis

A LETTER OF RESPONSE
By Robinson Jeffers

Tor House
Carmel, California
March 14, 1951

Dear Stanley Willis:

Thank you for the little essay about Una Jeffers. It is beautiful and true, and will be kept here with the poems and other tributes to her that have been sent me.

It has been hard to live without Una. But indeed she is still present here: almost all the objects and books in this house--and the house itself--are of her choosing, so that everything reminds me of her; and even my blonde daughter-in-law, living here with our son Donnan, is rapidly acquiring some of Una's interests and characteristics.

If you can come west I'd be glad to see you again.

Cordially,

Robinson Jeffers

STRONG COUNSEL
By Dana Gioia

ROCK AND HAWK: A Selection of Shorter Poems by Robinson Jeffers. Edited by Robert Hass. Random House. 292 pp. \$19.95.

No major American poet has been treated worse by posterity than Robinson Jeffers. Twenty-five years after his death, he has still not received either a collected poems or a responsible biography. The only comprehensive bibliography of his work appeared in 1933--shortly after Jeffers's sudden rise to fame--and was never updated to cover the remaining three-quarters of his prolific career. His critical and autobiographical prose remains scattered. Although the poet lived and wrote until 1962, the only substantial gathering of his voluminous work appeared half a century ago in Random House's 1938 SELECTED POEMS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS.

In 1955 Horace Gregory called Jeffers the "poet without critics." In 1987, the centennial of the poet's birth, one would hardly revise that verdict. Academic interest in Jeffers remains negligible. No longer considered prominent enough to attack by critics, he is now ignored. Not only is there little first-rate academic commentary on his poetry, compared with the massive scholarship on his most significant contemporaries--Eliot, Pound, Williams, Moore, Stevens, Frost, Crane and Cummings--there isn't even much second-rate writing. What little scholarship appears originates mainly in California, where Jeffers spent virtually all his adult life. Half a century ago he towered as an international literary figure. Now he survives as a regional figure studied mainly by specialists in West Coast authors.

Although no representative historical anthology can exclude Jeffers's verse, few general collections of poetry consider him worth notice. The three widely used, non-historical college textbooks on my shelf--X.J. Kennedy's AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY, John Ciardi and Miller Williams's HOW DOES A POEM MEAN? and John Frederick Nims's WESTERN WIND: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY--include only one short poem by Jeffers in their collective 1,300-plus pages. Poor Jeffers! Even Rod McKuen gets two poems.

As these anthologies suggest, Jeffers is not much taught. An informal poll of friends who teach college-level English revealed that not one was ever assigned a Jeffers poem from high school through graduate study. Nor, it seems important to add, are any of them currently teaching him in their classes. His verse, especially the wild, expansive narratives that made him famous in the 1920s, does not fit into the conventional definitions of modern American poetry. His work is not essentially lyric, elliptical, stylistically innovative or self-referential. Likewise his preoccupations with sexuality, violence, intergenerational conflict and the extremes of mental and physical disease bear little relation to the thematics of his poetic contemporaries. (One can't imagine Wallace Stevens writing on incest or Marianne Moore on patricide.) Instead, Jeffers's poems ask to be compared to the work of novelists and dramatists like Lawrence, Faulkner, Hemingway and O'Neill--a difficult request for academic specialists who usually study these genres in isolation.

The academy's neglect is particularly interesting because Jeffers, unlike most modernist poets, still commands a general readership. Compared with the usual audience for twentieth-century poetry (which is made up mainly of poets, would-be poets, academic specialists and students), Jeffers's readers form an unusual group. Few of them inhabit English departments. If they are at the university at all, they will most likely be found in the sciences. In the author's lifetime they were so numerous that he became one of the best-selling serious poets in American history. Even now enough fans remain to keep fourteen books of his verse in print without the subsidy of a captive student market. His 622-page SELECTED POEMS has been reprinted so many times (with progressively cheaper paper and binding) that Random House has lost count of its sales. Even the meager paperback selection of fifty-eight short poems issued after his death sold over 80,000 copies before it went out of print last year.

In a culture where most intellectuals agree that "poetry makes nothing happen," Jeffers also remains strangely influential. He is the unchallenged laureate of environmentalists. The Sierra Club's lavish folio NOT MAN APART: PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BIG SUR COAST, poems by Jeffers with illustrations by Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and others, helped focus political efforts to preserve that spectacular stretch of California coast the poet celebrated in his verse. It also turned a passage from his 1937 poem "The Answer" into a credo for Western conservationists:

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. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or
drown in despair when his days darken.

Perhaps what makes Jeffers's poetry so important to environmentalists is exactly what repels academics. More than any other American modernist, Jeffers wrote about ideas--not teasing epistemologies, learned allusions or fictive paradoxes--but big, naked, howling ideas that no reader can miss. The directness and clarity of Jeffers's style reflects the priority he put on communicating his world view. Many interesting studies have been written on the style of Eliot and Stevens, for indeed one needs to understand how most modernist poems mean (to use Ciardi's famous formulation) before one can understand what they mean. Jeffers's verse, however, presents no such barriers to an intelligent reader. It states its propositions so lucidly that the critic has no choice but to confront its content. The discussion can no longer be confined within the safe literary categories of formal analysis--internal structure, consistency, thematics, tone and symbolism--that still constitute the overwhelming majority of all academic studies. Instead, he or she must deal with the difficult and disagreeable primary issues of religious belief and morality.

Jeffers' world view certainly never makes it easy for his critics. His self-proclaimed philosophy of "inhumanism" contains something to offend everyone--Christian, Jew, Marxist or humanist--who assumes man's central position in the cosmos. He resolutely refused to be bound by any of the usual allegiances of human society--not merely those of race, class, religion or nation. (Voltaire and Nietzsche had already questioned those pieties.) Jeffers's originality came in going beyond social loyalties to the more fundamental ones of species, time and even--no, I'm not kidding--planet. No poet ever wrote more consistently sub specie aeternitatis. For Jeffers, humanity was ultimately only one species, which happened to gain biological ascendancy (like the bison or the passenger pigeon) over a particular range in a certain epoch. Mankind may be more intelligent or adaptable than other species, but these gifts hardly compensate for its cruelty, greed and arrogance. Before any other imaginative writer Jeffers articulated the immense evil inherent in humanity's assumption that it stands above and apart from the world. He saw the pollution of the environment, the destruction of other species, the squandering of natural resources, the recurrent urge to war, the violent squalor of cities as the inevitable result of a race out of harmony with its own world.

Attempting this cosmic scope, carrying the weight of his harsh message, Jeffers took as great a risk as any more stylistically innovative modernist. He not only risked being pompous and banal with his grave philosophizing. Stating his uncomfortable ideas strongly and lucidly, he risked being wrong. Alone among the modernist poets, he challenged the scientists on their own territory. Unlike most writers, he had studied science seriously in college and graduate school. His break with tradition was intellectual, not stylistic. He accepted the destruction of anthropocentric values explicit in current biology, geology and physics, which humanists had struggled against since the Victorian age. Instead, Jeffers concentrated on articulating the moral, philosophical and, indeed, imaginative implications of those discoveries. He struggled to answer the questions science had been able only to ask: What are man's responsibilities in a world not made solely for him? How does humankind lead a good and meaningful life without God? Jeffers's great triumph is that now--sixty years after he began his radical redefinition of human values--his answers still seem disturbingly fresh and cogent, while the political and social theories of Pound, Yeats, Eliot and others have become musty period pieces.

But Jeffers's poetic independence came at the price of being banished from the academic canon, where the merits of a modernist are still mostly determined by distinctiveness of stylistic innovation and self-referential consistency of vision. In this environment Robert Hass's *ROCK AND HAWK: A SELECTION OF SHORTER POEMS BY ROBINSON JEFFERS* constitutes a major act of restitution. This medium-sized anthology represents, difficult as it is to believe, the first representative selection from Jeffers's life work ever assembled. There are criticisms to be made of the collection, but one must first credit the seriousness and quality of effort displayed here. The book is well conceived, intelligently edited, suavely introduced and beautifully designed. It also contains some of the best poetry ever written by an American.

The critical language we have inherited from modernism makes it difficult to discuss the qualities that distinguish Jeffers's poetry without sounding hopelessly out of touch with contemporary literary taste. To say that his chief imaginative gifts were scope, simplicity, narrative poise and moral seriousness makes him seem closer to a distinguished jurist than a great poet. But there was something of the judge--particularly the Old Testament variety--about Jeffers. Standing apart from the world, he passed dispassionate judgment on his race and civilization, and he found them wanting. Pointing out some grievous contradictions at the core of Western industrial society earned Jeffers a reputation as a bitter misanthrope (he sometimes was) but this verdict hardly invalidates the essential accuracy of his message. As clearly as any Marxist he saw the interdependence of economic and moral ideologies. His genius came in translating these complex socio-political situations into a few stunning images. In "Ave Caesar," for instance, he portrays a crippling contradiction at the heart of America's vision of its destiny:

No bitterness: our ancestors did it.
They were only ignorant and hopeful,
 they wanted freedom but wealth too.
Their children will learn to hope for a Caesar.
Or rather--for we are not aquiline Romans but soft mixed
 colonists--
Some kindly Sicilian tyrant who'll keep
Poverty and Carthage off until the Romans arrive.
We are easy to manage, a gregarious people,
Full of sentiment, clever at mechanics,
 and we love our luxuries.

This short poem shows Jeffers's unique style. His language is direct and conversational without ever being dull or simplistic. The subject unfolds as clearly as in expository prose. A listener can follow the story perfectly, even on first hearing. The language, while strong and concise, never calls so much momentary attention to itself that it overwhelms the narrative line. The images and metaphors are subordinated to a paraphrasable argument. One notices what Jeffers is saying, not how he says it. His subject also has a public importance one rarely sees in modern poetry.

On rereading the poem, however, one notices how much Jeffers has packed into these eight lines. He sets up three temporal planes--the past of the ancestors, the present of the speaker and the future of the children--and outlines the political choices each must make. He manages to condemn American values without bitterness, through a clever rhetorical trick. He begins the poem by discussing contemporary America, but just as the message becomes harsh (at the end of line three) the narrator relocates it metaphorically to the ancient Mediterranean world. Without ever being difficult this metaphor is complex. It shifts twice, each time becoming slightly crueler. First the children will "learn to hope" (through unpleasant experience) for a Caesar (notice they don't get the heroic original but some latter-day autocrat). No sooner has this insult registered, however, than Jeffers qualifies it. His fellow Americans don't even deserve to be called Romans. The Romans (like, by implication, the British) at least once built a great empire civilization. Americans are merely soft colonials like the Sicilians and a petty tyrant is enough to keep them in order.

Even by today's hyperbolic standards Jeffers's public career was remarkable for the speed both of his rise to literary fame and his plunge to critical dismissal. His public breakthrough resembled a young writer's daydream. Having published two volumes of elegantly dull juvenilia, Jeffers was unable to place any of his mature poetry. After years of quiet work he decided in 1924 to publish TAMAR AND OTHER POEMS with a vanity press. For a year after it appeared nothing happened. Then James Rorty and George Sterling decided to use one of Jeffers's new poems as the title piece for CONTINENT'S END, a 1925 anthology of California verse, and the grateful poet sent them both copies of TAMAR. (After all, the 37-year-old author had nearly all the original printed copies still stuffed in his tiny attic.) Suddenly Jeffers's

luck changed. Not only did Rorty review the book ecstatically in March 1925 for The New York Herald Tribune but he also passed on copies to Mark Van Doren, who lauded it a few days later in The Nation, and Babette Deutsch, who told readers in The New Republic that she "felt somewhat as Keats professed to feel, on looking into Chapman's Homer."

Jeffers shipped a coffin-sized crate of books to New York City, where they immediately sold out. By November an expanded trade edition containing Jeffers's most famous poem, "Roan Stallion," was issued by Boni and Liveright. The critical reception was tumultuous. Dozens of excited articles and reviews appeared hailing Jeffers as a great tragic poet. Critics compared him to Sophocles and Shakespeare and ROAN STALLION, TAMAR AND OTHER POEMS went into multiple reprintings. Leonard and Virginia Woolf published a British edition. Even a French translation was reprinted five times. By the end of the decade, Alfred Kreyborg felt obliged to devote the final chapter of his now forgotten but still engaging OUR SINGING STRENGTH: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN POETRY 1620-1930 solely to Jeffers, declaring him the heir to Whitman. When Boni and Liveright went bankrupt, in 1933, thirteen publishers scrambled to sign up Jeffers, who had recently appeared on the cover of Time. The wily Bennett Cerf flew out to Carmel to court him personally. He knew Jeffers's name would add prestige to his fledgling Random House. As Cerf later commented, "There are always a few poets that people think it's smart to have around." Indeed, by then Jeffers was so chic that Carmel real estate brokers used his name in their ads to sell property.

Meanwhile, Jeffers remained in Carmel where he and his beloved, domineering wife, Una, had lived since fall 1914. Carmel then was not the chic resting place for retired financiers and real estate moguls it is today but an isolated rural area with a touch of bohemianism. Writers since Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London had found its breathtaking scenery and its privacy invigorating. But it was more than Carmel's natural magnificence that first drove the couple there. They also needed to escape their past--the long, scandalous breakup of Una's first marriage in Los Angeles and the death of the newlyweds' first daughter at birth. They had hoped to move to England (as Frost, H.D., Eliot and Pound already had), but the outbreak of World War I prevented them. They came instead to Big Sur, their "inevitable place," where they would remain the rest of their lives.

The couple lived simply, without electricity or indoor plumbing, in Tor House, a small stone cottage that Robin, as his few friends called him, had constructed on a headland overlooking the Pacific at Carmel Point. He wrote in the morning, quarried stone for further building in the afternoon and read to his wife and twin sons by lamplight each evening. Little changed for them after he achieved fame, except for the pestering of visitors. But Jeffers's austere, colorful life and patrician good looks made him a favorite subject for the press, and, as with Frost, a popular myth soon began forming around this quiet, private man.

To his credit Jeffers ignored his celebrity. He wanted nothing to do with literary society or worshipful fans. What the 40-year-old author now wanted was to work. Inspired by his sudden if late success, he made up for lost time by embarking on the most remarkable, ambitious and bizarre series of narrative poems in American literature. In the ten years following the acclaim of ROAN STALLION, Jeffers published eight major collections of poetry: THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR, CAWDOR AND OTHER POEMS, DEAR JUDAS AND OTHER OTHER POEMS, DESCENT TO THE DEAD, THURSO'S LANDING, GIVE YOUR HEART TO THE HAWKS, SOLSTICE AND OTHER POEMS and SUCH COUNSELS YOU GAVE ME AND OTHER POEMS--nearly a book a year, almost a thousand pages of verse in all. These poems, which have never been adequately assessed by literary criticism, constitute an American realist and regionalist alternative to the mandarin aestheticism of international modernism. Largely ignored by poets in the two generations after Jeffers, curiously, they are just beginning to have an impact on American literature through the young poets currently reviving narrative verse.

Nearly every volume centers around one or more long narrative poems, usually set in Big Sur. Violent, sexy, subversive, these compelling verse novellas are impossible to describe briefly. Sometimes hard to stomach, they are always difficult to put down. Their tragic stories of family rivalry and primal emotion usually move at lightning pace toward their bloody finales. There is nothing quite like them in American poetry. In sheer narrative energy and visual scope they frequently remind one of movies. Not real films but wild, imaginary ones where high and low art collide--Bergman's CRIES AND WHISPERS reshot as a Peckinpah western or Kurosawa's RASHOMON reset as a California thriller by DePalma. In these poems Jeffers's central human obsessions emerge as the suffocating burden of the past on human freedom, the harsh interdependence of power and sexuality and the impossibility of human salvation. At their worst they become ponderously philosophic and psychologically hyperbolic. At their best, however, as in "Cawdor," they remain among the few successful long poems in modern American literature.

From the beginning these narratives divided Jeffers's audience. Many of his early supporters could not accept the sprawling energy, the lurid violence, the sheer weirdness of THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR. What critics had judged as a young poet's momentary nightmare in "Tamar" or "Roan Stallion" now emerged as Jeffers's considered view of humanity. Each book fueled new controversy. Conservative readers bridled at Jeffers's explicit sexuality, his strident anti-Christianity and anti-nationalism. Leftists found his distrust of all political programs for human improvement repugnant. His use of free verse and Freudian psychology likewise alienated literary reactionaries. Meanwhile, the New Critics rightly perceived Jeffers's commitment to a poetry of direct statement and linear narrative as a challenge to the high modernist mode they had championed. To the degree they acknowledged Jeffers at all, the New Critics attacked him savagely. Yvor Winters suggested that if Jeffers truly believed his own philosophy, he should kill himself. Randall Jarrell mocked him as "Old Rocky Face, perched on his sea crag . . . who must prefer a hawk to a man, a stone to a hawk." All factions agreed Jeffers had no place in textbooks or anthologies.

The controversial long poems caused Jeffers another problem as well: they overshadowed his shorter work. Reviewers treated him like a novelist. As his collections appeared, they focused on the central narrative and ignored how many stunning short poems were literally tucked away in the back pages of each book. The critical agenda was to debate the psychological realism and moral impetus of each histrionic story, not listen carefully to the sad, quiet music of Jeffers's lyric poems. Complaining in The New Yorker about "Robinson Jeffers's latest set-piece of human savagery," Louise Bogan was so busy damning the title poem of SUCH COUNSELS YOU GAVE ME that she missed "The Purse-Seine," "The Answer" and "The Beaks of Eagles" in the same volume, all of them, I believe, permanent additions to American literature.

Though Jeffers's books continued to sell well, by the end of the 1930s his critical reputation had collapsed, never to rise again. The Depression had made his cosmic pessimism less palatable to intellectuals caught up in international politics. Jeffers still commanded a small but devoted group of serious readers, but the literary establishment had deserted him. The orthodoxy of Eliot and Joyce had banished all other variants of modernism. Finally, Pearl Harbor did what little damage to his reputation there was left to deliver. For years Jeffers had warned that America's entry into a new world war would drag the country into the temptations of imperialism. Now his refusal to endorse the American war effort as an absolute good fighting absolute evil disgusted many of his remaining readers.

Surely not only international but literary politics contributed to Jeffers's fall from public grace. He had no interest in the literary world, and once the initially receptive literati realized his indifference, they gradually returned it. Even then the American poetry world was a buzzing network of personal loyalties, interests and obligations that collectively shaped literary fashion. Unlike a Pound or Frost, Jeffers never developed the relationships that sustain a writer's reputation through the vacillations of opinion. Hating big cities, he scarcely stirred from Carmel. (Eleven years once passed between visits to San Francisco, only a hundred miles up the coast.) He would not teach or lecture. He scarcely answered his mail, and even then he was more likely to respond to a serviceman than a fellow writer. He declined all invitations to read from his work. The one reading tour of his career--at the age of 54, in 1941--was undertaken only to pay his property taxes in a Carmel growing too expensive for him. Worst of all for his reputation, Jeffers stayed in California, which the literary establishments of London and New York have never taken seriously. Has any American author ever been able to build and sustain a major literary presence from the West Coast? As writers from Allen Ginsberg to Joan Didion know, if one lives out West, one must also keep an apartment in Manhattan.

By 1948 even Random House had grown impatient with their former prestige author. Reading the manuscript of THE DOUBLE AXE, Jeffers's editor, Saxe Commins, declared it "proof of early senility" to his colleagues and forcefully persuaded the author to tone down its political language. Jeffers eventually dropped ten short poems from the manuscript and made changes in eight more, mostly removing slighting comments about Roosevelt and Truman. But Commins convinced Cerf to print an embarrassing disclaimer on the dust

jacket and front section of the volume to announce that "Random House feels compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet." Meanwhile, Cerf, always the businessman, commented hopefully that this "footnote" would "attract added space and attention from reviewers." Thus high principle and low commercialism combined to reduce the public reception of one of Jeffers's most powerful volumes to a political squabble. By the time the reviewers began their attack Jeffers probably didn't care. He now lived almost totally in the quiet isolation of his family. When Una died two years later, he sank gradually into an alcoholic loneliness waiting for his own death. The end of his last long poem, "Hungerfield," written in 1954, is heartbreaking. The violent story finishes, and suddenly Jeffers breaks into an unexpected lyric coda:

Here is the poem, dearest; you will never read
it nor hear it. You were more beautiful
Than a hawk flying; you were faithful and a lion heart like this
rough hero Hungerfield. But the ashes have fallen
And the flame has gone up; nothing human remains. You are earth
and air; you are in the beauty of the ocean
And the great streaming triumphs of sundown; you are alive and
well in tender young grass rejoicing
When soft rain falls all night, and little rosy-fleeced clouds
float on the dawn. --I shall be with you presently.

A few years later Jeffers joined his wife in the nonhuman world. His ashes were buried with hers in the Tor House garden. "Posthumous long before his death," as Robert Zaller put it, his obituaries displayed "chiefly the surprise that he had still been living." He had never won a major literary award, but the bulk of his work was still in print.

In attempting to rehabilitate Jeffers's reputation, Robert Hass has sidestepped the central issue in evaluating the poet's legacy by limiting his selections for ROCK AND HAWK to Jeffers's shorter work. Fortunately, he cheats a little by stretching the definition of "shorter" to include two fiery medium-length narratives--the early "Roan Stallion" and the late "Hungerfield" (twenty-one and twenty-two tightly packed pages, respectively). But beyond these Hass offers only two unpersuasive excerpts from THE TOWER BEYOND TRAGEDY (Jeffers's reworking of THE ORESTEIA) and THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR as well as the two lyric set-pieces from "Cawdor" that Jeffers himself chose for his 1938 SELECTED POEMS. One can understand, if not totally sympathize with, Hass's conservatism. He wants to present Jeffers at his most accessible and uncontroversial best. Certainly the case he makes for Jeffers in this volume is irresistible, if incomplete.

No reader ever entirely approves of someone else's selections from a favorite poet. But the usual grumbling aside, Hass does an excellent job. Even in his short work Jeffers wrote obsessively about a few subjects, and Hass displays exemplary taste in presenting just enough of the best poems of each sort to register the author's fixations without wearying the reader. Hass's choices also reflect some interesting biases beyond the omission of any long narratives. He generally favors the earlier work to the later. Most of the poems I would wish to add come from the second half of the canon. Poems like "Hellenistics," "Cassandra," "The Eye" and "Why Do You Still Make War?" seem conspicuous in their absence. Hass also reprints virtually all of DESCENT TO THE DEAD (an atypical collection written after Jeffers visited Britain and Ireland), presumably to highlight the unacknowledged debt Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney owe the elder poet.

Knowledgeable and sympathetic though Hass is, however, he does make a few curious mistakes. Organizing his selections according to the original volumes from which they are drawn, he places Jeffers's famous "Shine, Perishing Republic" in the wrong book. Meanwhile, going to the length of presenting the poems from AMERICAN POETRY 1927: A MISCELLANY as a separate group (which Jeffers himself did not do in his SELECTED POEMS), Hass conflates the title as AN AMERICAN MISCELLANY. He also misconstrues the lineation of "Hungerfield" at one point to give the poem a bizarre visual leap on the page at odds with Jeffers's intention. (This unfortunately is a common problem in reprinting long-lined free verse, about which Jeffers himself frequently complained.) These are small mistakes but annoying ones. The book also lacks an index of poems by title and, worse yet, an index by first line. Publishers today assume that readers no longer search out a poem because a particular line has been buzzing around in their heads. And the publishers are almost right. Most contemporary poetry is eminently forgettable.

But Jeffers is a distractingly memorable writer. Rereading his poems in ROCK AND HAWK, I found an astonishing number of his lines tumbling around in my head. But hearing them there, I noticed it wasn't only their strong music I savored but the hard edge of their wisdom. They held their own against experience. It was good to live with these poems again. Jeffers has entered his second century quite splendidly.

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This review essay is reprinted here with the permission of NATION magazine where it appeared in the 16 January 1988 issue, pages 56-64. Dana Gioia writes frequently on poetry for THE HUDSON REVIEW and elsewhere. A book of his poems, DAILY HOROSCOPE, was published by Graywolf Press.
