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Robinson Jeffers Newsletter

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CONTENTS

NEWS AND NOTES	Page	2
BOOKS IN PRINT, 1989	Page	4
UNA JEFFERS: A NOTE ON ANCESTRY	Page	7
A CZECH POET IN CARMEL: MIROSLAV HOLUB By Naiman & Hurych	Page	9
THE TEMPTATIONS OF DESPAIRE: JEFFERS AND THE FAERIE QUEENE By Alex Vardamis	Page	11
TAMAR'S OEDIPAL TRANSCENDENCE By Robert Zaller	Page	13
REVIEW OF WILLIAM EVERSON'S	Page	20
THE EXCESSES OF GOD, ROBINSON JEFFERS AS A RELIGIOUS FIGURE By Robert Ian Scott		

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NEWS AND NOTES

THE ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER: A JUBILEE GATHERING is available through the Occidental College Bookstore (Los Angeles, CA 90041) for \$20.00, plus California sales tax and postage. It contains sixteen articles, three check-lists, a series of Una Jeffers' letters, and illustrations. Selections were chosen to represent the entire timespan of the Newsletter and the variety of materials--memoirs, explications, reports, articles, and so forth. The book also features a second printing of Jeffers' touching lyric to Una on the second anniversary of her death, "Whom Should I Write For?"

The Arundel Press edition of SONGS AND HEROES, twenty-two previously unpublished poems of Robinson Jeffers, was released just in time to be displayed in the "Art Books" section of the Frankfurt International Book Fair, October 5-10, which this year hosted 7,500 publishers from 92 countries, with 100,000 new titles. From the FLAGONS AND APPLES era, the undated poems were given by Una to her sister Daisy Bartley during the process of a 1920s Tor House housecleaning. The manuscripts are now in the Special Collections Library of California State University, Long Beach. The poems are presented in a 50 copy deluxe edition printed on Gutenberg paper, priced at \$245, and in a 200 copy edition printed on Frankfurt creme, priced at \$165. The text is set in 16 pt Centaur by Mackenzie & Harris, with hand-set 24 pt Castellar used for decorative initials and titling. The books are hand-sewn and bound by Bela Blau in Dutch silk. A short "Introduction" and "Notes" are by Robert Brophy. Arundel Press, 1842 Kelton Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90025. 213-479-4456.

Gloria Stuart has edited and published a book, "Tor House Inscriptions," recording and identifying the quotations to be found printed and carved throughout Tor House and Hawk Tower. These are gathered in a 50 copy edition which is available from Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, at \$500.

Ward Ritchie will soon release through the Book Club of California a facsimile edition of Una Jeffers' melodeon music book which was illustrated by drawings done by Robinson Jeffers.

FINE PRINT (July 1988, pages 125-27) contains an essay, "Peter and the Wolf Editions," describing the portfolio POINT LOBOS (1987, see RJN No. 70) and discussing Jeffers' verse, William Everson's preface and Wolf van den Bussche's photographs.

Poetry critic Helen Vendler has an essay review, "Huge Pits of Darkness, High Peaks of Light," in the December 1988 NEW YORKER magazine (pages 91-98), assessing Jeffers' career and prosody while examining Robert Haas's Random House edition of Jeffers' selected poetry, ROCK AND HAWK. Although Vendler's assessment is largely unfriendly (and sometimes uninformed and even prejudiced), it is significant and stimulating.

The fall 1989 issue of QUARRY WEST magazine (Santa Cruz) will be devoted to eight brief Jeffers articles under the guest editorship of Alan Soldofsky of the Center for Poetry and Literature at San Jose, California.

The February issue of WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE (Logan, Utah, pages 323-352) reports 53 Jeffers items in its annual bibliography on writers of the West.

The August 1988 number of the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation Newsletter (P.O. Box 1887, Carmel, CA 93921) features several three to six paragraph notes--"Why Do We Need Jeffers' Poems" by Robert I. Scott, "Jeffers as Environmentalist" and "Jeffers and War" by Jean Ritter-Murray, "War as Cosmic Process" by Robert Zaller, "War in Context of the Early Poems" by Tim Hunt, and "What the Earth Watches: Jeffers on the Ultimate Irrelevance of War" by Robert I. Scott. The Newsletter announced the Annual October Robinson Jeffers Tor House dinner and program, held at the Casa Fiesta Room at Hacienda Carmel on October 22, 1988. Tim Hunt was honored as editor of the Stanford Press COLLECTED POETRY OF ROBINSON JEFFERS. Joseph Langland spoke on the importance which nature and sense of place have in human life and on selected writers who have been concerned with the natural world.

William G. Miles is offering a series of ten photographs of Tor House and points along the Sur Coast under the rubric "Jeffers Country Series." In a limited edition of 100 each, these photographs are to be issued one per year. The first, "Hawk Tower," 18x23 inches framed, can be purchased until December 31, 1989 for \$275 prepaid. Order or inquire: William G. Miles, P.O. Box 2103, West Sacramento, CA 95691. Tel. 916-371-2740.

The Czech version of Jeffers' CAWDOR (the Hippolytus/Phaedra story, 1928) from Kamil Bednar's translation has been dubbed for German television and will be aired this spring.

The renowned Czech film director Ota Koval, who was responsible for the televised CAWDOR, is preparing the production of THE LOVING SHEPHERDESS, which will be filmed on the Siberian Coast south of Vladivostok.

Ms. Sigrid Koehler has presented a thesis, "Weltanschauung des Robinson Jeffers in seinen Kurzgedichten" ("The Worldview in Robinson Jeffers' Short Poems") at the University of Heidelberg, Spring 1988.

Robert Brophy gave an illustrated lecture, "Robinson Jeffers: Proto-Ecologist and Poet of California," at the Amerika Institut of the University of Munich, November 28, 1988.

The Newsletter regretfully notes the rather sudden death of Herbert Arthur Klein, whose essay, "The Poet Who Spoke of It," opens the selections of the ROBINSON JEFFERS: A JUBILEE GATHERING noted elsewhere. Herb Klein was a supporter of the Newsletter from the beginning. Among other writings, he was author of science texts for young people--in which he invariably quoted from Jeffers.

CORRECTION: In the RJN: A JUBILEE GATHERING, page 48, the photo notation should read "Lough Carra" and not "Off Horn Head." According to Garth Jeffers, the oarsman in the foreground is James Reilly, family steward of George Moore's estate. The Jeffers family had gone to Lough Carra in July 1937 so Una could visit Castle Island where Moore's ashes were.

BOOKS IN PRINT, 1989

By Robinson Jeffers:

- THE ALPINE CHRIST AND OTHER POEMS. William Everson, ed.
Cayucos, California: Cayucos Press, 1974. \$20.00
- BRIDES OF THE SOUTH WIND: Poems 1917-1922. Cayucos, 1974. \$80.00
- CAWDOR AND MEDEA. New York: New Directions, 1970. Paper \$8.95
- THE COLLECTED POEMS. VOL. I. Stanford University Press, 1988. \$60.00
- DEAR JUDAS AND OTHER POEMS. Reissue edition. Liveright (W.W. Norton),
1977. Paper \$7.95
- THE DOUBLE AXE AND OTHER POEMS. Reissue edition. New York:
Liveright (W.W. Norton), 1977. \$7.95
- FLAGONS & APPLES. Cayucos, 1970. \$20.00
- POETRY, GONGORISM, & A THOUSAND YEARS. Reprint of 1949 ed.
Folcroft, 1974. \$20.00
- ROCK AND HAWK: A SELECTION OF SHORTER POEMS. Robert Haas, ed.
New York: Random House, 1987. \$19.95
- ROBINSON JEFFERS: INTERJOCHTE ERDE (SUBJECTED EARTH)
Munich: Piper, 1987. DM 16.50
- SELECTED POEMS. Random House (Vintage), 1965. \$4.95
- SELECTED POEMS: Centenary Edition. Colin Falck, ed.
Manchester, England: Carcanet Press, 1987. £6.95
- SELECTED POETRY. Random House, 1938. \$24.95
- WHAT ODD EXPEDIENTS AND OTHER POEMS. Rob Scott, ed.
Camden, Conn.: Archon, 1981. \$20.00
- THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR. Reissue. New York: Liveright
(W.W. Norton), 1977. Paper \$7.70
- Special Printings:
- THE LAST CONSERVATIVE. Amador City, CA: Quintessence, 1978.
Paper \$40.00
- POINT LOBOS: A Portfolio of 15 Poems. Oakland, CA: Peter and the
Wolf Editions, 1987. \$3000.00

SHINE, PERISHING REPUBLIC. San Francisco: James Linden,
1987. \$375.00

SONGS AND HEROES. Los Angeles: Arundel Press, 1988. \$165.00/\$245.00

WHERE SHALL I TAKE YOU TO: THE LOVE LETTERS OF UNA AND ROBINSON JEFFERS.
Covelo, CA: Yolla Bolly, 1987. \$245.00

On Robinson Jeffers:

Adamic, Louis. ROBINSON JEFFERS: A PORTRAIT. Reprint of 1929 edition.
Library binding. Arden Library. \$27.50

Adamic, Louis. ROBINSON JEFFERS: A PORTRAIT. Reprint of 1929 edition.
Library binding. Folcroft. \$16.50

Alberts, S.S. A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WORKS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS. 1966.
Small Press Distr. \$25.00

Antoninus, Brother (William Everson). ROBINSON JEFFERS: FRAGMENTS OF
AN OLDER FURY. Berkeley, CA: Oyez, 1970. \$7.50

Bennett, Melba B. ROBINSON JEFFERS AND THE SEA. Reprint of 1936 ed.
Library binding. Folcroft. \$20.00

Boswell, Jeanetta. ROBINSON JEFFERS AND THE CRITICS, 1912-1983.
Scarecrow Author Bibliographies, 1986. \$18.50

Brophy, Robert J. ROBINSON JEFFERS: MYTH, RITUAL AND SYMBOL IN HIS
NARRATIVE POEMS. Camden, Conn.: Archon, 1976. \$29.50

Carpenter, Frederic I. ROBINSON JEFFERS. New College & University
Press (Twayne United States Authors Series), 1962. Paper \$8.95

Coffin, Arthur B. ROBINSON JEFFERS: POET OF INHUMANISM. University
of Wisconsin Press, 1971. \$32.50

Dotson, John. THE ENDURING VOICE: A TOR HOUSE JOURNAL. San Luis
Obispo, CA: Mariposa Press, 1987. \$12.00

Everson, William. THE EXCESSES OF GOD: ROBINSON JEFFERS AS A RELIGIOUS
FIGURE. Stanford University Press, 1988. \$29.50

Gilbert, Rudolph. SHINE, PERISHING REPUBLIC. Studies in Poetry, No. 38,
1969. Reprint of 1936 ed. Library binding. Haskell. \$75.00

Karman, James. ROBINSON JEFFERS: POET OF CALIFORNIA. Literary West
Series. Chronicle Books, 1987. Paper \$6.95

Klein, Mina C. & Klein, H. Arthur. JEFFERS OBSERVED. Amador City:
Quintessence, 1986. \$24.95

Nolte, William H. ROCK AND HAWK: ROBINSON JEFFERS & THE ROMANTIC AGONY.
University of Georgia Press, 1978. \$22.00

Powell, Lawrence C. ROBINSON JEFFERS: THE MAN & HIS WORK. Century
Bookbindery, 1983. \$50.00

Powell, Lawrence C. ROBINSON JEFFERS: THE MAN & HIS WORK. Gordon Press, 1973.
\$59.95

Powell, Lawrence C. ROBINSON JEFFERS: THE MAN & HIS WORK. American
Bibliography Series, No. 32. Haskell, 1969. Reprint of 1934 Edition.
\$49.95

ROBINSON JEFFERS, POET: A CENTENNIAL EXHIBITION. Los Angeles: Occidental
College, 1987. Paper \$8.00; Hardbound \$20.00

ROBINSON JEFFERS: POETRY AND RESPONSE. Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1987.
\$6.00

THE ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER: A JUBILEE GATHERING. Los Angeles: Occidental
College Bookstore, 1988. \$20.00

Vardamis, Alex A. THE CRITICAL REPUTATION OF ROBINSON JEFFERS:
A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL STUDY. Camden: Archon, 1972. \$30.00

UNA JEFFERS: A NOTE ON ANCESTRY

Orlando B. Call--Baptist Minister (Una Jeffers' grandfather). Native of Colerain, Massachusetts, of Scotch descent. Married Caroline C. (Crandall) Call of Providence, Rhode Island, of English descent.

They came to Ingham County, Michigan in 1858, acquired land here and lived on a farm. There were eleven children in the family. Four sons served in the Civil War.

1. John M. Call lost his life in the second battle of Bull Run. His leg was shattered by a shell and he did not survive two leg amputations. He left two children. A daughter, Eva M., married William Almy of New York.
2. Henry Call served two terms during the war, was three times wounded and discharged on account of the wounds. Afterwards, he was accepted as a sharpshooter and was again wounded. He lived in London, Tennessee, and received a pension.
3. Augustus T. Call served two years with the First Michigan Sharpshooters, was wounded, his lung penetrated. He was postmaster at Lakeview, Montcalm County, Michigan, and received a pension of \$10.00 per month.
4. Harrison O. Call. Postmaster at Mason, Michigan. A man known for his integrity and intelligence--

Harrison O. Call (Una Jeffers' father). Born in Springport, Cayuga County, New York, April 17, 1842--died January 16, 1926 in Mason. He received his education in country schools. At the breaking out of the Civil War, he was attending Union School at Corunna, Michigan.

He enlisted in Company A of the Twentieth Michigan Infantry August 9, 1862. For six months he was detailed by duty as a scout in Kentucky and Tennessee. He took part in the Battle of Fredericksburg, also at Horseshoe Bend and Green River Ford. He was in the Battle of the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania, where they were engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

At North Anna River he received a slight wound in the knee from a minié ball. While scouting with Captain M. A. Hogan, they penetrated enemy lines a distance of ten miles and captured five rebel soldiers.

He was honorably discharged May 30, 1865. Mr. Call was proud of the distinction that he was one with thirty others who opened the way in the Confederate lines and took the first artillery into Petersburg, Virginia. His regiment with First Michigan Sharpshooters and the Second Michigan Infantry were the first to raise their colors in that city.

On returning home, he entered public school in Lansing, Michigan, to complete his education. On October 20, 1867, he married Eunie E. Lamb of Bowling Green, Ohio--where she was born October 27, 1851--a daughter of Dr. William G. and Pamela (Chapman) Lamb, natives of Ohio.

[Their] three children:

1. Carrie P. Call b. August 25, 1868, d. 1956
2. Edith E. Call b. September 30, 1870, d.---
3. Harry W. Call b. July 29, 1876, d. 1893

Eunie E. (Lamb) Call d. October 24, 1876.

Second marriage. [Harrison O. Call]--February 15, 1881--married Isabel Lindsay, b. June 17, 1855, d. July 27, 1940. She was the daughter of John and Elizabeth (Donnan) Lindsay; they were natives of Lenawee County, Michigan.

[Their] children:

1. Una Call b. January 6, 1884, d. 1950
2. Daisy Call b. 1895, d. 1975
3. Violet Call b. 1895, d. 1985

Mr. Call was a member of the First Baptist Church. He served as deacon for over thirty years. Also served as church clerk, trustee and historian.

He led an active life in the community--taught school as a young man. In 1874 [he] served as Justice of the Peace, in 1879 was Ingham County deputy sheriff, was Ingham County truant officer 1911-1919, was for four years deputy school commissioner, serving under his daughter, Daisy Bartley, who was the Ingham County school commissioner. He served the City of Mason as alderman, street commissioner, city marshal and postmaster. He was associated with the Knights of Pythias and was a Master Mason and member of the G.A.R. and Post Commander.

The above information is from PORTRAIT AND BIOGRAPHICAL ALBUM OF INGHAM AND LIVINGSTON COUNTIES, MICHIGAN by Chapman Brothers, November 1891. Some dates of the family are from Violet (Call) Hinkley notes. The transcript, handwritten, was provided by Mrs. Ellsworth Brown, historian of the Baptist Church, Mason, Michigan. Courtesy of Garth Jeffers.

A CZECH POET IN CARMEL: MIROSLAV HOLUB

By Sandra Naiman and Jitka Hurych

By the time Robinson Jeffers died in 1962, his work was possibly better known in Czechoslovakia than in the United States. When the Czech translation of *THE LOVING SHEPHERDESS* appeared in 1961, an edition of 5,000 copies sold out within a couple of days, which would have been the equivalent of selling 100,000 copies within a few days in the United States.¹

One reason for Jeffers' popularity in Czechoslovakia was that the translations by Kamil Bednar were beautiful poems in and by themselves--not surprisingly, since Bednar was a poet. However, his success in interpreting Jeffers to Czech readers was probably a result, as well as a cause, of Jeffers' appeal to the Czech soul. Bednar himself was so swept away by Jeffers' poetry that he announced his intention to devote his life to translating it.²

Jeffers captivated Czech readers because the country he described was so exotic. The seascape of gulls and pelicans, of fog-drift and fishing-boats, "the flight of the twilight herons" over Point Lobos is as remote as possible from the Czechoslovak scene; in little, landlocked Czechoslovakia, most people live in urban areas. To a Czech, the Big Sur scenery is the landscape of dream. Not only is it appealing in itself, but it readily constellates attractive feelings of freedom and expansiveness.

That Jeffers' poetry deeply impressed the California coast on the Czech imagination as both picture and symbol is clear from the way the distinguished contemporary Czech poet Miroslav Holub responded to Carmel when he visited the United States shortly after Jeffers' death. Holub reported his impressions in *ANDEL NA KOLECKACH*, which went through several Czech editions and won a publisher's award but has never been translated into English. The title means "Angel on Wheels" and probably owes something to Jack Kerouac and something to the fact that Holub was everywhere impressed by how importantly "wheels" figure in American life.

Holub obviously came to Carmel with a definite picture of how that spectacular promontory would look, based on his knowledge of Robinson Jeffers' work:

Carmel, California

Robinson Jeffers lived here.

Yes! From these hills the shepherdess descended on her journey to the madrone-tree; and somewhere around here Hungerfield fought Death. And here, under the cliff, naked Tamar bathed in the foam-flecked sea, while cypress trees hovered in the white sand like phantoms.

Yes. Murmuring forest and fragrant eucalyptus trees. Red flowers heavy with the evening. The first star appears over the black rock. Yes! But overhead, an Explorer flies through the sky like a planet that has broken loose; and down here, you have to jump from one side of the asphalt road to the other, dodging Buicks and Chevrolets. Looking for a landscape where prophets wrestle with demons, you find a neighborhood of luxurious villas radiating green fluorescent light from their TV screens. Looking for wilderness, you find motels and real estate agencies, banks and restaurants. Looking for Robinson Jeffers' rock house on the cliff, you find only a villa among other villas in the beech tree thicket, and a rock tower where a radio cheerfully howls and an amiable kid is reducing a pile of last year's leaves to smoke that chokes you.

And looking for just one square foot of pure forest or pure rock, you find that anything else is possible. Every tree and every rock have been purchased and are "private" and are guarded by ever-present eight-cylinder sentries watching you with their half-dimmed eyes, astonished because they don't remember ever having seen anybody who would look for anything--be it poetry, love, or death--on foot.

For a day and a half I looked for a place to be alone with nature in Carmel, trying to escape its maze of highways and villas and department stores, Holman's and Wells Fargo Banks, the Hide-A-Way Inn. It was no use. There is no escape from civilization.

Robinson Jeffers has been dead for two months. Sometimes months seem like decades.

From Carmel I was going to Monterey by bus. Sitting in an empty waiting room, I watched a little brown fly climbing a Pepsi-Cola bottle. "You see how it is," I told him. He crawled away, his eyes shining like gold.³

References

1. H. Arthur Klein, "Czech Poet, Jeffers Translator: Kamil Bednar, A Memoir and Tribute," ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER, No. 35 (1973): 10, 14.
2. Kamil Bednar, "Robinson Jeffers in Czechoslovakia," ROBINSON JEFFERS NEWSLETTER, No. 13 (1966): 3.
3. Miroslav Holub, ANDEL NA KOLECKACH (Praha: Ceskoslovensky Spisovatel, 1963): 20-21. The translation is ours.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF DESPAIRE: JEFFERS AND THE FAERIE QUEENE

By Alex A. Vardamis

Visitors to Tor House, Robinson Jeffers' home in Carmel, California, are shown the room where Jeffers died in 1962. There docents read Jeffers' poem, "The Bed by the Window," which begins, "I chose the bed downstairs by the sea-- window for a good death-bed/ When we built the house. . . ." The poem continues, "I often regard it [Death], / With neither dislike nor desire; rather with both so equalled / That they kill each other and a crystalline interest/ Remains alone. . . ." On an exposed beam above that bed Jeffers painted, some sixty years ago, lines from Edmund Spenser's poetic allegory, THE FAERIE QUEENE:

Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please.

Docents and scholars generally see in the inscription Jeffers' stoic acceptance of death. Jeffers' poem, "The Bed by the Window," which appeared in 1932, is often similarly interpreted. But a reading, in context, of the Spenser passage, reveals a deeper ambiguity in Jeffers' attitude towards death.

The lines from Spenser appear in Book 1, Canto 9, Stanza 40 of THE FAERIE QUEENE. In Canto 9, the Redcrosse knight, accompanied by the Lady Una, encounters Despaire, who attempts to convince him to kill himself. They meet in a cave. At their feet lies the fresh corpse of a fallen knight, a victim of suicide. As part of his discourse, Despaire, in Stanza 40, speaks temptingly of death, saying:

What if some litle paine the passage have,
That makes fraile flesh to feare the bitter wave?
Is not short paine well borne, that brings long ease,
And layes the soule to sleepe in quiet grave?

Despaire concludes with the two lines that appear over Jeffers' bed, "Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas," etc. The Redcrosse knight has met his most formidable foe and is seduced by the argument. Finally Despaire gives the Redcrosse knight the means to kill himself: ". . . Swords, ropes, poison, fire, / . . . But when as none of them he saw him take, / He to him raught a dagger sharpe and keene, / And gave it to him in hand." The Redcrosse knight raises his hand to kill himself. At that moment, the Lady Una stays his hand:

Out of his hand she snatcht the cursed knife,
And threw it to the ground, enraged rife,
And to him said, "Fie, fie, faint harted knight,
What meanest thou by this reprochfull strife?

.

Come, come away, fraile, feeble, fleshly wight,
 Ne let vaine words bewitch thy manly hart,
 Ne divelish thoughts dismay thy constant spright.

.
 Arise, Sir knight arise, and leave this cursed place.

And thus, through Una's intervention, the Redcrosse knight, having overcome the deadliest and most treacherous of his foes, leaves the abode of Despaire and turns his back on suicide.

Certainly Jeffers knew, in context, the lines inscribed above his bed. That his wife bore the same name as Spenser's Lady Una must have given the lines a special significance.

Elsewhere Jeffers recognized the seductiveness of suicide. In his later poem, "The Deer Lay Down Their Bones," written after his wife's death, Jeffers deals explicitly with this attraction. In this poem, the poet finds a sanctuary of death, a place where fatally wounded deer go to die. He is tempted to end his life there.

But that's a foolish thing to confess and a little cowardly. We know that
 life
 Is on the whole quite equally good and bad, mostly gray neutral, and can be
 endured
 To the dim end, no matter what magic of grass, water and precipice, and
 pain of wounds,
 Makes death look dear.

The poet wonders why ". . . wait ten years more or less, / Before I crawl out on a ledge of rock and die snapping, like a wolf / Who has lost his mate?" And then he recalls, "I am bound by my own thirty-year-old decision: who drinks the wine / Should take the dregs." The "thirty-year-old decision," in this context, must have been a conscious choice to renounce suicide. The specific time references in "The Deer Lay Down Their Bones" would indicate that the decision was reached in the early 1920's, a period of personal turmoil and of immense change in Jeffers' poetic style. Jeffers' inscription, on the beam above his chosen death bed, of Despaire's argument for suicide, is roughly coincident with this period.

Suicide was not uncommon in the social and intellectual milieu Jeffers encountered after his move to Carmel in 1914. Among the California Bohemians who frequented Carmel and who killed themselves were Jack London and Carrie Sterling, the wife of the San Francisco poet, George Sterling who became Jeffers' good friend, and one of his earliest and greatest admirers. In 1926 George Sterling, too, committed suicide. As quoted in S.S. Alberts' A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WORKS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS, Jeffers describes a dream he

had during the night before he learned of Sterling's death. In the dream Jeffers found himself with Sterling in "the interior of an ancient church, a solid place of damp stone about which the earth had crept up." Jeffers writes, "Sterling and I were there in the stone twilight . . . and I said though it was pleasant we mustn't stay, it was time to return out-doors. But he [Sterling] preferred to stay, and I returned alone." The setting of the dream resembles the cave of Despaire in "The Faerie Queene." As the Redcrosse knight resisted the temptation of suicide, so Jeffers did not follow his friend into death.

And yet Jeffers was attracted to suicide. The docents of Tor House do well to stress the importance of the lines so carefully painted on the beam above Jeffers' bed. However they are no simple expression of the peace that comes after death. Taken within the context of THE FAERIE QUEENE, the words of Despaire proclaim the debt the poet owed to his wife, Una. They were, as well, for Jeffers, a warning against the seductive charm of suicide.

TAMAR'S OEDIPAL TRANSCENDENCE

By Robert Zaller

"The Death of the father opens the reign of violence (and that is indeed what it is from the beginning), and violence against the father, the son--or patricidal writing--cannot avoid exposing itself."¹

Jacques Derrida's remark stands as a commentary on a major strain of Western writing and experience from OEDIPUS REX to a work such as John Calvin Batchelor's THE BIRTH OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF ANTARCTICA. It is a strain that may be said to have preoccupied our culture since the revival of Arianism with the Reformation of the sixteenth century. What the Reformation did, in undermining the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son that had been the long and laborious accomplishment of the Roman Catholic church, was to make each man the son and each woman the daughter of God directly, each nakedly accountable for his or her behavior, each under the burden of obedience and rebellion. To the ecstatic English Antinomian Gerrard Winstanley, writing in the mid-seventeenth century, this meant "the rising up of Christ in sons and daughters,"² that is, the literal subsumption of Christ in living men and women. For Winstanley, there was no intercessory Christ between man and God; Christ was neither a metaphysical nor an historical entity, but a figure for the divine birthright of man, who was given the kingdom of earth to make his own heaven of. Still less was there a mediating church, which in Winstanley's eyes was simply a Jacob-like device to cozen man out of his earth's empire; and in THE TRUE LAW OF FREEDOM, Winstanley's design for a utopian commonwealth, the death penalty, wholly eliminated in some of his earlier writing, was reinstated for anyone attempting to ply the trade of clergyman.

Robinson Jeffers' father was a clergyman, two-and-a-half centuries later; and in the interim, not merely had the ontological status and authority of the Son been shaken, but that of the Father as well. The historical Jesus of Renan, David Strauss and others, pallidly sentimentalized in the Victorian stereopticon of picture postcards and neo-Gothic glass, was a radically denatured figure, far more in need of substance and support than apt to provide it for others. As for God the Father, the deus absconditus of Pascal and Matthew Arnold and the unnecessary hypothesis of Lamarck and Thomas Henry Huxley, he had long ceased to be the guarantor of earth of Winstanley's bright vision, nor even the public prop of monarchy, morality, or the nostrums of redemption hawked by liberal politicians and parricidal revolutionaries.

The Rev. William Hamilton Jeffers was a Presbyterian, that dour denomination most characteristic of the religious sensibility we call Puritan. The Puritan was the most highly wrought product of the trauma of the Reformation, God-internalized and at the same time God-fearing, with that dissociated yet intensely powerful mentality so shudderingly described by Eliot. But the Presbyterians of Nathaniel Hawthorne's day were no longer those of John Milton's. The Rev. Jeffers was learned and grave, but his faith was hollow at the core. Like his avatar Arthur Barclay in *THE WOMEN AT POINT SUR*, he was a pilgrim who abandoned his ministry, his flock, and in a religious sense his family. To that family he was at last as remote as the God he seemed to be seeking. The poetry of Robinson Jeffers is, almost from first to last, a testimony to his sense of abandonment and to his quest for a father who had hidden himself as the God of his own fathers had been gradually hidden from him.

That quest is most obvious in such early poems as "The Year of Mourning," "To His Father," and, above all, the vast fragment of "The Alpine Christ," in which Jeffers projects himself alternately as a bereaved son seeking his lost father among the Alps and a Christ-figure expelled from heaven to win his patrimony on earth. Jeffers' failure to integrate this double movement of search and expulsion is symptomatic of a larger repression of meaning. If we take the youthful mourner and the incarnated Christ as two sides of the same archetypal son, then it appears that each movement of the former toward the Father is cancelled by one by the latter away from him. But this scheme too breaks down on closer examination. The Christ figure, Manuel Ruegg, is represented as sent forth on a mission; his deeper anxiety, one indeed borne out in the course of the poem, is that he is being expelled from the Father's presence (a maneuver whose hostility is concealed behind the imminence of the Father's death): but the true, unacknowledged movement is a flight from the Father as a quest for autonomy. Similarly, the Young Man who seeks his father's spirit among the Wordsworthian escarpments of the Swiss Alps is in fact burying it in a gesture that risks self-immolation. In both cases, the common thesis is the father's death, and the son's desperate attempt to avert the guilt of it from himself. The repressed theme of "The Alpine Christ" is parricide, a theme which the poem spends all its energies denying.

Again and again in his early work, Jeffers approaches the forbidden parricidal theme, only to draw back before acknowledgement and, playing Abraham to his own Isaac--most notably in "The Coast-Range Christ"--to offer himself as a sacrifice instead. Had he been unable to do so, he might have remained what until his thirty-third year he indubitably was, a minor poet working an outmoded idiom whose latent gifts were doomed to shuttle resultlessly between the impulse that called them forth and the barrier that denied them expression. Had Jeffers been an actual contemporary of Wordsworth instead of a would-be epigone, this might have been the case. But by the early twentieth century, cultural currents were at work that not only coaxed forth the kind of "problem" that appears in his early work but provided a clinical model of it. In the 1880s, Nietzsche had proclaimed the death of God; twenty years later, Freud declared the dethronement of the earthly father, the bourgeois patriarch; and a decade after, the Cambridge anthropologists gave ethnographic confirmation of these still-daring speculations. God the father, whether in a cathedral or a tropical rain forest, was yearly, seasonally or weekly sacrificed to his worshippers' need, as his earthly surrogate was nightly sacrificed in wish, fantasy or dream. A poet was only wanting who would suffer this truth into art. Robinson Jeffers, long balked by the very intensity of his feelings, was to be that poet. And "Tamar" was to be his poem.

In "Tamar," Jeffers found at last a way of releasing the aggression that had dammed up his art. Hitherto, his world had been populated by weak young men, idealized but often covertly punishing fathers, and strong-willed, often sexually aggressive women. Very much the same failed cast of characters appears in the early drafts of "Tamar," whose hero, Will Cauldwell, discovers that he has married the illegitimate daughter of his father and his aunt. Will is assigned the Hamlet-like task of meting out punishment for these transgressions, a task which will clearly entail his own destruction. There is, moreover, some question about the way the father's trespass is to be regarded. Jeffers notes that "The conflict is in Will's mind chiefly," while his father, David, is represented as having "attained the philosophic calm of old age," a calm from which "These things are nothing to him, except by little flashes."³ These comments suggest that sin here is rather in the eye of the beholder, which gains us the further inference that what is at issue is less biblical prescription than Oedipal jealousy. In any event, what is clearly adumbrated is another formula for a failed poem. Once again a duped and blameless son is to be sent up against an impregnable patriarch. The result is foregone.

In the actual poem, the weak son--now named Lee--and the illegitimate daughter remain. But two very crucial changes have occurred. David, the father, is no longer masterful and indifferent, but feeble and guilt-ridden. The key, as it were, is no longer that of HAMLET but of LEAR. And the protagonist of the story is no longer the son but the daughter.

These changes are of great significance, not only for "Tamar" but for all of Jeffers' subsequent career. In creating a weak, even despicable father--a type that was to recur in "Thurso's Landing" and "Give Your Heart to the Hawks"--Jeffers was able for the first time to challenge artistically the authority of the father. At the same time, by transferring the responsibility for vengeance to the daughter, he was able to elide the direct encounter of father and son that would, until "The Love and the Hate" a quarter of a century later, prove inevitably fatal to the latter. Yet there is no question that it is the repressed energies of the son that animate the character of Tamar. As Jeffers' avenging surrogate, Tamar is able to accomplish the overthrow of the patriarchy. What she finds behind the forbidden citadel however, is both less and more than she conceives.

Jeffers makes one more important structural change between the original draft and the finished poem. Lee and Tamar are no longer married. This makes David's guilt somewhat the less, although Tamar is now the offspring not of a cousin but of a sister, thus bringing the Oedipal crime a step closer to the center. The chief result however is that it is now not Lee who is primarily victimized, but Tamar herself. It is an injury moreover which, unlike a consanguinous marriage, cannot be undone. Tamar cannot cease to be herself.

Yet Jeffers is not attempting a melodrama in "Tamar," and his characters will not behave like Faulkner's or O'Neill's. If Tamar is devastated by the discovery of her true parentage, it is neither because of its social or its moral implications. Early in the poem, she seduces Lee, thus recreating the incestuous "marriage" of the original draft, not as a fatal circumstance but as a freely chosen act. Far from experiencing guilt, she exults that "I never shall be ashamed again." Tamar is only, as Jeffers comments, "half-innocent;" she knows that what she has done is a violation of moral law, or at any rate the breach of a taboo. It is precisely in this that she seeks her freedom. In Freudian terms, this is a primal scene, but one in which shame precedes the liberating act and transgression creates not the sense of guilt that establishes the law but the passional independence that exalts the will.

Tamar's belief that she has won her freedom by an act of violation is what makes the discovery of her parentage insupportable. Her incest appears not as an act of will but one predetermined by the taint in her blood; it reveals not her freedom but her chains: "It makes me nothing, / My darling sin a shadow and me a doll on wires."⁴ She attempts to purge herself by a ritual abortion, during which she is invested by the ghosts of the Indian dead of the region. There is a double signification here: as the abortion repudiates a predetermined future, so the violation by ancestral ghosts represents a return to the aboriginal past, a recapture of temporal priority and hence a symbolic purification of the parental taint.

This act however is not sufficient to reestablish Tamar's identity. Tamar has scourged herself of impurity by means of defilement, has submitted to an alien will in order to regain her own: but that will, now possessing her, stripping away "Whatever is rounded and approachable / In the body of woman," leaving only the narrow hardness of "A weapon," requires its object and its action. The object can only be her own father, and the action vengeance.

Even the most casual reader of "Tamar" will perceive that Tamar's seduction of David is completely devoid of desire. It is, like the ritual abortion, an attempt to reverse the chain of ancestry that has shackled her will. Tamar's aim is not to possess her father but to revoke his paternity; as she declares, "You know it is forty years ago that we revoked / Relationships in the house. . . . there are neither / Brother nor sister, daughter nor father. . . ." Rather than the end-product of a process of inversion that can only lead to final debility, she will be the triumphant goal, the star of pure will that sin has fumbled toward:

. . . it was out of me that fire lit you
 and your Helen, your body
 Joined with your sister's
 Only because I was to be named Tamar and to love my
 brother and father.
 I am the fountain.⁵

Tamar's victory lies in her conquest of sin, the last barrier to the will. Old David, haunted for forty years by his transgression, has sinned through weakness rather than strength, and, knowing the weakness of his act, he trembles before judgment. For Tamar however, sin is not a transgression against a superior will but the affirmation of one's own. One can never freely obey a law, one can only freely violate it; transgression is freedom, and only remorse can make it a crime: "we must keep sin pure / Or it will poison us, the grain of goodness in a sin is poison. / Old man, you have no conception / Of the freedom of purity. . . / we pure have power."⁶

Tamar's purity is a paradox however; she has achieved it only at the cost of defilement, and the stain of anteriority clings to her in the midst of her triumph. In renouncing the generations she has renounced the future and, in her own words, "annulled hope." The only thing left for her is to complete the circle of vengeance by an act of final destruction, and the purgative fire that consumes the household is the only possible ending for the poem.

It will be apparent that incest plays only a symbolic role in "Tamar;" it is the means by which the will is disclosed and its tragic limitations set. In this sense the poem is much more Nietzschean than Freudian, and one might well argue that Jeffers has only used Freud to bring Nietzsche up to date. But while true enough perhaps, such a conclusion is seriously incomplete. From the point of view of Jeffers' own development, "Tamar" marks a critical transit: the supersession of the father. Tamar's liberation is Jeffers' own, and one cannot but feel in the sustained intensity and bitterness of her confrontation with David, Jeffers' long-pent conflict with his father finding its passionate release:

Let me talk to this old man, and see who has suffered
 When you come back. I am out of pity, and you . . .
 Will be less scorched on the other side of the door . . .
 You thought it was your house? It is me they obey.
 It is mine, I shall destroy it. Poor old man I have
 earned authority.

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I told you I have authority.
 You obey me like the others, we pure have power. Perhaps there are
 other ways, but I was plunged
 In the dirt of the world to win it, and, O father, so I will call you
 this last time, dear father,
 You cannot think what freedom and what pleasure live in having abjured
 laws, in having
 Annulled hope, I am now at peace.⁷

It is a scene that Jeffers will play out again in "Give Your Heart to the Hawks," "Such Counsels You Gave to Me," and "The Love and the Hate," but with one critical variation: the protagonist will be not a daughter but a son. Yet there are grounds for believing that Tamar too is a son-in-hiding. In the transformation scene that sets her on vengeance, she casts aside her femininity and takes on phallic attributes: her body becomes a "weapon," and she gathers "long black serpents" of seaweed as an ironic crown for her feeble aunt, Jinny. This theme of the secluded son will become far more explicit in "The Women at Point Sur," in which the spirit of the Rev. Arthur Barclay's son Edward becomes manifest in the body of his daughter April. What such a view suggests, from a Freudian perspective, is that the subtext of Tamar's confrontation scene is Jeffers' own unresolved Oedipal dilemma, a dilemma so powerfully inhibiting that it could be represented only through the medium of a feminine surrogate. The Freudian view is, it seems to me, more fruitfully explanatory than any other that has yet been advanced to account for Jeffers' poetic development in general and the pivotal importance--acknowledged by all critics--of "Tamar" in particular; but it may be noted that a Jungian interpretation is complementary to it as well. If Tamar and the other strong heroines of Jeffers' early verse be taken as expressions of a robust anima that had developed to compensate for an inhibited masculinity, then Tamar appears again as a liberating figure, both artistically and personally. The act of liberation, in either case, remains the same: a confrontation with paternal authority and the assertion of personal autonomy.

Jeffers himself at least tacitly acknowledged the centrality of Tamar to his artistic development. In "Apology for Bad Dreams," a poem that examines the roots of his art, he evokes the apparition of Tamar: "white as the half-moon at midnight / Someone flamelike passed me, saying 'I am Tamar Cauldwell, I have my desire.'" Fifteen years later, in "Come, Little Birds," she appears again in a vision: "the pale dead / Were fleeing away; but a certain one of them came running / toward me, slender and naked, I saw the firelight / Glitter on her bare thighs; she said, 'I am Tamar Cauldwell / from Lobos; write my story. Tell them I have my desire.'"⁸ Such retrospective references to narrative characters are extremely rare in Jeffers' work; and the similarity of description, the imperative tone in which the poet is addressed, and the atmosphere of intense, hypnotic reverie they evoke, all suggest a vision of decisive importance. In Tamar, Jeffers discovered his own capacity for passion, and his own conception of tragedy.

Passion, of course, was not philosophy, and to depict the illimitable aspiration of the will as the extremity of the human condition was not to accept it as a rule of conduct. For Jeffers the last wisdom was the abnegation, not exaltation of the will. But wisdom could be achieved only by an experience of passion; mere abstinence was an evasion rather than a conquest of the will. It was through Tamar that Jeffers grasped the motive truth of his mature art, that the thirst for transcendence is the root of transgression, and that the scale of this duality contains the entire register of human experience. In Tamar, crying forth her purity in the midst of the foulest pollutions, Jeffers found his prototype. But she could be depicted only once. Remorse or bitterness would clog his later protagonists, shading their passions with a more human dubiety of motive; Tamar alone, appearing again in the banked fire of Jeffers' imagination, would have her desire.

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *LA PHARMACIE DE PLATON*, quoted in James Creech, *DIDEROT; THRESHOLDS OF REPRESENTATION* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), p. 82.
2. See George Sabine, ed. *THE WORKS OF GERRARD WINSTANLEY* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941).
3. Jeffers Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Ann Ridgeway, *THE SELECTED LETTERS OF ROBINSON JEFFERS* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968) and William Everson, *BRIDES OF THE SOUTH WIND* (Cayucos, CA: Cayucos Press, 1974), have published transcriptions of these notes.
4. Tim Hunt, ed., *THE COLLECTED POETRY OF ROBINSON JEFFERS, Volume I 1920-1928* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 30. Cited as CP.
5. *Ibid.*, 63.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 210; *BE ANGRY AT THE SUN* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 117.

WILLIAM EVERSON'S
THE EXCESSES OF GOD, ROBINSON JEFFERS AS A RELIGIOUS FIGURE
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), xv + 190 pages, \$29.50

William Everson is of course a religious figure himself, long known as Brother Antoninus, and a poet. He is also the scholar who discovered and edited "The Alpine Christ" and other poems which Jeffers wrote in 1916-20, about the time he was giving up Christianity and finding his own religious view. This present book concerns not that conversion but Jeffers' sense of the holy as his subject.

Everson begins with the phrase used by a religious newspaper in 1926 calling Jeffers "intrinsically terrible" --as suggesting that Jeffers saw the holy as Rudolf Otto did in *THE IDEA OF THE HOLY* in 1917. As Everson says, we have no evidence that Jeffers read that book; he apparently made the same discovery on his own, at about the same time of the "intrinsically terrible" nature of God.

For both Otto and Jeffers, the holy makes us feel awe and our unimportance. It is what Jeffers called "the enormous beauty of things," causing a grateful humility. Jeffers' appreciation of the holy was apparently not often noticed or understood by hostile critics. Celebration of "the excesses of God" Everson sees as basic to Jeffers' poetry. The world seems excessive because we do not know why the holy should be so beautiful; it exceeds our words and logic.

Everson describes Jeffers as a latter-day Jeremiah, and as possibly the first religious figure to say that the whole human species needs to outgrow its egocentricity (see Jeffers' preface to *THE DOUBLE AXE*). Why Jeffers discovered the holy, and what long-term results that discovery has for Jeffers or for us, Everson leaves mostly unexplained; he concentrates on the immediate emotions involved in such discoveries.

Robert Ian Scott
