



# Robinson Jeffers

## NEWSLETTER

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**ON THE COVER:**

*A pen drawing by Amy Skov, taken from the pamphlet,  
Robinson Jeffers, Western Writers Series, Boise State University, 1975.*

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The **Robinson Jeffers Newsletter**, co-sponsored by California State University, Long Beach, and Occidental College, is published quarterly.

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## ***NEWS & NOTES***

- The 1992 Robinson Jeffers Festival was held October 9 through 11 at the Sunset Center, Carmel, beginning with a Friday evening book signing at the Thunderbird Bookshop. The Saturday morning panel featured Garth and Brenda Jeffers with photographer Morley Baer on "The Robinson and Una We Knew." The afternoon was dedicated to "A Tribute to Dame Judith Anderson," with actress Lili Bitá's dramatic readings, Robert Zaller's comments on "The Actress as Playwright," and James Karman's "Dame Judith and Robinson Jeffers: The Letters." Saturday evening concluded the festival with a banquet at La Playa Hotel with Marsha Hovick reading from Judith Anderson's favorite Jeffers lyrics.
  
- *Iris* by Mark Jarman, a long narrative poem in the style of Robinson Jeffers about a woman obsessed with Jeffers' ideas, has been published by Story Lane Press (Three Oaks Farm, Brownsville, OR 97327, 114 pages). Hardcover wrappers feature a commentary by Dana Gioia.
  
- Mr. Gioia's introduction to John Haines' *New Poems*, 1980-88, a volume which won three major awards in 1991, begins with a discussion of Jeffers and the relationship of poet to place. Mr. Gioia has replaced X.J. Kennedy as editor of several anthologies, including *An Introduction to Poetry*, in which there had been no Jeffers poems until Kennedy discovered Gioia's "Strong Council" essay in *The Nation*. This is by far the most successful college introduction in print.

■ The 27th annual conference of the Western Literature Association took place in Reno October 7-10. Christopher Cokinos (Kansas State University) convened a panel, "Gaia and Modern American Nature Poetry." Among the papers was Patrick Murphy's "An Evolutionary Error? Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, and People's Place in the Gaia Hypothesis."

■ *Perspectives on William Everson* is available at Castle Peak Editions, Suite 105, 840 Rogue River Highway, Grants Pass, Oregon 97527, from editors James B. Hall, Bill Hotchkiss, and Judith Shears. It contains essays "Everson, the Art of Reading, and Robinson Jeffers" by R. Brophy, "The Giant Hand: William Everson on Robinson Jeffers" by Robert Zaller, "Kin and Kin," a poem in response to Jeffers by Denise Levertov, and "Earth as Metaphor" by William Hotchkiss, which compares Everson and Jeffers.

■ Professor Tadeusz Slawek of the Institute of English, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec, Poland, has two articles, "A Hammer of Philosophy: The Scene of Violence in Nietzsche and Jeffers" in "Violence/Intolerance/Literature" (Katowice, 1990, pages 20-32) and "'The Continent's End': Border as a Figure of Thought in Robinson Jeffers' Poetry" in *Boundary of Borders*, publication of Cieszyn Theory of Literature Conference, 1992, pages 119-127.

■ The Vancouver Chamber Choir, Jon Washburn conductor, presents a CD-recorded program: "Harp of David" by John Beckwith (Psalms 65, 130, 80, 148, 122, and 87) and Jeffers' "Night" by Elliot Weisgarber, with Bruce Pullan, baritone, The Purcell String Quartet, and Wilmer Fawcett double bass. Centrediscs, 20 St. Joseph Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4Y 1J9.

■ The fourth annual American Literature Association conference will be held in Baltimore on May 28 to 30. "Robinson Jeffers and the Female Archetype" will be the title of a panel chaired by Robert Zaller and will feature a monologue from Jeffers' *Medea* performed by Lili Bitá and a symposium with short presentations followed by a roundtable of poets Betty Adcock (Meredith College), Diane Wakoski (Michigan State), and Mark Jarman (Vanderbilt).

■ In the weeks following International Women's Day, March 8, 1993, Jane Brown will perform her choreographed Jeffers' *Medea* four times in San Francisco at the New Performance Gallery. Brown's *Medea* interpretation sees *Medea* as a rejection of the rising Greek patriarchy, *Medea* herself being a formidable champion of "equal power." Following the final performance, this *Medea* will be committed to videotape by a team of veteran professional camera persons-seeking to record an art piece for use on public television. The performance and taping will require significant monetary support. Tax deductible contributions can be sent to Jane Brown Company, 2639 E. 9th St., Oakland, CA 94601. Ms. Brown performed *Medea* in the dance pavilion of the Occidental College gymnasium during the Jeffers Centennial Celebration in 1987.

■ The Tor House Foundation "Robinson Jeffers" office in Carmel's Sunset Center is collecting Jeffers memorabilia (and more basic materials) as reference for future visiting scholars and aficionados. Should anyone have duplicates, they would be much appreciated. THF, Box 2713, Carmel, CA 93921. Membership dues are \$30, \$15 for students and seniors. Phone (405) 624-1813 (same as for tour reservations) for more information.

# ***POEM-SOURCE ANECDOTES: "OH, LOVELY ROCK" & "HANDS"***

*by Garth Jeffers*

■ ***Editor's Note:*** Jeffers's son has provided the RJN with two reminiscences on adventures which occasioned poems.

## ***– "OH, LOVELY ROCK" –***

Around 1937 or '38 my friend Lloyd Tevis and I decided to attempt to climb Ventana Double Cone mountain from the West. Father may have toyed with the idea too for when the day that we had selected arrived, he suggested that he might go with us. We were not averse to the idea. I no longer remember our route and do not have a map at hand but I fancy we went up the trail along the Big Sur River for a way, then turned off up a creek. The terrain became steeper and more rocky as we proceeded and we were held up a number of times by Lloyd's Irish setter which had to be helped up some of the rock faces. Eventually it became obvious that we could go no farther so we settled down for the night.

After a modest repast Lloyd and I were soon asleep but Father always had trouble sleeping on the ground as long as I remember him (although he was known as the Little Spartan by his friends in school in Europe) and probably spent much of that night sitting close to the dying fire and encouraging it along and possibly scribbling an occasional thought on some scrap of paper he found in his pocket. He was not above using a bit of the paper lining his Prince Albert tobacco tin.

The next day we devoured whatever scraps of food remained and drove home.

## ***– "HANDS" –***

It was, as I remember, in 1926 that my mother—who was almost always the instigator of these outings—decided that the Jeffers family should

visit Tassajara Hot Springs. Accordingly, we set forth a few mornings later in the Model T.

We drove up the Carmel Valley road to the Jamesburg turnoff then up that to Chews Ridge. We left the somewhat exhausted car there as Mother had heard frightening stories about the rest of the route. It was narrow and winding but quite adequate as a footpath. After several miles we reached the resort to Mother's relief for it was quite hot. The next morning we followed directions to the shallow cave on the wall of which are the painted hands. Most of these were drawn but in a number of cases the tips of the fingers are actual impressions of fingertips dipped in white pigment and there is at least one handprint. I don't remember that Father made any comment at this time.

These pictographs are in territory once held by the Esselen Indians, one of the smallest tribes in California, numbering an estimated six hundred people. Little is known of their culture for they died out shortly after the arrival of European Americans. The last survivor of whom we have record was Isabela Meadows who had spent part of her childhood at the Carmel Mission. She remembered enough of her ancestral tongue to provide ethnologists with a limited vocabulary before she died in the thirties. She was then apparently well over eighty.

Tassajara Hot Springs was "discovered" by a white hunter in 1843 and a man named Frank Rust founded the baths in 1868. A hunter named Rocky Beasley is said to have shot 132 grizzly bears in the vicinity.

To return to 1926, we made it out to the Ford with no misadventures and it got us home before too late.

***"A NOTE ON TWO POEMS,"  
BY ROBINSON JEFFERS:  
"HURT HAWKS" & "PROMISE OF PEACE"***

■ Jeffers himself, in a now long-forgotten textbook, *American Authors Today* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1947), offers the following commentary on "Hurt Hawks" and "Promise of Peace":

*There is nothing in particular to say about these pieces of verse. They are not lyrical, nor dramatic, nor even narrative; they record incidents—the incident of the broken-winged hawk which I kept for a while and then killed; the incident of my youthful admiration for an old man who looked as if he were at peace with himself. The incidents were not important, and the poems are not. One of them was written nearly twenty, and the other nearly thirty, years ago; presumably they are still read a little, for they have been reprinted several times. So they seem to have served their purpose as records.*

*Equally unimportant incidents were recorded by Greek poets more than two thousand years ago, and remain fresh and living to this day. The conclusion must be that there is something durable about poetry; even when it is made of very slight material it is not frail, but tough and resistant.*

-ROBINSON JEFFERS

The editors, Whit Burnett and Charles Slatkin, provide this background for the book itself:

*American Authors Today is a new kind of text and collateral reading book. It is, in the widest sense of the word, a book of collaboration. In this volume nearly fifty of America's best-known literary figures have participated. Behind the book was a single purpose: to bridge the gap between America's greatest writers and their potential audience of high school age. To this end many of the selections in American Authors Today have been chosen with the discriminating assistance of the authors themselves. In the majority of cases the authors also wrote forewords to their selections, addressed to high-school readers. Sometimes in an introduction an author tells why he chose this particular selection; sometimes he explains his point of view about life in general; and sometimes he sets forth his ideas about writing and reading. There is no deadwood in this book. This is a book of our times, by people of our times, and designed for the readers of today.*

# ***ROBINSON JEFFERS: AMERICAN ROMANTIC?***

*by Colin Falck  
York College, Pennsylvania*

■ ***Editor's Note:*** Colin Falck is a British poet, critic, and editor. This article was developed from his introductory essay, "Robinson Jeffers: American Romantic," appearing in *Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems: The Centenary Edition*, which he edited in 1987 for Carcanet Press, Manchester, England.

*"It was a world before and after the God of Love."  
– D. H. Lawrence, St. Mawr*

Robinson Jeffers's current neglect tells us more about the present state of our literary fashions than about any of the real strengths or weaknesses of his work. Such literary movements as Franco-American post-structuralist theory, or the wave of showy simile-mongering which recently overtook British verse, or the general "post-modernist" tendency for literature to be about language, or about itself, rather than about the world we live in, might all be seen as symptoms of the same evasion of reality—the same loss of spiritual nerve—which Jeffers (sometimes crudely, over-insistently, and with a surfeit of misanthropic bombast) attacked throughout his career. It may be a measure of the spiritual void at the heart of our culture, and a confirmation of some of his direst insights, that he should now have come to be almost entirely ignored by the literary establishment.

A great deal was at one time made of what Jeffers himself called his "inhumanism," and earlier critics have spoken of his "disgust with the human species in *toto*" (Alfred Kazin), or of "the *idee fixe* which runs through all of Jeffers's volumes: Life is horrible" (Louis Untermeyer). He has been called a classical pessimist or a "classical Freudian" (R. P. Blackmur). Yet there is nothing in Jeffers's work of the business-like gloom of Hobbes or of Freud, and his outcries against men's follies and pettinesses might be more sympathetically understood within the tradition of an anguished Romanti



cism: men were once different and better, and they might even (though it seems unlikely) become so again. His view of the world has much in common with the divine discontent of such Romantic visionaries as Blake or D. H. Lawrence, as well as having affinities with the quieter rejections of the adult world-as-it-has-come-to-be of such American Romantics as Emerson, Thoreau, and the later Whitman.

So close, in Jeffers's case, is the connection between Romantic despair and idealistic scorn that there is even a certain "terrorist" quality in his work (as there came to be in Lawrence's)—so deep is his hatred of the spiritual squalor with which liberal democracy has besmirched humanity and with which humanity has besmirched the world. (In this he of course shares ground with T. S. Eliot and the Conrad of *Heart of Darkness*, and stands partly outside Romanticism.) The annunciatory truth of Jeffers's poetry resembles the truth behind modern religious fanaticism, and if the liberal West cannot understand this truth (complacently assuring itself of the triumph of bourgeois democracy in an "end of history") it may perish sooner rather than later. Yet there is no appeal in Jeffers to a transcendent scriptural background which would reduce men's earthly life to insignificance—in this he may be closer to the militant traditionalism of a figure like Yukio Mishima—and he was always prepared to trace the saying and doings of the religious prophets to the particular conditions of their personal biographies. For all the dark goings-on in his long narrative poems (which must be read symbolically—incest being a symbol of man's self-fascination, for example—rather than naturalistically), Jeffers does not reject man as such—he can even call him "somedays one of the nobler animals"—but only what man has made of himself.

What man has made of himself is human history, and almost everything that appears in Jeffers's poems appears not as history but *sub specie naturae*. This (though when pushed too far it becomes a philosophical mistake) gives the poet an impressively remote vantage-point from which to get the modern urban and technological world into a diminishing perspective. Rather than ignoring history, Jeffers expresses his disdain for the greater part of it, as when he welcomes a way of life in which a man has

*no thought nor emotion  
that all his ancestors since the ice-age  
Could not have comprehended. I call that a good  
life; narrow, but vastly better than most  
Men's lives, and beyond comparison more beautiful ...  
("The Wind-Struck Music")*

or when he more explicitly insists:

*It is good for man*

.....  
*To know that his needs and nature are no more changed  
in fact in ten thousand years than the beaks of  
eagles.*

(—"The Beaks of Eagles")

This is not the whole truth, but it is the part of the truth that we nowadays seem the most ready to forget. When (as he sometimes does) he pulls back from these extremes, Jeffers can venture into the human middle ground and remind us of the nature-based thoughtfulness of such poets as A. E. Housman or Robert Frost; but most often his desire to escape altogether from history or temporal process seems overwhelming, and it is his rejection of modern ordinariness—of what Randall Jarrell called "dailiness"—which brings him dangerously close to a poetry that hates life. If he resembles Eliot in this, the vital difference is that in Jeffers there is a felt, experiential embracing of life, even if only of primal and uncivilized modes of life, which one does not find in Eliot.

In his own introduction to his *Selected Poetry* of 1938 Jeffers wrote that "[p]oetry must concern itself with (relatively) permanent things. These have poetic value; the ephemeral has only news value." Of his southern Californian subjects and landscapes he said:

*Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come. Here was contemporary life that was also permanent life; and not shut from the modern world but conscious of it and related to it; capable of expressing its spirit, but unencumbered by the mass of poetically irrelevant details and complexities that make a civilization. (xvi)*

As with Hardy's "this will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass," one may hesitate over the prophetic judgment but must respond to the human affirmation. The distant, almost trans-historical perspective that Jeffers adopts allows him a measure of engagement with ultimate things in which is not very commonly found in Western European or most American poetry. (Nor is he wholly without irony about his self-imposed limitations, as when he has an imaginary self-criticizing voice complain, "It is certain

you have loved the beauty of storm disproportionately" ["Self-Criticism in February"], or when he compares a stormy day to a poem—"but too much / Like one of Jeffers's, crusted with blood and barbaric omens, / Painful to excess, inhuman as a hawk's cry" ["The Day is a Poem"].) Louis Adamic has said that Jeffers "can hardly be spoken of as an American poet" at all; and yet the confrontation between man and ultimate things can—even in the technological twentieth century—be more compellingly staged in America than in Europe, and the beauty and savagery of Jeffers's Californian landscapes ("this coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places" ["Apology for Bad Dreams"]) have exactly the same kind of radically symbolic function as the wild and primitive landscapes of New Mexico in D. H. Lawrence's prophetic novel *St. Mawr*. In a perceptive and sympathetic study, *The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers*, Radcliffe Squires has argued: "To direct man toward a moral self by means of the wise, the solemn lessons of Nature: that has been Jeffers' life work" (134). There is what Jeffers calls

*the great humaneness at the heart of things,  
The extravagant kindness, the fountain  
Humanity can understand, and would flow likewise  
If power and desire were perch-mates.  
(—"The Excesses of God")*

On this view, Jeffers's "inhumanism" becomes comprehensible simply as a rather fiercer form of Wordsworthian pantheism: it asks—Squires suggests—"that man achieve serenity and security by ...[being] both primitive and civilized" (136). There is perhaps more to be said on this question, but this view is certainly a corrective to those who would see Jeffers as someone who had abandoned all hopes for humanity.

None of this is to say that Jeffers always strikes us as having fully understood the psychological springs of his own work (he never, in any case, goes out of his way to reveal them to us) or to deny that his vision sometimes seems to become unbalanced in the direction of nihilism—as in the war-time poem "Pearl Harbor":

*Meanwhile our prudent officers  
Have cleared the coast-long ocean of ships and fishing  
craft, the sky of planes, the windows of light: these  
clearings  
Make a great beauty. Watch the wide sea; there is nothing  
human; its gulls have it. Watch the wide sky  
All day clean of machines; only at dawn and dusk one  
military hawk passes*

*High on patrol. Walk at night in the black-out,  
The fire-fly lights that used to line the long shore  
Are all struck dumb; shut are the shops, mouse-dark the  
houses. Here the pre-human dignity of night  
Stands, as it was before and will be again. O beautiful  
Darkness and silence, the two eyes that see God, great  
staring eyes.*

Jeffers's long poems in particular—symbolic stories in verse which depend for their incident on murder, rape, incest, and various bloody fantasies perhaps inadequately comprehended ("Tamar" and "Roan Stallion" are among the most powerful of these) —may leave the reader wondering where exactly all this violence comes from (the question is not about Jeffers's sources but about the reasons for his interest in them) and where, both poetically and in terms of human self-comprehension, they can be expected to lead us. The violence of Jeffers's Medea, which considerably outdoes that of Euripides's original, is garish, if brilliantly compelling. In one of his last short poems Jeffers asks "Who ever heard of a pleasant dream? / ... / It is only man must be always wakeful, steering through hell" ("Nightpiece"). There is evidence enough that Jeffers's usual avoidance of personal subjects comes from his own felt inability to deal with them (when he does deal with them, he can be heart-rending, as in the opening lines of "Hungerfield"), and in his later poems he more than once mentions a "thirty-year-old decision" which seems to have been a decision to reject suicide and to live by a Nietzschean philosophy. Only someone whose condition exactly mirrored the dark or morbid regions of Jeffers's psyche could embrace his vision in its entirety (we might feel the same of Swift, perhaps, whom he sometimes recalls—as for example in "The Inquisitors"). How far the fatalism and misanthropy of Jeffers's poetic outlook may also have their roots in the Calvinist spirit of his paternal background is something that we are not in a position to know.

For an over-all view of Jeffers's work one must read at least some of his longer narrative poems, since in his shorter poems—they are more discursive or argumentative than lyrical, often in the manner of Lawrence's—he nearly always ascends rapidly from the human and concrete towards the abstract and philosophical. This philosophical stance raises its own problems of authenticity (we are, after all, a part of culture as well as of nature, and for a poet to pretend otherwise may be an act of bad faith), but it also raises particular problems of language and diction in which more mundane or colloquial poets do not have to face. Because he is not concerned (in Keats's

phrase) to "think with the human heart," Jeffers is not obliged to look for or to accept the language with which the human heart most commonly thinks. Instead, he tries for a reflective but heightened idiom which will lift him above ordinary thinking and which will be more adequate to his cosmic concerns. Such diction must be hard to find (the risk is that it may sound merely hollowly oracular), but at his best Jeffers can make us accept his prophetic role at least as readily as we accept such a role in Whitman or in Lawrence.

Jeffers's shorter poems are sometimes spoken of as lyrics, but in the majority of cases this is not what they really are. The poet, or any individually-experiencing substitute for him, is often not present in these poems at all, and their imagery usually tends to be symbolically general or emblematic rather than localized and specific in the way that the modern lyric genre (what Robert Langbaum has called "the poem of experience") essentially demands. The underlying drive in Jeffers's poems is mainly didactic, and his use of the lyric method in the service of this drive is only extremely intermittent. Many of the key symbols in his poems—rock, hawk, ocean, and the rest—are used for their idea-content rather than as part of a lyric presentation of anyone's particular experiencing. In these respects, Jeffers operates in the same borderline poetic region that Lawrence operates in the animal and nature poems of his *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. Some of Lawrence's nature poems are truly experiential: a poem like "Snake" even tells a story about something that happened to someone in a particular place at a particular time. Others ("Figs," "Kangaroo," "Hibiscus and Salvia Flowers," for example) are almost undisguisedly philosophical, presenting abstract Lawrentian ideas in a conveniently metaphorical or emblematic form. Both Lawrence and Jeffers, caught up in their prophetic evangelizing, seem entirely indifferent as to which of these (poetically very distinct) methods they use. Like Lawrence, Jeffers often moves very close to "dead metaphor"—that realm of (perfectly effective) ordinary speech in which well-trying metaphors are used to give a rhetorical freshness to general ideas. It might seem that this rather instrumental way with language should debar both of these poets from writing any truly imaginative poetry at all; but the way in which the poems that truly succeed achieve their effects is often through their powerful rhythms and oratorical structure, rather than through their use of sensory imagery or poetic symbol (in the Goethean or Coleridgean sense). What the poet has done is to give a stylized presentation of a certain kind of speech-act—mostly, it approximates to something like a philosophical "voice" in the act of preaching or per

suading—and the tradition to which both of these poets have affiliated themselves in this respect is one which has its origins in the Bible—a towering presence in both of their backgrounds—and which runs through Blake in his prophetic books, as well as through Whitman.

It is for these rhetorical reasons that both Lawrence and Jeffers were obliged to abandon traditional versification, and that they eventually did so in quite decisive ways. (Jeffers, the superior technician, occasionally returned to it in his later poems.) The kinds of impersonal and revelatory acts of poetic discovery, both concrete and abstract, which have sometimes been conveyed within the neutral structures and diction of traditional metrics were not what either Lawrence or Jeffers were aiming—or temperamentally suited—to achieve. Instead, what they needed was a verse technique in which would allow them to express a highly assertive philosophical stance which they had already won through to quite independently of their poetic writings. The necessity (it amounts to a kind of "applied poetry" poetics) was to find ways of bringing their prophetic message across in a sufficiently fresh and inspirational way to an as-yet-unpersuaded readership. The way to do this (the influence of the more prophetically insistent side of Whitman is obvious) was to find a poetic rhetoric of elevated speech, of carefully-heightened ordinary speech rhythms (perhaps with certain suggestively Calvinist or Methodist undertones or under-rhythms): in effect, to find an acceptable rhetoric of modern sermonizing. The unique voice, and the rhythmic magnificence, of a poem like Jeffers's "Pearl Harbor" has in fact almost no parallels in the English-language poetry of the twentieth century. That in the course of writing poems in these ways both Lawrence and Jeffers sometimes also wrote truly modern and "negatively capable" lyrics, where the experience dealt with is authentically *presented* in a way that precedes any extractable message, is perhaps frustrating for anthologists or selectors from their works, but need not be altogether surprising.

What we see in this post-Whitmanian tradition is the opening up of a new option for English-language verse, whereby it begins to empty itself out in the direction of one kind or another of discursive prose. When the preacherly rhetoric of Whitman, Lawrence or Jeffers—in its way a rather austere rhetoric—is no longer the dominant and controlling mode, and when it is not replaced by any equally strong rhetoric of another kind, what we begin to get is the move towards rhythmless annotation or conversational rambling which has increasingly dominated free-verse poetry in the later twentieth century (and which has in turn provoked desperate attempts at "new formalisms" in order to prevent poetry from disintegrating altogether).

Earlier twentieth-century free-verse technicians such as Eliot or Pound seem to have been presciently aware of the dangers of abandoning traditional metrics altogether without putting some kind of alternative principle of rhetorical organization in their place. (Such mid-century poets as Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath found powerful alternative springs for their free verse by sometimes tapping into the buried "voices" of schizophrenia or hysteria.) The price we sometimes have to pay for the preacherly tonal heightening in the poems of Robinson Jeffers—as in the later poems of Blake, or in many of the poems of Whitman or Lawrence—is a mind-wearying tendency towards monotony and self-repetition. This, together with the rapid elevation of his concrete subjects—seascape, rockscape, birdscape—into the same overbearing abstract vision can make him hard to read in *extenso* even where his individual poems work successfully enough. Only in his longer narratives does one get any real sense of the individual human being's place in this world of superhuman or sub-human forces—but even there, one is aware that the human beings we are being offered are overpoweringly stylized and mythic beings rather than particular persons truly exposed to the contingencies of life.

If we explore these characteristics of Jeffers's poetic style more closely we may see that they derive overwhelmingly from the fact that, while being a true Romantic in his antipathies to the modern world, Jeffers was also a pre-Romantic and more like an eighteenth-century proselytizer in his insistence on the importance of "reason" in human life, and in his tracing of man's failures to his evident inability or unwillingness to make proper use of that faculty. Jeffers's almost geological or astronomical detachment from human concerns seems to be a preacherly version of the eighteenth century's misguided faith in the possibility of attaining to universal knowledge—to an Archimedean viewpoint outside human life, from which the petty fumbblings of humanity might be put in perspective and perhaps corrected. In this respect, Jeffers altogether failed to make the transition out of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth: he failed to grasp the Blakean awareness—arrived at independently by Goethe, Schiller, Herder, and the entire German Romantic tradition—that man must inevitably, and whether he is pleased by this necessity or not, regard himself as experientially at the center of the universe ("all deities" ultimately reside in his breast), and would therefore do best to assume the philosophical responsibilities that go with that awareness rather than continuing to evade them (an analysis of the human condition that reaches its fullest elaboration with Heidegger). We might also think of this as Jeffers's failure to pass through Kant's (reverse) "Copernican revolution," which ushered in the entire modern age

of existentially-based philosophy. This is D. H. Lawrence's intuitively grasped and never-wavered-from philosophical foundation, and is what makes Lawrence an incomparably sounder and more credible—as well as perhaps healthier—philosopher than Jeffers was able to be. In taking his standards from the inter-stellar spaces rather than from the human heart, Jeffers was able to deride and to belittle humanity for "reasons" which admitted of no reasonable rejoinder: only an abject acceptance of humanity's insignificance before ocean, rock, and hawk might in the end have been sufficient. It was possible for Blake or Lawrence, by contrast, to imagine ways in which humanity might reconstitute itself on a basis of pride and self-assertion—by means of a benign, in part submissive, but ultimately also dominating relationship to nature. For Blake, unlike for Jeffers, "there is no natural religion." For Lawrence, the sickness of the stallion St. Mawr came from the fact that there was no longer a noble species—a worthy rider—for him to acknowledge and to serve. All of these latter ideas, while lying close to the heart of Romanticism (and being traceable also in such religious philosophies as Taoism or Buddhism) are quite alien to the universalistic and rationalistic side of Jeffers's temperament. In confusing the experiential with the merely subjective—and in rejecting both (and therefore only writing lyric poems, as it were, by accident), in abandoning the sentimental love poetry of his first volume without any subsequent poetic trace whatever, in venting his rage against the human species in its entirety rather than against its particular failings, Jeffers sometimes seems to have been marooned in a kind of pre-Romantic and sentimentalist *Sturm und Drang* which prevented him from gaining any secure poetic purchase on even the nineteenth century, to say nothing of the twentieth in which he actually spent most of his life. The temptation to look for personal psychological sources for this syndrome of contempt and despair is almost irresistible.

These are some of the undeniable weaknesses of Jeffers's poetic vision and method. Among its corresponding strengths are its unhesitant intellectual directness, its courageous firmness of tone, its avoidance of gratuitous similes and metaphorical cleverness-in effect, as he says of an admired portrait of his granddaughter,

*nothing tricky nor modernist,  
Nothing of the artist fudging his art into the picture,  
But simple and true.*

(—"Granddaughter")

Jeffers's poetic strengths can speak for themselves, and do not really require enumeration. The problem is only to bring his work into relation with the



rest of what we know and are already able to accept. His moral and philosophical standpoint, for the most part, is too remote for common access, since whether we like it or not we are obliged, in our ordinary lives, to commit ourselves to whatever and wherever we are and to make the best bargain with fate that we can. (Jeffers's "plague on both your houses" stance towards the second world war did a good deal to put him beyond the reach of any easy sympathizing.) Equally obviously, one might wish that Jeffers had been able or ready to celebrate nature in all of its variety, rather than only in its more predatory aspects. (In this he resembles a poet like Ted Hughes, and is inferior to Lawrence. His primitive and impersonal treatment of human sexuality, for example—however much we might excuse it by saying that Jeffers is dealing only with trans-historical archetypes—is unlikely to appeal to any feminist, or perhaps even to most women.) His stark vision, nevertheless, if we can find authentic and not merely defensive ways of exposing ourselves to it, can only be spiritually strengthening. It may seem a crude instrument to beat our insensitivities with, but it may be one that we now need along with others more subtle; and it can only be the voice of our over-civilizedness, deluding us if we seize on Jeffers's deficiencies as an excuse for not reading him. In some ways he has paid the price of being right: many of his ideas can now strike us as both obvious and outdated. But what he has left us, over and above his ideas, is a body of poems which connect these ideas with the world we live in, an intense concern with the fate of humanity (when he says "I would burn my right hand in a slow fire / To change the future" he is poetically persuasive), and a reminder—since these things cannot be forced—of the need, over and above all struggle and striving, to find ways of waiting and hoping for the return of spirituality to the world:

*The spirit that flickers and hurts  
in humanity  
Shines brighter from better lamps; but from all shines.  
Look to it: prepare for the long winter: spring is far off.*  
(—"Mara")

These are more than enough reasons to make him a poet worth keeping alive.

#### WORKS CITED

*The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. New York: Random House, 1938. Radcliffe Squires, *The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956.

***UNA JEFFERS, CORRESPONDENT:  
THE LUHAN LETTERS  
EXCERPTS, 1934***

■ ***Editor's Note:*** These letter fragments are continued from RJN nos. 77, 80, and 83, and follow a Luhan memoir in no. 81. They look in on the Jeffers family friendships, pilgrimages, working habits, and political attitudes. They include remarks on Hitler's advent, Krishnamurti's friendship, marital politics, family schedules, correspondence, cults, fads, and weather. Wording, spelling and punctuation have been preserved from the original letters, with editorial notes in brackets.

— *JULY 18, 1934* —

[From Taos.] Home safely and all well. We spent the second night at Williams, 3rd at Tehachapi (on top of the ridge of mts. before you get to Bakersfield). We went (at the behest of U.S. gov't agents who stop you and urge you to do it) to Petrified Forest and Painted Desert. We went along the edge of the Painted Desert up to Grand Canyon, drove the 25 miles along rim and back via Williams.

Yesterday Liam O'Flaherty the Irish novelist came with Gavin Arthur. Liam is very Irish in appearance and amusing but bitter. His mind is full of bitterness. Toward wealth and religion and sham and he seems to see sham every way he looks-1 really didn't like him very well (hard for me to admit of an Irishman).

Robin is writing away like mad up above-I must rush to straighten the house and dress. Blanche is having a few people to lunch at Peter Pan to honor my return!

— AUGUST 9, 1934 —

I haven't done very well about writing you lately—Life has been too crowded. I am in a state of complete confusion about getting caught up. —People and things to do and our own pilgrimages in which Robin seems to need.

I think I told Cady about our wild trip to Pico Blanco [3709 ft.]. 2-day trip and climbed the mt. with Dr. MacDougall. Yesterday I rode with a Tevis party, then the boys played polo and then all of us stayed to venison barbecue.

John Martin of Time came with a very well known ex-Californian Cyril McNear. Stayed to tea—then on to dinner, then came back next day to lunch and swim and in P.M. we drove them back down to Big Sur—had whiskey and sodas at that great Molera ranch with Harry Hunt, my beau ideal!

They wanted to take Robin up to Canada for two weeks hunting and fishing—flying up but I said No (Robin didn't *want* to—but of course they blamed me) but liked me in spite of it and are coming back before going to N.Y. They said if we would go they would fly us over Yosemite all together. We may—

The great excitement when we got home was the case of the Reds here. They have been acting very obstreperous here without interference but no one interfered until just lately this awful strike in S.F. and complete tying up of the port infuriated people. The communist leader announced over the radio that they were back of it and so the law has laid its hand on them and they are pretty subdued around here.

— AUGUST 21, 1934 —

Dearest Mabel: We were not surprised to hear of Mary Austin's death and were grateful to you for the wire. *Did* she die at Taos? One paper said so. I hated to even write it down at the time when we saw her how death-like she looked and how, when Robin went in first (I thought she might like seeing him alone) and came out soon to take me in too—he murmured "I am afraid she will die while we are here!" Her face was set and deadly still and she spoke with no glint of emotion or lightness, just that *fixed* calm. She was like a shell or mask of Mary. One thought she had either definitely taken leave of life or had found that only by complete immobility she could escape the struggle with her heart and breathing.

I went to lunch at Blanche's yesterday to meet a German woman, wife of a Scotchman, who has lived in this country since she was 14 (now 32) but goes back constantly. Her father, a scientist who has been living in Germany again for the last five years. She is *wildly enthusiastic* about Hitler. She says that we hear such grossly untrue stories about him due to the communist propaganda against him over here. She was very convincing and answered all our questions very clearly.

Also, Han Barkan is visiting his parents in Berlin (his mother is German, his father a Hungarian). He says that Germany is in infinitely better condition than at any time since the war and is very comfortable and pleasant to live in.

— *SEPTEMBER 20, 1934* —

Who do you think is here at Peter Pan Lodge for 3 weeks or more, Krishnamurti! —He is a friend of Blanche's. He has his secretaries with him and friends—a large entourage. Has the greatest personal charm, adorable—but the one discussion I heard didn't come to much. Questions and answers. I am going to another. It's very vague and evasive with no beginning or end in sight and no regard for any external objective constructive conduct. He definitely broke with Annie Besant and theosophy years ago and derived his Messiahship. He is to go for a walk in the hills with Robin today. He says he feels Robin's tremendous power and nobility!

Boys going back and forth to junior College, Salinas is working out grandly and they are studying well. They use my car and 2 days get home by noon. We get up at 6 as they have a class at 7:50. I go to the village just 3 times a week and it's fine to escape so much.

— *SEPTEMBER 25, 1934* —

So much going on here-and seeing Krishnamurti often and his colleague Rogagopal and his wife Rosalind. Much to tell you all about them but can't this morning.

I had such an amusing supper party Sunday-Krishna, Blanche, Noel, Elsie Arden, Richard Buhlig, Ernestine Ball journalist. And Elsie sang her famous *Titanic*. Krishna gave some temple chants and Noel sang. Richard didn't play, he is resting.

The Hindoos of course are most abstemious and eat only an occasional lettuce leaf.

— OCTOBER 11, 1934 —

Dearest Mabel: Just been reading and answering Robin's mail and now I have just one moment for my own. In the mail was a *filthy* one written in a sort of nigger baby-talk, H—S—kind of thing, from Pennsylvania somewhere I think—I've burnt it so I'm not sure—from a man who said he played the piano and his name was Wolfe and we had met him at your house. Neither of us can place him. He sounded crazy. Was there such a person there?

We've been seeing Krishnamurti and his entourage. He is very nice indeed with a clever, clever mind but he seems so evasive and so open to the contrary winds of belief that I can scarcely imagine him in the role of leader ever. He is extremely reluctant to even cry to persuade anyone of anything.

We had tremendous seas for two days this week. Almost the highest ever since we've been here. Weather report said a tremendous storm at sea 3,000 miles in length north and south.

— OCTOBER 16, 1934 —

That little seer: How can they trust him? He looks so ignoble and sly. I wouldn't trust him with a thri'penny bit. Richard Buhlig gave me the first lengthy description of Steiner I'd had and how he meandered off into his anthrosophy. He thought he and the Catholic Church had knowledge of a lot of arcana. I must say I feel with Myron [Brinnig] that it's very mysterious how women covet saviours. I wish you could see them after Krishnamurti!

Yesterday I was up at Olga's—a lot of people came in—Mrs. Arden Ruark is staying there (She was Mrs. George Moore, you know). She and her handsome sulky polo-playing husband have just come back from paying a round of visits to his family and friends' country estates in Ireland. She loved it. Her twin sister Mrs. Forrester was there and the Harry Hunts and Francis McComases and at least two came in to stay overnight from Rhinehardt's "Midsummer Night's Dream." I didn't get their names. She is supposed to be the most dazzlingly beautiful creature seen in Hollywood. Francesca Something. Yellow hair and black eyes, very foreign voice—

— OCTOBER 26, 1934 —

You are sweet to humor my foibles! I love that book on Round Towers in which I have often seen quoted and once read in an old house in Belfast. There are many interesting bits about the towers in it besides his amusing and almost convincing phallic ideas of them.

Olga was here yesterday to ask us up to meet Dorothy Parker on Saturday. I can't bear her smart, cynical books (but thousands can!). Teddie brought over a book of her short stories with great admiration "After Such Pleasures"—The people I spoke of coming in one day when I was there are connected with your life I think. Francesca Bragiotti (not spelled right) —of Florence, —father taught singing—mother sang too didn't she and had 13 children—surely they are in your *Memoirs*. Olga took singing of them there, this girl leads a ballet in Hollywood. Her husband who looked like a tall oily Jew is no less than John Cabot Lodge of Boston.

We've been seeing Krishnamurti—Robin and he are to walk again up in the hills today and we are going to dinner with him at Peter Pan. He and Robin have had several grand walks. They seem not to talk, —just *walk* at lightening speed. I can't begin to write about him. He is a most loveable person and his mind brilliant and trained. I do not find his teaching anything I am needing and indeed it seems so far from any practical living (except for a hermit) that it seems to me a sort of metaphysical exercise for the mind—pleasantly interesting.

Another interesting man came over from London to interview Krishna, Mr. Rom Landeau, a Pole. He wrote books on PiLsudski and on Paderewskiis doing one now on world saviors of our time. He has been staying with Kaiserling in Germany and his report on conditions in Germany is appalling. He stayed for a time with a friend who owns a castle near Berlin who being anti-Nazi has to submit to the most exasperating demands in order to hold on at all! (Such as, the local company of Nazi troops needs 250 pairs of shoes this week—he must get them: or they need a local meeting place,—he must allow them a room in the castle, etc. —). Another friend owns a small factory in which uses 150 workmen. He is made to employ 4,000, who must sit about most of time, and he is going bankrupt. —Even these things sound better than communism however, and Landeau does admit the fanatical ideals and power of Hitler.

My step-sister and her Scotch husband [Edith: Jack Allen] have just gone south, stayed with us four days—They are just down from 6 months in the most remote part of upper British Columbia working on a mining claim. I never heard such wild stories—62 miles to pack everything in.

— *DECEMBER 14, 1934* —

A young Irishman, who lost a leg in the war, is in Carmel for a few months. He plays upon an Irish harp & sings ancient Irish songs in both Gaelic & English—it's lovely! We arranged a little concert for him at

the Green's studio night before last. Netted clear \$70, which was fine. He is very hard up. I took him up to Olga's one day & he played the best I ever heard him. Even Sydney was enchanted.

Tell Tony the boys went to a cock-fight that lasted almost all Sunday in Salinas, with the Tevises. John Phelps (Muriel Vanderbilt's husband) entered 20 cocks. They live on the ranch by the Mission you know. I guess it was pretty bloody.

— *DECEMBER 20, 1934* —

We are going to Christmas dinner at Tevis for the fourth or fifth year. It's very gay. Last year thirty were at table. (Robin doesn't enjoy it much as you may guess but he gets out of every other function or rather I get him out.)

# ***JEFFERS LITERARY MANUSCRIPTS: AT THE JAMES S. COPLEY LIBRARY***

*by Robert M. Kafka*

**THE JAMES S. COPLEY LIBRARY**  
1134 KLINE STREET  
(P.O. Box 1530)  
LA JOLLA, CA 92308

■ This extraordinary private research library was funded by Copley Newspapers in 1966 and is now housed in an elegant facility which opened in 1982. While the primary collection pertains to the American Revolutionary War, secondary collections with significant holdings include Robinson Jeffers, the Fremonts, Lincoln, Twain, the Southwest, and Presidential Correspondence. Some of the holographs in the Jeffers Collection were acquired within the last ten years; researchers should inquire about recent accessions. Applications for reading privileges may be made to Carole Beaes, Manager, at the above address.

The emphasis in the Jeffers Collection is on first editions and printed materials; the collection is especially rich here, including many rare printings and inscribed copies. Additionally, the holdings include the following holographs and typescripts:

1. TMs "Remembered Verses," 2 leaves on Hammermill Bond paper. Versos blank. Foreword to S.S. Alberts' bibliography.
2. AMs "Remembered Verses," 3 leaves on Hammermill Bond paper. Versos blank on first 2 leaves; verso 3rd leaf has last paragraph of text and signature.
3. AMs, 1 leaf, no watermark.  
—Recto: [Saul], 9 lines of verse, AMs with autograph revisions. 1 page. Describes a gloomy and resolute Saul



besought by Abner to lighten his mien for the benefit of newly-conscripted troops. Unpublished.

—Verso: "On a Poem Called the W. at P.S." (Title cancelled.) Four Ams quatrains, most cancelled, heavily revised. Unpublished. Also other short verse fragments for narrative poems.

4. TccL to [George] West. 1/22/26. No watermark. 1 leaf, 2 pp. West was author of an important early article on RJ (San Francisco *Call-Bulletin* Jan. 2, 1926). Two typescript versions of this letter exist. Ridgeway (Selected Letters, #53) followed the version now at the University of Texas, which omits the closing paragraph of the Copley TccL, referring to the story appearing in the *Call-Bulletin* by West's friend Jack Black. RJ says he is reading every word of it, and much admires the writer. "Some of his recent episodes are tremendous, like scenes in King Lear." It is uncertain whether either this TccL or the one at the University of Texas was in fact made by Jeffers. The holograph of this important letter has not yet been located.
5. ALS to Mr. Turner, 7/19/54. 1 p.  
Gives permission to reprint "The Deer Lay Down Their Bones." It is quite true, by the way, not a poetic fancy, that I found those four or five deer-skeletons huddled together above the river-gorge." Best wishes for The Poet. Return address specifies "USA."
6. ALS to Mr. Braithwaite, 7/21/26. Embossed Tor House stationary. 1 p. Gives permission for Braithwaite to reprint poems in his anthology; begs off answering biographical questions.
7. ALS to Paul Landacre, June 1931. 1 p. Acknowledges receipt of Landacre's wood-cuts from Edward Weston. Declines to write Foreword about them, though he and Una think them admirable. Admires the "keen, clear line, the solidarity of your hills, and the splendid energy of 'Grass-fire.'" With this, an ALS letter from Edward Weston to Landacre, 5/13/31, 1 leaf, 2 pp. Weston details his efforts on Landacre's behalf, and notes: "Do not be too hopeful. He is swamped with requests, and may have a negative policy. Anyhow, one can be a great poet, and not have a critical plastic sense."

## Guidelines for Submissions for *RJN*

The *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* will print short notes, notifications of work-in-progress, announcements requests for information, inquiries from collectors, bibliographic findings, etc. It especially welcomes short anecdotes relating to the poet and his works.

It has not been RJN policy to publish unsolicited poem tributes. Photos relating to Robinson Jeffers and family are most welcome and may be printed if not restricted by copyright.

Significant letters from or about the Jeffers family are equally welcome, as are drawings, maps, family-tree annotations, and reports on cultural allusions to the poet, use of his poems, and difficult-to-access articles.

### Essays:

Place the title one inch below the top of the page, the author's name one inch below the title, the text two inches below the author's name. Affiliation of the contributor should appear at the end of the essay.

### Notes, Book Reviews, and Bibliographies:

Follow the form for essays, except that the author's name (and affiliation) should appear at the end of the text.

### References:

Consult the *MLA Style Sheet* Second Edition. Mark references in the text with raised footnote number (not author-year citations in parentheses). Double-space endnotes following the essay on a new page headed "Notes."

### Quoting and Citing Robinson Jeffers:

The standard edition of Jeffers' work is now *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Stanford University Press, Vols. I, II, 111: 1988, 1989, 1991), abbreviated CP. Of course, for peculiar purposes, the original printings may be referred to, in which case the title in full or (when repeated) appropriately abbreviated, should be cited, along with an explanatory note. Until *The Collected Letters of Robinson and Una Jeffers* (Stanford) is available, references should be to *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Ann Ridgeway (Johns Hopkins, 1968), or to the appropriate number of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*

Submit two typescripts, double-spaced on 8 1/2" x 11" standard white typing paper. To have one returned, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Address correspondence to Robert J. Brophy editor, *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*, I Department of English, California State University, Long Beach, CA 90840; (310) 985-4235 Contributors whose work is published or publishers whose book is reviewed will receive two complimentary copies of that issue of RJN.