

# *The Work of the Edition: Some Possible Lessons and Directions*

Tim Hunt

*Editors' note:* The following is a slightly modified text of the Keynote Lecture given at the opening of the Robinson Jeffers Conference at Stanford University, 25 May 2002.

Before I try to address the topic I've been given, I'd like to call your attention to something else that I think is important. A conference like this one is not only an occasion to share ideas and debate the implications of our different perspectives, it is also a reminder that we are a community of readers, and that this community has persevered and grown richer over time through the belief and work of several generations of scholars. The earliest generation—Powell, Bennett, Klein, and others—we now know only through their work and our memory, but those of us here today represent all the succeeding generations. So I think of this conference as a kind of family reunion. As a community, we are still young enough to recognize that and still small enough to value it. In the coming years as this organization grows and as our discussions of Jeffers broaden, deepen, and draw in additional voices and perspectives, it will be, I'd suggest, our privilege and our responsibility to maintain the sense of community we share today.

Last summer Brad Leithauser reviewed the new Stanford *Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* for *The New York Times*. I'm guessing that many of you read the piece. Like Yvor Winters and Kenneth Rexroth before him, Leithauser casts Jeffers as a minor figure—one who appeals to naïve readers who overlook his failings as a poet in their zeal for his overly sentimental ideas about nature, history, and God. Jeffers, he suggests, is too much a regionalist, had too little awareness of (and less regard for) modern developments in poetry, and paid too little attention to the poetic tradition and how the work of earlier poets might enrich his own. And he sees Jeffers (I think this is the central issue for him) as a poor craftsman. According to Leithauser, Jeffers “belie[ved] that it's sufficient merely to speak of beautiful things, without necessarily putting a beautiful finish upon them” and that this is why “Jeffers so often settled for inflated but limp expressions of praise and wonderment.” Jeffers, it seems,

couldn't or wouldn't turn his coastal material on the lathe of poetic craft and offers merely the driftwood that might have been turned into beautiful aesthetic objects had Jeffers had the skill, discipline, and commitment to craft to do so. Jeffers apparently failed to recognize that basic precept of all current poetry writing courses that poetry should show instead of tell.

This may seem an odd way to start a consideration of how the Stanford edition of the *Collected Poetry* might contribute to new directions in our individual and collective work with Jeffers, but I want to suggest that one possible lesson that the material in the edition offers is that Jeffers was quite aware throughout his career of both the poetry of past generations and his own time; that he thought of his work and career partly in terms of how he was extending, modifying, or countering the projects of other major poets; and that he was actually carefully crafting his lines and poems to realize his aesthetic goals. The fifth volume of the *Collected Poetry* offers various examples that I think support these claims, but my guess is that they wouldn't convince Leithauser, because I think the root of the problem is that Leithauser neither recognizes nor acknowledges the kind of poetry Jeffers was writing. If so, this means our challenge is a double one: It is partly to establish the literariness of Jeffers, and it is partly to work out the particular nature of that literariness and why it is a legitimate alternative to the kinds of poetry that Leithauser and others do understand and acknowledge.

Contemporary poetry might seem far removed from the High Modernism that Pound, Eliot, and others championed in the early decades of the first half of twentieth century, but in poetry writing classes these days we insist that poems must show, not tell, and this belief has its roots in the modernist revolt against nineteenth-century rhetoric. Pound insisted that beautiful sentiments bathed in sonorous generalizations could not be considered poetry. Poetry, he preached, should avoid rhetoric; it should avoid abstraction. While we need to acknowledge the value of the modernist campaign against rhetoric and the stylistic possibilities the modernists pioneered, we also need to recognize that modernist experiment, the tactics for minimizing or even eliminating rhetoric, can lead to an atrophied sense of discourse and an atrophied sense of the poem as an actual exchange with the reader. Jeffers, I think, sensed this quite early, and it is one of the reasons he chose to write against the modernist grain. For Jeffers the challenge was to fashion a sufficiently modern rhetoric for poetry so that it could address modern readers. For Pound and those who followed his lead, the task was to free poetry from its rhetorical roots so that the poem could stand as a fully realized modern object. For Pound and the modernists the page became at root a space to inscribe writing, a place to show. For Jeffers, the page became, instead, a space to enact speech and remained a place where one might tell as well as show.

For Leithauser Jeffers's willingness to "tell" is the basis of an array of aesthetic sins. I would like to suggest, instead, that this willingness is actually a key aspect of Jeffers's craft and an important feature of his achievement. I want to suggest, that is, that recognizing the nature of Jeffers's rhetoric and its role in his poems can help us appreciate the way that they are more than (as Leithauser puts it) "inflated but limp expressions of praise and wonderment."

"The Ocean's Tribute," a late poem, suggests that Jeffers was quite aware of his willingness to tell, that this meant he was at odds with critical fashion, and that he wrote this way as a matter of aesthetic principle:

Yesterday's sundown was very beautiful—I know it is out of fashion to say so, I think we are fools  
To turn from the superhuman beauty of the world and dredge our own minds—it built itself up with ceremony  
From the ocean horizon, smoked amber and tender green, pink and purple and vermilion, great ranks  
Of purple cloud, and the pink rose-petals over all and through all; but the ocean itself, cold slate-color,  
Refused the glory. Then I saw a pink fountain come up from it,  
A whale-spout; there were ten or twelve whales quite near the deep shore, playing together, nuzzling each other,  
Plunging and rising, lifting luminous pink pillars from the flat ocean to the flaming sky. (*CP* 3:439)

Jeffers here "speak[s] of beautiful things"; but he is less interested in making the poem a world unto itself than in pointing to a world and qualities that he claims are outside the poem, and he seems unconcerned with giving his piece "a beautiful finish." The poem exemplifies what Leithauser finds problematic about Jeffers. It opens with a flat, even abstract statement. It tells rather than shows. It moralizes. The metaphor of "ceremony" is an instance of the pathetic fallacy. What the piece apparently needs is Ezra Pound's red pencil to slash away the underbrush of "I knows" and "I saws" and reveal the imagist lyric hidden within.

But "The Ocean's Tribute" is more than a digest of Jeffers's apparent flaws. The speaker "know[s]" that it is "out of fashion to say" what he is saying and that he is saying it in an unfashionable way. Jeffers seems to recognize, that is, that his work is discursive and overtly rhetorical, and he knows that this is what makes it "unfashionable." More, he makes this writing against the grain of the time a gesture within the poem, even though writing unfashionably has no direct connection to the sunset and could be dropped without changing the scene. That Jeffers knows his manner "is out of fashion" but emphasizes this within the poem points to his willingness to challenge the poetic fashion that he rejects, and it implies that he willingly risks having his work misunderstood and devalued. But even more it suggests that this poem is as much about aesthetics—*aesthetic purpose and aesthetic value*—as about the sunset. It proposes a particular way of seeing and relating to natural beauty (one where the poem is less an object that embodies a beauty derived or transformed from the

world and instead more a process of reflecting on beauty). Also, the poem models a particular way of addressing the reader (as a potential listener to the speaker's dramatized speaking), and it critiques (at least implicitly) current poetic and critical fashion. And perhaps most fundamentally the poem reflects Jeffers's sense that poetic language and the poem can never compete with or contain nature but that the poem instead stands as a witness to the world beyond it. For Jeffers, poetry leads us out of the poem (beyond the routines and conventions of culture) to a recognition of the beauty of objects, modes of being, and transformations in nature that are always and necessarily beyond the poem.

While "The Ocean's Tribute" can be seen (on the surface) as the work of someone content "merely to speak of beautiful things, without necessarily putting a beautiful finish upon them," the poem is not (as Leithauser might conclude) merely a lesser attempt at "In a Station of the Metro" with an outdoor setting. We are not dealing with a poet who fails to write a properly modern lyric, but to see this we must attend not just to the finish of the phrases but to how Jeffers situates the poem rhetorically and how it unfolds as an observation of a beautiful moment. The poem does not crystalize a moment of heightened perception nor has it been crafted to be an object that becomes the equivalence of such a moment and its possible replacement. Instead, "The Ocean's Tribute" enacts a dramatized speaker, then unfolds the speaker's process of both perception and reflection. The poem moves from a kind of rhetorical self-consciousness that compromises the speaker's ability to enter fully into the experience of the perceptual moment and the simple beauty it offers (a beauty so simple and common we have deadened it into a cliché and declared it poetically out of fashion) on to imaginative dramatizations of the landscape (the imputation that the sunset is to itself a ceremony), then pivots on the phrase "Refused the glory" (actually the fanciful and inadequate glory that the speaker has projected for it), and concludes with what the speaker then sees because the scene "Refuse[s]" the poet's illusory "glory." Jeffers has crafted a poem that trades (willingly, it seems) the pleasure of rendering the intensity of moments of heightened perception for a different set of pleasures. It isn't simply that the poem reflects on our possible relationship to moments of simple natural beauty and (implicitly) considers how language can stand between us and such moments or draw us into them, it is also the way the poem turns on the drama it enacts—the intersection of the natural scene, the speaker's changing relationship to it, and the way the poem both draws us into its process yet pushes us to focus on the world beyond the poem. For Jeffers, the poem is dramatic process and engagement, not artful, constructed object, and the degree of poetic finish in his work, the relative skill or clumsiness at the stylistic level, needs to be treated in this context—a context which reveals, for instance, the dramatic and conceptual precision (i.e., the craft) of the verb "saw" in "The

Ocean's Tribute" (line 5). In another poem, another kind of poem, this word could be ordinary, flat, and clumsy, but here it has a dramatic—and aesthetic—rightness that a more elaborate or colorful word would lack.

Whatever his mix of strengths and weaknesses and place in the tradition, Jeffers is not the figure that Leithauser describes. For one thing, "The Ocean's Tribute" suggests that he used the language with purpose, logic, and control. The poem also shows that he was aware enough of other poets of the time and the canons of taste supporting their work to know that his approach was "unfashionable" and to deliberately cast his work in opposition to these poetic norms. If this opposition were a rejection of the category of poetry itself, it would be a sign that Jeffers thought he could write as if other poets and the tradition were simply irrelevant to his own work. This seems Leithauser's sense of the matter: "There are strikingly few references in Jeffers's work to the writers of the past, and those that do appear tend to belong to the classical Greek rather than the grand English tradition. . . . Jeffers was by temperament a solitary. He was eager to expunge other voices from his verse." But Jeffers's willingness to write against the modernist grain in "The Ocean's Tribute" is not necessarily an indication that he was naïvely fantasizing that he could naïvely turn away from the poetic tradition and write as if he were some sort of Adamic first poet. The speaker's act of declaring what he says as "unfashionable" does not set the poem (or its poetics) in opposition to the poetic tradition or the category of poetry. Rather, it links the poem and poet to the tradition, writes the figure of the tradition into the poem as a context, and gives the poem the task of recuperating what has been lost (thematically, rhetorically, stylistically, but above all experientially). When Jeffers labels his poem and its "say[ing]" as "unfashionable," he is, then, implicitly defining the other side of the equation as merely fashionable and opening the possibility that the "fashionable" is in a less authentic or more problematic relationship to the tradition than his own work. The issue for the speaker of "The Ocean's Tribute," then, is not so much whether to engage or ignore the tradition but the need to renew and extend the tradition in spite of current critical norms, which by the mid-1950s had pretty much declared high modernism as the only legitimate modern poetic game. This is not to suggest that "The Ocean's Tribute" is primarily a coded argument about the poetic tradition and literary politics. Rather, it is (as it says) about looking at sunsets with these other contexts implicitly positioning it in opposition to the then New Critical fashion that validated certain projects (Eliot's for one) at the expense of others (Jeffers, Millay, even to some extent Frost if we consider how we usually focus on a few of the lyrics at the expense of the early narratives that are equally crucial to his achievement). The speaker's sense of his marginalized position (of what he rejects and affirms in part because of it) becomes an element in the poem's rhetoric and factors into the speaker's process of reaching

—through language and the dialectic of perception and imagination it enables—  
a moment of heightened participation and awareness.

While “The Ocean’s Tribute” suggests that Jeffers saw himself as engaging and extending the literary tradition, not dismissing it, it does not do much to define the specifics of the tradition that he saw himself as validating or how or why his view of the tradition required a different approach to being a modern poet than the approaches of his critically more fashionable contemporaries. A second late poem, “Granddaughter” (written in the late 1950s), helps clarify these specifics and Jeffers’s view of them:

And here’s a portrait of my granddaughter Una  
When she was two years old: a remarkable painter,  
A perfect likeness; nothing tricky nor modernist,  
Nothing of the artist fudging his art into the picture,  
But simple and true. She stands in a glade of trees with a still inlet  
Of blue ocean behind her. Thus exactly she looked then,  
A forgotten flower in her hand, those great blue eyes  
Asking and wondering.

Now she is five years old  
And found herself; she does not ask any more but commands,  
Sweet and fierce-tempered; that light red hair of hers  
Is the fuse for explosions. When she is eighteen  
I’ll not be here. I hope she will find her natural elements,  
Laughter and violence; and in her quiet times  
The beauty of things—the beauty of transhuman things,  
Without which we are all lost. I hope she will find  
Powerful protection and a man like a hawk to cover her. (*CP* 3:464)

As with “The Ocean’s Tribute,” this poem can seem artless and talky—nothing more than a grandfather doting on a “command[ing]” five-year-old, but here too the simplicity of the surface is not the whole of the poem. For one thing, the claim that there is “nothing tricky nor modernist, / Nothing of the artist fudging his art into the picture” implicitly validates the speaker’s own direct speaking; the painting is “simple and true” and so is the voice that comments on the granddaughter and how naturally she inhabits the natural scene. The rightness of the painting (both in its approach and result) also brings the issue of representation into play as a thematic element. Although the poem is evoking the granddaughter, the one feature it offers directly is her temperament; beyond that the speaker’s declaration that the painting captures a “perfect likeness” of the child substitutes for an actual description of her. The speaker (with-

in the imaginative frame of the poem) points to the painting, which in turn points to the granddaughter.

If we focus on the figure of the granddaughter, the poem can be seen as an instance of the “trickiness” Jeffers claims to reject. The speaker validates the painting, the painter’s approach, and his own mode as alternatives to modernist “fudging,” yet the poem withholds or defers the representation of the granddaughter that it seems to promise. However, the doubled figure of the actual granddaughter and the painting of her are more the poem’s occasion than its subject. The poem is not a verbal portrait of the granddaughter, even less a verbal portrait of her painted portrait. What the poem offers is the speaker’s encounter with the painting and the awareness it triggers—that the granddaughter is not, at five, as she was at two, and that she will be yet different at eighteen. The poem portrays how this awareness leads to the speaker’s sense that nature is both on-going (inescapable) change and beauty. As the poem unfolds it becomes less a poem about the granddaughter and more a poem about consciousness of and in nature. The apprehension of time and change that the granddaughter drives becomes the speaker’s recognition of his mortality (a mortality that is no longer safely distant in some vague future). But this apprehension becomes (also) a moment of recognizing the “transhuman” nature and how its “beauty” is both incarnated in the inevitable change of material existence and transcendent. The poem, that is, enacts—through the figure of the granddaughter, the artifact of the painting, and the figures of the landscape—the speaker’s deepening awareness of the granddaughter’s life unfolding in time, that her life unfolds in a time that will soon not include him, and that this is what one must not only accept but affirm as the condition of knowing “transhuman beauty.”

The painting and poem, then, are equally direct—but differently so, and this difference is also an element in the poem. The painting can represent the physical dimensions of the moment, “Thus exactly she looked then” against the “still” backdrop of the ocean “inlet.” The single painting cannot simultaneously engage and represent how the ocean has been and will be at different times in the same inlet (it is only “still” for relatively brief moments). Nor can it capture the granddaughter as a changing figure or project her future transformations, though the flower in her hand can point to such change and invite reflection. Conversely, the poem cannot capture or convey an actual scene, but it can enact, record, construct the experiencing of a moment (the speaker’s recognition that the “fierce-tempered” girl of five is both the same and not the same as the painting’s girl of two), and it can explore or project aspects of the experience that move conceptually and chronologically well beyond the moment that the poem inscribes as its catalyst. The poem, then, is a series, a layering, of representations: the painting, the granddaughter at different moments, nature as change, and the speaker’s recognition of mortality, in which the recognition of

natural change is both the threat of mortality that drives the poem and the experience of a potentially redemptive beauty. Where the painting (as figured in the poem) offers the experience of a resonant moment, the poem offers a resonant process. The poem incorporates the image of the painting but in no way functions as a kind of surrogate painting. The poem remains rooted in speech, in speaking, and, like “The Ocean’s Tribute,” is less a representation of a scene or moment than an enactment of engaging, reflecting on, and speaking from a moment—and as such the precise opposite of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro,” a quintessential imagist lyric that is a kind of verbal painting.

Finally, the way the painting functions in “Granddaughter” implicitly positions the poem in yet another way. The speaker’s comments on the painting of the granddaughter echo the duke’s comments on the painting of the wife he has apparently had murdered in Robert Browning’s most famous dramatic monologue, “My Last Duchess.” Both poems offer a speaker sharing a painter (albeit in Jeffers’s poem with the reader instead of an auditor within the frame of the poem as in Browning’s piece), and both counterpoint sincerity and artifice. For both speakers the paintings represent figures who seem to participate in the natural world with a spontaneity and immediacy that contrasts with the speakers’ own more passive and reflective position. And in both, the paintings reveal and conceal. The contrast between the poems is also suggestive. In Jeffers’s poem the speaker recognizes, acknowledges, and moves to accept change and otherness, even though doing so confronts him with a not-too-distant mortality. In Browning’s poem the speaker blinds himself to these things through his decadent aestheticism (an aestheticism that for Jeffers prefigures “modernist” “trickery”?). But perhaps most interestingly Jeffers’s muted allusion to Browning points toward the contrasting rhetoric of the two poems. In “My Last Duchess” both speaker and auditor are constructed figures contained within the frame of the poem and function dramatically within it (the one overtly, the other implicitly). This casts the reader as an onlooker responding both to the poet’s fashioning of his materials and to the way the poem projects issues and perspectives that the figures within the poem reflect but neither contain nor recognize. In “Granddaughter” the speaker is also a dramatically constructed figure, but in this case a figure of the poet who offers himself (though constructed) as an authentic and sincere speaker addressing the reader, who (though beyond the frame of the poem) is offered the role of participating auditor. The contrast suggests that Jeffers recognized that the position of speaker and auditor/reader in “The Ocean’s Tribute” and “Granddaughter” were constructions, fictions, but it also suggests that he thought these positions could be enacted in ways that could function like real speaking and listening. In this sense it makes perfect sense that the Duke disappears back into the poem and aesthetic solipsism at the end of Browning’s poem, while the speaker in Jeffers’s poem invites us (implicitly) at the end to move with him beyond the poem



to the actual world (the way the poem points to this heightened engagement of the world beyond the poem is clearer in “The Ocean’s Tribute,” the rhetorical logic behind the move is clearer in “Granddaughter”).

These two late Jeffers poems function as what might be termed written acts of speaking that are partly grounded in the figure of the poet (his experience, his insight, his authenticity). And this poetics of personality (as some might see it) is clearly not modernist or even Victorian. But if Jeffers is neither modernist nor Victorian, what is he? One possibility is that he is naïvely unaware—or unconcerned—with these matters (this, I think, is Leithauser’s view). Yet “The Ocean’s Tribute” and “Granddaughter” argue against this: in the one Jeffers not only knows that he is being “unfashionable” but makes a point of it; in the other he seems clearly aware of how his piece plays against Browning’s paradigmatic text. Rather, I’d suggest that Jeffers’s affirmation of the figure of the poet speaking directly through the poem to the reader rather than through various ironic and objectifying frames is at root a Romantic position. This too can, of course, be read negatively—as a regression to an outmoded and discredited mode (and actually this was a key element in Winters’s argument that Jeffers was perniciously decadent), but here, also, the apparent awareness of, and concern with, poetics, poetic traditions, and their implications suggests that Jeffers was not simply reverting to the Romantic position. Instead, he was writing a modern Romanticism that was itself a critique of the Victorian and modernist reactions against Romantic poetics.<sup>1</sup>

Leithauser, I’d suggest, misses the richness and subtlety of poems like “The Ocean’s Tribute” and “Granddaughter” because his assumptions about poetry and the kind of poetry he has learned to read and value lead him to *look* for Jeffers’s craft rather than *hear* for it. The momentum of the long lines, the effect of pace and rhythmic modulation, and how these create dramatic and conceptual nuance require that we hear the poems through the voice Jeffers has carefully created and that we attend carefully to the way Jeffers positions the act of speaking (in the lyrics) and narrating (in the long poems). And this, I’d suggest, is another way of saying that we need to acknowledge the poems as deeply, unfashionably rhetorical. If this is so, our challenge critically is to defend and explore that, not the poetry apart from that.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Janet Debar, commenting after I read this piece at this year’s conference, raised the possibility that the close of “Granddaughter” may also show Jeffers

echoing William Butler Yeats's "A Prayer for My Daughter," and I think she is right. If so, this further complicates Jeffers's rhetorical positioning.

## WORKS CITED

Jeffers, Robinson. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Tim Hunt. Vol. 3. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991.

Leithauser, Brad. "Staring Out to Sea." Rev. of *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. *New York Times* 22 July 2001, sec. 7: 14.

*Tim Hunt, Professor of English at Washington State University, Vancouver, is author of Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction (1981), editor of The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (Stanford UP, vols. 1–5, 1988, 1989, 1991, 2000, 2001) and The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (Stanford UP, 2001), and author of numerous articles, introductions, and book chapters on Jeffers. He is also a published poet.*