

# *Carrying the Weight: Jeffers's Role in Preparing the Way for Ecocriticism*

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In “Fallen Western Star: The Decline of San Francisco as a Literary Region,” Dana Gioia argues that acclaim for poetic accomplishment has depended largely on being from the East Coast. Gioia states that

The effects of California’s remoteness from the centers of literary power are obvious. It is more difficult to create and sustain a major literary reputation from the West Coast. Not a single Californian—nor for that matter any Westerner—was appointed as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in its entire fifty-year history. Even after the position was elevated by Congress into the Poet Laureate, only one Westerner, Robert Hass, has served in the sixty-two years of the office. It took fifty-one years for a California poet to receive the Pulitzer Prize—George Oppen in 1969—but the winner at least had the good manners to have been born in New York.

Neither Jeffers nor Winters, Rexroth nor Duncan, Miles nor Everson ever won a Pulitzer. Did these estimable West Coast writers lose to greater talents? An examination of the Pulitzer winners suggests that literary quality mattered less than proximity to the Manhattan-based committee. For example, in the two decades that Jeffers published his best collections—from *The Women at Point Sur* (1927) through *Hungerfield* (1945)—the prize went to New York writers, Leonora Speyer, Audrey Wurdemann, William Rose Benét, Robert P. T. Coffin, Marya Zaturenska, Mark Van Doren, and Leonard Bacon, a New York-born Rhode Islander. (The Maine-born Coffin taught in New York at the time of his award.) (20–21)

Gioia finalizes his comments by asking: “*Is even the best of these poets remotely comparable to Jeffers?*” (21).

Gioia registers a frustration that has dogged the Jeffers scholarly community for years. Jeffers scholars have, for the past few decades, defended Jeffers against vigorous exclusion and marginalization. Gioia’s comment also points toward the purpose of this paper: to assess the value of Jeffers for the late 20th century, and, in the process, to reexamine the rationale for the general refusal

to recognize his work. More specifically, it is my wish in this paper to advance an argument I have long believed to be true: that Jeffers provides a significant and essential link to today's ecoliterature and ecocriticism movement. In my reading of the shifts in the poetic and political terrain of literature studies, the recent traction gained and won by scholars wanting to study environmental literature is hard to imagine without Jeffers.

## THE EXCLUSIONARY FORCES

On the way toward understanding the full dimension of Jeffers's significance for the field of literary environmentalism, we must try to understand Jeffers's odd placement in the narrative history of American literature. In the first few decades of the 20th century, Jeffers had achieved some level of status. In 1934, Lawrence Clark Powell, assessing Jeffers's work and fame at the time, stated that it seemed inconceivable that Jeffers could be denied "a unique position in contemporary literature. The natural course of events will award him his final place in English letters more inevitably than any man of his time could profess to do" (203). Avid attention, which included the cover of *Time* magazine, characterized this period. However, when Edward Abbey, an ardent admirer of Jeffers, recorded the pilgrimage he made to the master's house, even Abbey put his visit in these illuminating terms: a "literary pilgrimage to the shrine of one of America's best, most reclusive, least known, most unpopular poets" ("A San Francisco Journal" 71). Abbey records what, for many decades following the 30s, became a standard reaction to Jeffers: ambiguous, hesitant, admiring, and, for many, dismissive.

In attempting to account for this reaction, one certainly must cite the well-documented reaction to the publication of *The Double Axe* in 1948. The press savaged this antiwar poem, published at the climax of victory in WWII.<sup>1</sup> In addition, those who work in Jeffers studies have made much of the effect New Criticism had on excluding Jeffers. The combination of these exclusionary elements led an uncharitable reviewer, in 1962, to say, "it took his death to remind us that he had in fact been alive" (in Karman 1–2).

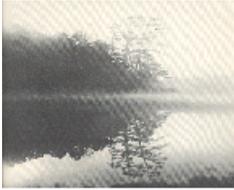
However, I submit that it has been the vision at the core of his work, *a vision that displaces humans from the center of importance while elevating nature*, which is the basis for loyalty to his work on the one hand and the sublimation of his work on the other. One way to understand this response is to think of the religious response to Darwin. Religion reacts so strongly to Darwinian theory and evolution because of the leveling effect it has on our androcentric sense of importance. Such theories point to our fluidity, our temporality, and even our absurd relativity. Most cannot encounter such a perspective and sustain a sense

that they are secure, saved, nourished, whole, and intact. Many who feel drawn to Jeffers are those who see the beauty beyond that which is under the control of humans. Jeffers's work focused on the environment; it focused on nature as possessing a higher value than human beings. Speaking of the things in nature Jeffers says, "their beauty has more meaning / Than the whole human race" (*CP* 3:119). The many reviewers who talk about the disgusting imagery, the unsavory elements, and the misanthropic personality in Jeffers testify, not to the "quality" of the poetry, but to an inability to swallow a tough message. The personal attack is particularly revealing in these cases. David Copland Morris touches on this kind of reaction in a recent article in *Jeffers Studies*:

... Helen Vendler, a central pillar of the critical establishment as poetry editor at *The New Yorker* and holder of an endowed chair at Harvard, has claimed that Jeffers suffers precisely from a lack of authority, that he did not have a courageous or mature mind: "What, then, is it that fails to compel acquiescence to Jeffers' verse? My short answer would be 'his moral timidity'" (91). In Vendler's view, Jeffers resisted the "introspection" required of the major poet, nor did he conduct a proper "investigation into his own private terrors" (94–5). She sees Jeffers's own condemnation of the modern preoccupation with such investigations as cowardly avoidance; she ridicules his criticism of "introversion" (she is the one who puts this word in quotes) as self-serving blindness (95). (15)

With such an intense focus on the beauty and power of the inhuman world, Jeffers's poetry was not going to be 1) easily embraced by self-loving humanity, nor 2) advanced by the tools available to literary critics of the day. By arguing in this way, I don't mean to claim that Jeffers's insight emerged miraculously void of historical or sociopolitical forces. Many other "dangerous" thinkers such as Darwin and Nietzsche had made their mark on Jeffers and the early 20th century. Clearly there had been an avid interest in what Lawrence called the language of the blood; in addition, in the early years of the 20th century, the arts and culture in general had a fascination with romantic primitivism. My claim is that no one writing poetry or literature rearranged the preferred order of the hierarchy of being with the force and precision of Jeffers. In addition, he did it in a way that matched, anticipated, and perhaps helped bring about modern environmental consciousness.

**Jeffers established the mid point between Thoreau on the one hand and today's environmentally oriented literature**



**Thoreau**



**Jeffers**



**Snyder**



**Many others since**

## THE INFLUENCE OF OTHER FIELDS ON LITERARY STUDIES

In the 60s and 70s, the environmental movement was fresh, on the move, and inventing itself as it gained energy and direction. Many of us who were in college at the time struggled in vain to find a link between our interests in literature and the movements in the science and politics of environmentalism. Glotfelty: “students interested in environmental approaches to literature felt like misfits” (xvii). Of the available tools for literary analysis—archetypal, biographical, historical, psychological, textual close reading—none could address the incredibly powerful reassessment of humanity’s place in the scheme of nature occurring in other fields. A splendid and luxurious uselessness and an ironic balance of opposing and ambiguous textual elements defined literature (see Reising ch. 4). Thinking back, one might suggest that Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* presents itself as an exception; but this text reduced an apparent interest in nature to a discussion about genre, and it sought a typical New Critical balance of opposites in a “complex pastoralism.” As Russell Reising states, the writers Marx appreciates conceive of an “aesthetic unity without suggesting how the problems posed by technology could be solved” (Reising 143). *Marx makes it quite clear that the problems associated with realizing a pastoral ideal are “not the problems of artists but of society, a problem that belongs not to art but to politics”* (Reising 145, Marx 365). Close reading was the dominant activity of the day and anything else was likely to be labeled

“mere” sociology, reductionistic, or worse. As Glotfelty states, “If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession . . . you would never suspect that the earth’s life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might not know that there was an earth at all . . . Until very recently there has been no sign that the institution of literary studies has even been aware of the environmental crisis” (xvi). Sometimes a new methodology comes into being because of a generalized theory and then evidence is sought. But at other times, and this is the case with Ecocriticism I think, we have an object of study and interest but no language or formalized method to assess it. In this case we had texts and ideas, and finally we began to construct essays about what we found that was meaningful in the texts.

In the 60s and 70s, nature had counter cultural moral and political energy, and it provided a philosophical reference point by which to pivot away from the demands and the mandates of contemporary authority and persuasion. The broader, more inclusive environmental movement sensed the turn in perspective that the literary culture was unwilling and unprepared to take on. Texts such as the *The Immense Journey* (1959) by Loren Eiseley and *Gaia: A New Look at Life* (1979) by James Lovelock (he first proposed the idea in 1972), although based in science, had enormous cultural impact. Certainly, *The Immense Journey* rose to poetic heights in its prose meditations on time and being. These texts radically reconceived human presence and importance in relation to the environment and natural forces. So many of the really notable examples of culture-changing texts from this period were from history, economics, or biology. Even where literature is involved, it is appropriated at the hands of people from one of these other fields. This is borne out in the following list:

*Not Man Apart* (1965), Sierra Club, by David Brower. An example of environmental groups appropriating Jeffers.

*Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), by Roderick Nash, a historian, refers to several literary figures but mentions Jeffers once in passing. Nevertheless, the text is important for its attempt to connect literature with nature. Nash refers to Muir, Leopold, and Thoreau but the focus is on nonfiction, i.e., items understood to be non “literary” productions. Nash’s book foreshadows intellectual histories to follow from Don Worster and Richard Slotkin.

*Desert Solitaire* (1968), by Edward Abbey. An exception on this list since this text was somewhat construed as a literary production; but at the time, even Abbey didn’t call this “literature”; Abbey’s work was what we now call creative nonfiction. Abbey’s publication was crucial for pushing the ecocriticism movement forward. Also, it is important to note that Jeffers serves as essential foundation for the work.

*Small is Beautiful* (1973), by E. F. Schumacher, an economist who caused many to rethink the environment and our responsibilities toward it.

*Person/Planet* (1979), by Theodore Rozsak, historian. This book was a radical formulation of the relation between the environment and the individual.

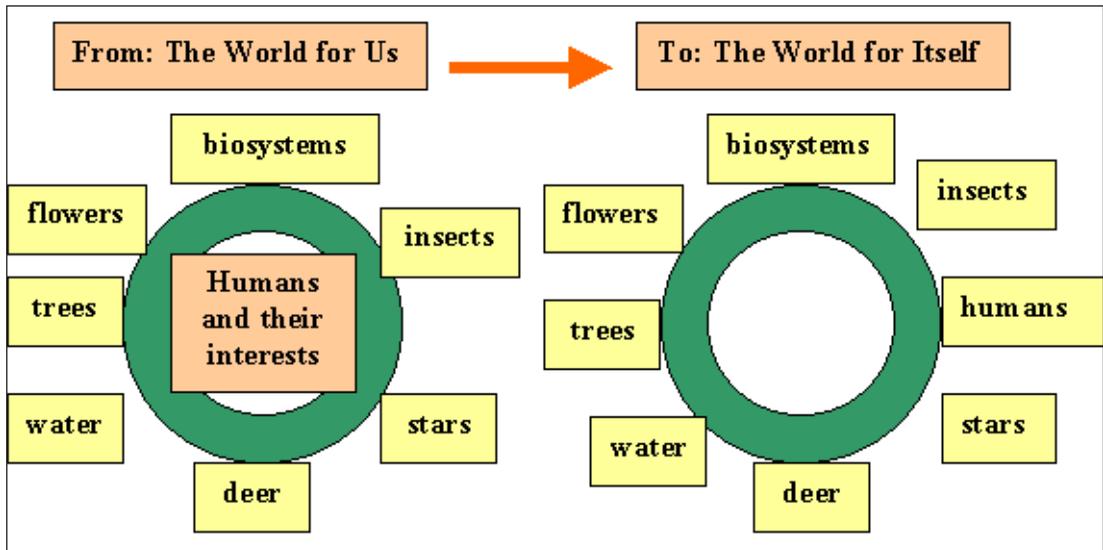
*The Population Bomb* (1968), by Paul Ehrlich, biologist.

*Silent Spring* (1962), by Rachael Carson, marine biologist.

*Deep Ecology* (1985), by George Sessions and Bill Devall. Widely read by the general public but also impacted the Nature Conservancy, Greenpeace, and Earth First! It discussed Edward Abbey, but it was primarily a book of new-age biology and not focused on literature.

All of these texts were busily responding to and shaping events in intellectual culture and praxis while literary study retreated from its self-created demons of science, realism, and positivism into a rich, textual sensuousness of non-utility.

The effect of the environmental movement on the political movement and intellectual culture cannot be underestimated. In short, the effect was to draw into question the solidity and homogeneity of the human, the "I," the American, the citizen, the consumer as the center or arbiter of meaning. At the same time, literary discussions focused on the unique subjectivity of an irreducible, idiosyncratic self. This new direction in nonliterary aspects of culture had an enormously destabilizing effect on many accepted and assumed norms. It resulted in the following Copernican reassessment:



From this new perspective in ecological thinking, with the human removed from the center, Jeffers's assertion (referred to above) that "their beauty has more meaning" makes easy sense, and it loses the frightening, lurid, and misanthropic sense that so many felt the need to attach to such a sentiment. Jeffers removed the childish sense that humans are the center of the purpose of the universe. Human beings tend to want to feel as though they are at home, that their values are essential, not accidental, that their experience is uniform, whole, symmetrical, teleological, logocentric, that it all makes sense, adds up, and that the universe is written to them and that it is finally about them. Tell them this is not true, and they act badly. Jeffers's character, the Inhumanist, suggests that "growing up" means being able to acknowledge:

the astonishing beauty of things . . . and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe . . . We know this, of course, but it does not appear that any previous one of the ten thousand religions and philosophies has realized it. An infant feels himself to be central and of primary importance; an adult knows better; it seems time that the human race attained to an adult habit of thought in this regard. (*CP* 4:418).

There is one more development worth mentioning that restructured the moment and made possible a reconsideration of Jeffers's vision. Throughout the 70s, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, New Historicism, and other post-modern methodologies emerged as vigorously *anti-anthropocentric*. They did so by exposing the human interest in myths, social values, political values, sexual constructs, nature, and other systems of thought that wished to appear "natural." Nietzsche establishes the point of departure for this movement:

While you rapturously pose as deriving your law from nature, you want something quite the reverse of that, you strange actors and self-deceivers. Your pride wants to prescribe your morality, your ideal, to nature, yes to nature itself, and incorporate them in it; you . . . would like to make all existence exist only after your own image. (21)

Here Nietzsche outlines the concern of poststructuralists to follow: humans have created myths, masquerading as objective perception, filled with our own wishes and desires, and then we "discover" them and impose and implement them on nature, women, minorities, workers, immigrants; in short, on difference, on others. Within these structures of thought one can find all kinds of hierarchical assumptions regarding the position of many things in existence, including the environment. In addition, some developments in marxist post-structuralism allowed for a more sociopolitical and materially based criticism.

Although approaching it in different ways, these theories attacked the same area of belief and bias attacked by the new environmentalism: the centrality of the human. These new theories were particularly interested in exposing the way in which interpretive methods carried unexamined assumptions about the supremacy of human consciousness and being, human presence, individual human identity, and other aspects of 20th-century humanism. Recall that the Postmodern and Poststructural theories have targeted the illusion and delusion of logos (presence, meaning, noumena threaded through phenomena), the supposed reconciliation of opposites in some unity (intellectual, spiritual, or social systems), as well as the death of the subject. In short, poststructuralism was determined to expose the human-centered and biased nature of thought structures. It rejected the innocent appeal in language that says “Believe me. Accept me. I have no designs on you.” The main benefit has been to critique our attempts to offset our cosmic insecurities by building comfort zones of solidity in language and thought systems. I am not suggesting a close affinity between Jeffers and the heart of these theories; however, I am suggesting that these theories made considerable headway toward making it possible more easily to come to terms with a Jeffersian vision of the world that, while not a poststructuralist overlay, was intent on critiquing self-serving human delusion. Jeffers demonstrated this interest in many of his poems but one letter is particularly revealing:

power is with the radicals—the destroyers—in thought and literature . . . The memorable names are mostly the names of men who broke down some set of conventions or “ideals”—Voltaire, Rousseau, Byron—Nietzsche etc.—away down to D. H. Lawrence. Conventions of monarchy, warlike patriotism, Christian dogma, purity . . . Much of their power derives from this catalysis; as an animal’s power from breaking down starch and protein. . . . Perhaps this shift of power, from the builders to the destroyers, is another sign that our culture-age has culminated and turned down again, in a creative sense? — That now its “ideals” and ideas need to be broken up and lie fallow awhile, in preparation for a later age? (in Ridgeway 246)

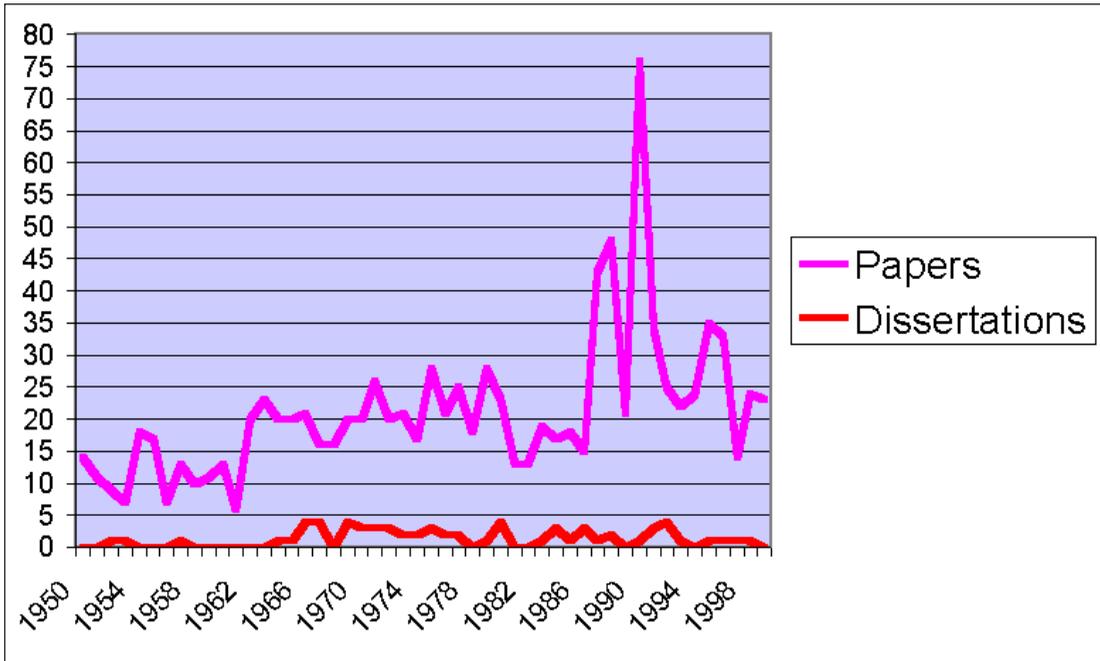
Jeffers continues by noting that when Wordsworth backed off from his critique of culture and converted to Christianity “he repented; and lost his creative power and significance” (in Ridgeway 246). Jeffers aligns himself with the process of preparing the ground. Theodore Roszak, in *Person/Planet* (1978), has called this “creative disintegration”; Jeffers also alludes to a falling apart “in a creative sense.” Jeffers’s favorite image of the hawk is clearly used by Jeffers to suggest that action of digesting the structures of current thinking to allow for a reconsideration of our attitudes toward nature and our daily lives as individuals and citizens. Jeffers accomplishes the same through many images

of nature as fire, fluidity, “the thing is like a river” (*CP* 3:419).<sup>2</sup> But Jeffers was not just interested in breakdown and intellectual chaos; ultimately he was interested in breakthrough. Beyond the self-interested mythologies and posturings, there was the possibility of a transforming encounter with the size, power, and beauty of nature. Jeffers, in short, was consciously preparing the ground for a paradigm shift (beyond realism and romanticism).

As I wrote a dissertation in 1989, I was asking for and trying to create an ecocritical perspective for literature. Many others were as well. My findings focused on the connection between the critique of anthropocentric thought in critical theory and the corresponding critique that was occurring in the environmental movement. The last chapter of my dissertation (“The Ground of Resistance”) was called “Towards a Poststructural Environmentalism.” It is interesting to think about this intellectual moment. I was not in contact with others as I made these connections. I can only assume that others were intuitively coming to the same conclusions at the same time; in short a kind of zeitgeist was occurring. My work was later formally expressed in “Rethinking Resistance: Poststructuralism, Environmentalism, and Literature,” in the journal *Environmental Ethics*. Critics such as Aaron Gare were interested in this connection and took notice of my attempt to link environmentalism and literary theory in the pages of *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (87, 92, 177, 178). The point here is to document that the work in critical theory was intersecting with environmental and literary thought, particularly concerning the issue of the critique of humanist-based theories and perspectives.

In the 90s, my dissertation advisor (Patrick Murphy) launched the journal *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment)* at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (now housed at University of Nevada, Reno). A related organization, ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment), was formed at University of Nevada Reno, with its first conference in 1995 at Ft. Collins, CO, in 1995. And, finally, in 1996, Cheryl Glotfelty summarized all of these initial gestures by asking in the Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, “How . . . can we contribute to environmental restoration, not just in our spare time, but from within our capacity as professors of literature?” (xxi). On April 9, 1996, the cover of *The Chronicle* featured a focus article on the emergence of ecocriticism and the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

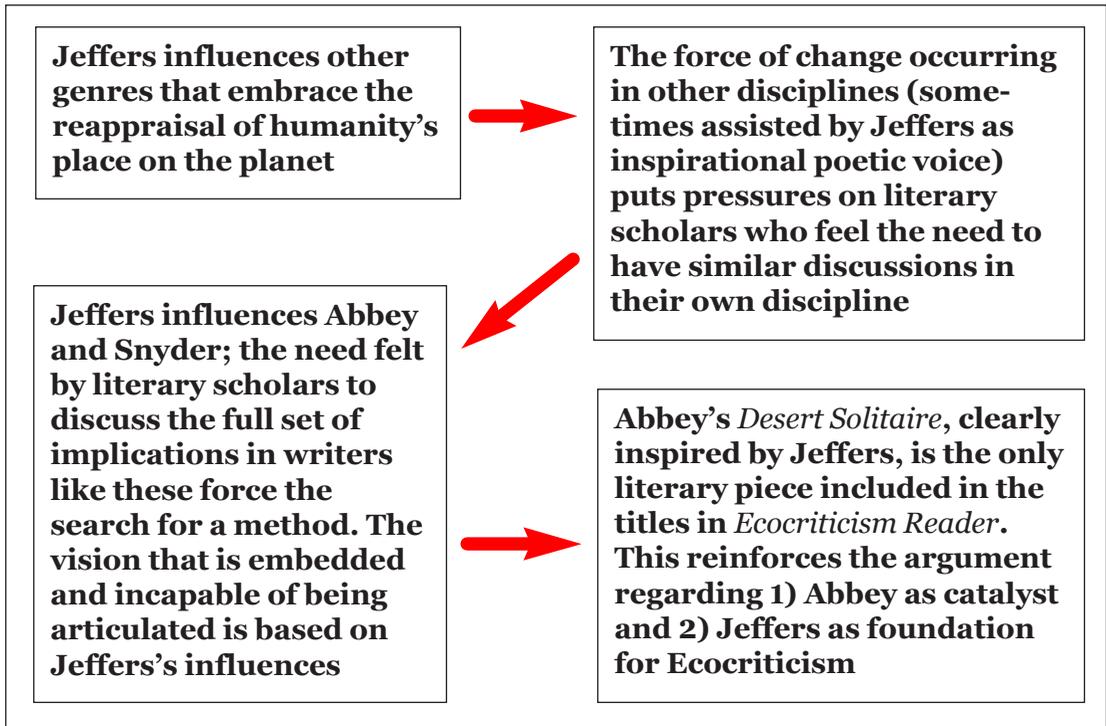
So, the colliding intersection of Critical Theory, a new-age biology (ecology and deep ecology), a determined environmental movement (Greenpeace, et al.), combined with Jeffers’s loyal readership and influence on nature writers and scholars, framed an atmosphere that gave rise to ecocriticism and an atmosphere that made reading Jeffers possible in a more widely accepted manner. In fact, if one examines the activity in Jeffers scholarship, one sees that right at the nexus of these forces Jeffers scholarship explodes:



(See *Jeffers Studies* at <[www.jeffers.org](http://www.jeffers.org)> for access to this and other reference tools on Jeffers.)

## A NEW OBJECT NEEDS A NEW METHOD

In addition to being the link or pivot that connects 100 years of ecopoetic trajectory from Thoreau (late 19th century) to Abbey to Snyder (late 20th century), I am suggesting that the force and character of Jeffers's vision spawned *the literary/poetic re-evaluation* of our place on the planet. By staking out this area in the intellectual memory of readers of poetry, Jeffers created the possibility for a literature and a literary methodology (ecocriticism) that is at once new and referentially focused on the material world of nature and environmental politics. The following diagram outlines where my argument has been and where it is going:



In 1996 Cheryl Glotfelty, in the *Ecocriticism Reader*, celebrated the new sun that had risen in the literary mind: “we are now considering nature not just as a stage upon which the human story is acted out but as an actor in the drama” (xxi). What brought about such a dramatic rearrangement of foreground and background? And why, comparatively, is the impact felt so late in literature? Certainly, one answer I have given is that decades of environmental thinking had significantly begun to change our culture and had finally articulated itself in the highly resistant, reflexive ideological apparatus of literary criticism. Other intellectual fields, therefore, such as ecology and prose genres such as the nature essay (which was not necessarily defined and limited as “literature”), were more responsive and achieved more cultural currency even as they entertained a vision of a humanity interwoven into nature. “While related humanities disciplines, like history, philosophy, law, sociology, and religion have been ‘greening’ since the 1970s, literary studies have apparently remained untainted by environmental concerns” (Glotfelty xvi).

But where in literature were there models that could have resonated to these mounting external pressures? Where were the models that could force this change from within? There has been only one poetic voice that, by not treating

nature as just a stage, stands out early; there has been only one voice that has marked out poetic/literary space for the world of nature in this manner: Robinson Jeffers. Of course, there have been Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir, Austin, London, Leopold, Carson, and Abbey. These accomplishments, in what we now call creative nonfiction, are important, and today they are gaining in significance for literary scholars. However, at the opening of the 20th century, Jeffers puts into poetry, into what was *then* clearly identified and marked off as solely within the literary field, what other writers would render in prose. What Jeffers put forward was incapable of being addressed by the available literary tools as well as the literary culture in power; but writers who used prose were not subjected to the same limitations. Prose, or the nature essay, could move in and out of fields of study, thereby avoiding the limitations set by literary studies. So two impediments were faced by Jeffers: 1) the clear marking of his work as “literature,” thereby subjecting his work to a limited set of readings by the discourse available to the “professionals” in that field; and 2) the strength of his vision regarding a myopic, self-centered, and deluded humanity that literally couldn’t see the forest due to its anthropocentric obsessions.

Students of literature were faced with working out their environmental interests within the approved list of Romantic poets. Therefore, English and American Romantic poets enjoyed a large amount of attention. Literature students with an environmental agenda embraced Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, and Wordsworth for all that could be gotten from these sources (many still read Jeffers on the sly). There was a great deal of joy, excitement, and subversive pleasure gained from reading the romantics with their critique of industry, commerce, the protestant work ethic, and their celebration of the primitive and the wild. There was also abundant delight found in the idiosyncratic subjectivities of Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson. Whitman and Emerson in particular produced versions of the poet as God, the human as the creator of all that is seen “out there.” We often imagine that our desire for (or our creation of) beauty, for the nonutilitarian, is a sign of our departure from and strength over primal needs. This perhaps explains the value placed on the aesthetic of uselessness in mid 20th-century literary studies. But while these gestures suggest strength and independence, as they walk away from one set of human-centered values (the alleged arrogance of science and reason), they are finally self-indulgent and self-comforting. As Emerson made clear in “Nature,” nature was there for him to absorb: “Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode” (38).

Jeffers departs from the romantic paradigm; however, in his acceptance of the world “out there,” he did not simply become a naturalist or realist such as Norris or Zola. He combined the stark realizations of the naturalists with a romantic’s yearning for beauty and wonder. It is, therefore, the expression of this vision in a literary genre, the earliness, and the singularity of Jeffers’s voice

that call for us to stop and reconsider his accomplishment. To deal with landscape as one's subject, a landscape that is not simply romantically, spiritually, and comfortably beautiful, means one ignores humans as the centerpiece of narrative (counter intuitive); it means one assumes an impossible task by trying to bring forward an infinitely nuanced, mute, indifferent, devouring, forever remote, inconceivably beautiful, and ultimately unknowable "character." At least in fiction it is possible to say about a human character, "he said," with some determination.

Considering that humans are seemingly incurably focused on narratives that involve the plight of their own "soul," destiny, identity, tribe, race, ethnic group, religious cult, gender, countrymen, or sports team, choosing to focus on the other, nonhuman world, seems bold at best, reckless and doomed for sure. For after all, we are so instinctively about ourselves. If we can be said to possess a nature, an essence, it is that we reshape the world into our own set of interests. Whitman and Emerson were the poets of this process; hence Melville's pause and concern. Our religions, our perceptual habits, our mythologies, our cities, our economies, our words, are all filters and translators. It is our very nature, it seems, to see things "for us"; it is perhaps our best tool, but also it is what deceives us. As Jeffers said, "trust no immortalist," since we derive our ideas and mythologies from fear and safety, not from a passion for objective truth. Our ideas are "dream-clothed, or dirty / With fears and wishes" (CP 3:118). The selfish filtering and converting of the world is what Jeffers called "the insanities of desire" (CP 1:209), and what Melville saw as the butchering of the whale. Here we can see the attraction of Jeffers for the same elements Snyder found in Buddhism: the acknowledgment of a beauty and reality beyond desire, the need to uncenter our minds from ourselves. "We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from" (CP 3:399).

It has always seemed to me that this alien quality, beyond a domesticated familiarity, is what is at the heart of *Moby Dick*, and this is why this book has captured our imagination and repelled many of us for so long. Melville deliberately sailed away from the center, from land and hearth and home, and, instead, drifted, willfully, into the sense of a world of alien transcendence, exposing himself to its self-shattering dissonance, its impossible size and grandeur, its indifference, its bizarre energies, its whiteness, and, from the perspective of human need, its nothingness. Courageous thinking has always seen this frightening immensity not as barbarous or something that must be conquered, feared, beautified, or hated, but as defamiliarizing, powerful, beautiful (in a way that doesn't involve possession), and wondrous.

Therefore, Jeffers didn't fit within the easy and comforting version of the Romantic Movement; his vision went further. He reversed the equation: the beauty, the reality principle, is out there, not inside the human. In addition, Jef-

fers assumed and embraced what Melville could only (in “Bartleby”) approach with stunned gaze: Nature does not care. In “Carmel Point,” speaking of nature’s reaction to the encroachment of homes and civilization, Jeffers states:

Now the spoiler has come: does it care?  
Not faintly. It has all time. It knows the people are a tide  
That swells and in time will ebb . . . (CP 3:399)

Even so, Jeffers was able to still see the beauty, a new and different beauty, while not positing a metaphysical relationship that saves, preserves, privileges, or centers the perceiver. Snyder will refer to this experience as “that other, totally alien, nonhuman: / Humming inside like a taut drum” (*Myths and Texts* 38).

Without the poetic efforts of Jeffers, there would be no vision, no courage, and no imaginative thrust taking us toward nature and beyond the range of human bias, beyond human self-serving delusion. Neither Snyder nor Abbey would have been ready and equipped with an Inhumanist vision at the precise moment when there was an opening for that message. To fully consider Jeffers’s contribution, as well as my purpose in this paper, it is instructive to re-read Glotfelty’s comment in 1996 and compare it with Jeffers’s statement regarding his poetic project:

[W]e are now considering nature not just as a stage upon which the human story is acted out but as an actor in the drama. (Glotfelty xxi)

. . . my love, my loved subject:

Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees  
Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters— (CP 3:484)<sup>3</sup>

## ABBEY, SNYDER, AND THE RIGHT HISTORICAL MOMENT

Although disregarded by the academy, Jeffers attracted a very loyal and dedicated group of lay and professional readers throughout the 20th century. Such dedication and force of influence must explain the appearance of works like *Not Man Apart* (cited above) that were from fields such as ecology but included Jeffers. But the most important influence Jeffers had for recent events can be seen in the work of Snyder and Abbey. Speaking about Snyder’s formative years as a poet, Patrick Murphy has stated that Snyder looked more to “Ezra Pound on the one hand and D. H. Lawrence and Robinson Jeffers on the other for poetic

guidance” (*Understanding Gary Snyder* 3). In addition, in a very early journal (early 50s), Snyder was clearly thinking about and positioning himself in reference to Jeffers. Snyder wondered how to proceed towards a vision, “[I]f one wished to write poetry of nature”:

(reject the human; but the tension of  
human events, brutal and tragic, against  
a nonhuman background? Like Jeffers?). (*Earth House Hold* 4)

Further evidence of Snyder’s debt is revealed in a newspaper article in the *L.A. Times*, dated Jan. 14, 1987. Robert Brophy organized a seminar to celebrate the 100th birthday of Jeffers. Snyder, Everson, and Milosz were participants. While Milosz registered a typically ambiguous response regarding Jeffers (“Jeffers is one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century . . . but at the same time my basic reservation [about him] is of a theological nature” (in Moffet 1)), Snyder put forth a hearty defense. Snyder documents that he started reading Jeffers in 1949. He then goes on in this news article to discuss what he took from Jeffers:

In Jeffers’ verse, he found “insights into why science acted with such hubris and destructively” in the August 1945, atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Snyder said. He also felt that Jeffers’ poetry spoke to such issues as the ongoing destruction of the Pacific Northwest forests and waters.

Jeffers’s poetry expresses “a profound respect for the non-human” rather than a contempt for humanity, Snyder said. His philosophy was that of “post-humanism, or trans-humanism, a humanism that goes beyond the human” to embrace the rest of the natural world (in Moffet 1, 5–6).

As he developed his vision and poetry, Snyder carried a small but dedicated tribe of counter-cultural folks with him through the 70s and 80s, keeping an ecopolitical influence alive. Snyder continued to model the idea of a life lived in humble and intense contact with nature. However, Jeffers’s most significant influence on the possibility of an environmental literature was the impact on Abbey. Abbey’s appearance on the scene in the early 70s was catalytic and crucial for making the connection between literature and referential environmental issues. The moment was ripe for his appearance as students of literature were literally casting about for ways to bring the environmental discussion inside the confines of literary study. Abbey paid close attention to flora and fauna using the Latin names for plants and animals, but the book was filled with inspired and poetic contemplations regarding the desert. As David Rothman has noted, *Desert Solitaire* has many references to Jeffers but also is filled with literary references to many other works. The prose of Abbey, although it

carried Jeffers's Inhumanism, gained currency because it was "just prose" and because of the environmental interests of the moment. Also, the essay flirted with hints that it had literary pretensions which made it appealing to those in literary studies: literary scholars had a more legitimate excuse to bring it within the confines of literary study. Embracing Abbey, however, still left one open to the charge of studying a "regional writer" and to mucking around in the vague genre of nonfiction.

*Desert Solitaire* boldly made a claim for the beauty and importance of nature; the claim was not just made for nature, however, but for a part of that terrain culturally assumed to be good only for dumping and nuclear testing: the desert. In addition, the desert was not only held to be beautiful, but, as with nature in general, the desert was seen as equal to if not more important than the world of humanity. Where did Abbey get such a controversial and subversive notion? Because of work in the environmental studies area (ecology), combined with residual counter-cultural energies still pulsating from anti-Vietnam energies, the notion of humanity's subordination to nature in the hierarchy of importance was "in the air." However, Jeffers is the source and the fountain that would feed Abbey's prose. In sum, Abbey's success is to be understood as due to:

- 1) The tolerance of tough messages delivered in essay form as opposed to pure "literary" productions that could not be managed within literary interpretive methods.
- 2) The clear and powerful influence of Jeffers.
- 3) The impact of ecology, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and subsequent emergence of Earth First!
- 4) The counter-cultural energies still prevalent as a result of the anti-war era.
- 5) The impact of anti-anthropocentric critical theory.

The appearance of Ed Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* found a large readership and also spawned the radical environmental group Earth First! David Rothman's article, "I'm a Humanist': The Poetic Past in *Desert Solitaire*," has recently (1998) made the case for the degree of Jeffers's influence on Abbey. Rothman documents that there are dozens of direct and indirect quotes from Jeffers in *Desert Solitaire*. And, as Rothman states, David Copland Morris had, in a previous article, suggested that Jeffers was the biggest influence on Abbey: "A case could be made that Jeffers is the strongest influence on *Desert Solitaire*, stronger than even Thoreau" (in Rothman 57).

What was it in Jeffers that inspired Abbey? It was the same difficult and, to many readers, dark vision that made Jeffers an uneasy prospect for previous generations: Inhumanism. Although Snyder is influenced by Jeffers, this aspect of Jeffers was cause for concern for Snyder, who said, "I will not cry in-

human and think that makes us small and nature / great" (*Riprap*, "T2 Tanker Blues"). Abbey, although wishing Jeffers had more of a sense of humor, embraced the full dimension of Jeffers's vision and was not put off by a vision that made humans small and even insignificant. Regarding the inevitable destructive appetites of Western civilization, it was all foreseen, said Abbey, "nearly a half century ago by the most cold-eyed and clear-eyed of our national poets, on California's shore, at the end of the open road" (*Desert Solitaire* 151). My point here is that the astonishing cultural impact made by Abbey couldn't have happened without Jeffers. And it is important to reiterate that phrase: cultural impact. Why? Because Abbey struck a chord at the right moment. He created a space where the environmental movement intersected with literature and thereby forced into sharp relief the fact that literature lacked the tools to discuss the social and political force of *Desert Solitaire*. It is, therefore, significant, and not serendipity, that *Desert Solitaire* is the only piece of writing mentioned by name in the table of contents of the *Ecocriticism Reader*.

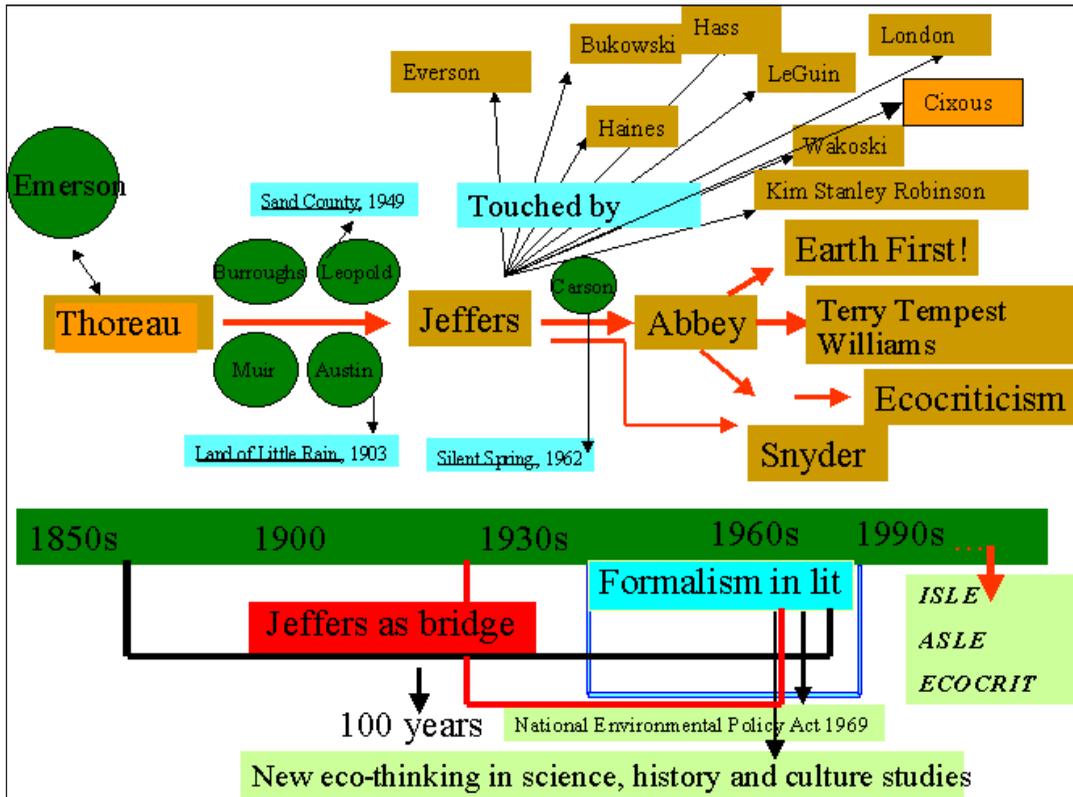
In sum, Jeffers made an astounding claim in the annals of literary proclamations. He claimed that the focus of his poetry was not human beings, not their challenges, fears, nuanced psychologies, nor their fine moments of insight, recovery, or victory. His poetic intention bears repeating:

. . . my love, my loved subject:

Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees

Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters— (*CP* 3:484)

*In sum, Jeffers was ignored by the discipline by which his writing had to be appraised. Nevertheless, Jeffers was continuously read, and he influenced writers and thinkers in many disciplines. Abbey and Snyder carried his vision forward, and their popularity, combined with the impact of the environmental movement, caused the search for a new method to properly discuss environmental literature.*



## THE REAPPRAISAL OF JEFFERS

Although scholars in Jeffers studies have long lamented the degree to which his work has been ignored and diminished, trends and fortunes have seemingly changed. After years of editing the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*, Tyrus Harmesen handed the position to Robert Brophy. Brophy took over editing *RJN* in 1968, and then he began full publishing responsibilities in 1991. Along with Tim Hunt and others, he spearheaded the evolution of that publication into a full-fledged academic journal, *Jeffers Studies*, in 1996.

In addition to increased scholarship, major texts in literary studies have focused significantly on Jeffers. John Elder's *Imagining the Earth* ([1985], 1996), for example, dedicates considerable space to Jeffers throughout his fine text. A project that examines poetry's ability to heighten attentiveness towards nature, Elder says that Jeffers is "one of the most important precursors of con-

temporary nature poetry, especially in his radical critique of Western civilization” (2). Elder goes on to say that Jeffers’s critique of culture sets up Snyder to imagine a new way to re-inhabit the earth. Elder uses Jeffers in dozens of references to support the argument of his text: we need a heightened attention to nature and a way of living that harmonizes our interests with its rhythms.

Max Oelschlaeger published an important ecoliterature text in 1991. *The Idea of Wilderness* traces the human sense of nature from Paleolithic times to the present day. Oelschlaeger is championing writers who have managed to sustain an intense realization of the power, beauty, and value of nature. He is also interested in the way of life that a particular vision of nature brings about. He, for instance, carries on a fascinating discussion of the relation between the emergence of sky gods (and in particular god the father) and the advent of farming, a way of life that abandons following the seasons.

Oelschlaeger devotes a chapter-length discussion on Jeffers and Snyder. Oelschlaeger begins by acknowledging that although ignored by the poetic establishment, “Jeffers has a thriving group of readers. His poems are well known to lovers and defenders of wild nature” (245). Oelschlaeger identifies Jeffers’s work with Paleolithic elements as opposed to Neolithic. In other words Jeffers was in contact with primal forces before we began to try and manage them within fertility cults, rituals, and religions: “he taps into a primal materialism” (249). Oelschlaeger describes Jeffers’s Inhumanism in detail and makes a strong case for the incredible attack Jeffers levels on the human attempt to ignore the force and flux of nature. As I mentioned earlier, the closer one gets to the central vision of Jeffers, the more difficult it is for self-preserving humanity to read along. Jeffers, Oelschlaeger claims, undermines any hope for permanence, at the individual, sociopolitical, or species level: “the human mind’s products are anchored in the shifting sands of time” (258). This, I think, is a crucial point in Jeffers, and, in another article, I made the central claim that “the main thrust of his work seems to be deconstructive” (“Man-Devouring Stars” 139). Does this refusal of human knowledge serve as a philosophical point of liberation, suspending our habitual action and thought and allowing us to rethink our positions, our assumptions, and our feeble self-serving beliefs? Is it simply a denial of human desire? Or is it a puritan-like castigation of our innate and malicious design? The scholars in the Jeffers studies circle have never agreed. And again: “Jeffers is intensely conscious not only of cultural evanescence but of individual mortality as well” (260). Oelschlaeger wisely states that for Jeffers “change is the central reality” (258). Jeffers, nevertheless, gives humanity a reasonable and graceful phenomenon to hang on to: beauty. “Love your eyes that can see, your mind that can / Hear the music, the thunder of the wings” (*CP* 2:410). Jeffers, according to Oelschlaeger, “recognizes the possibility of a limited knowledge of permanencies within the process” (258).

In sum, Oelschlaeger sees that although rejecting modernism, Jeffers moves beyond the self-serving comforts of romanticism. While abandoning delusion, Jeffers gives us a very real contemporary feel of a modern world we recognize. This world contains dwarfing cosmic size and inevitable disillusion of the illusions of state, individual, and species. In spite of it all, he delivers something higher and more magnificent: the beauty and wonder of an intense although uncertain existence in a strange and wondrous cosmos. By placing Jeffers together with Snyder, he suggests the symmetry in the trajectory of themes running through both writers. In addition, this underlines the case I have been making regarding the link Jeffers provides between the mid- and late 20th century.

Lawrence Buell, in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), states that in “Jeffers, *if anywhere*, the Emersonian dream of nature as humankind’s counterpart seems to have been purged of its theistic residue and to have assumed the status of an environmental ethic.” Buell goes on to characterize the force of Jeffers’s contribution: “At the manifesto level no postromantic assault on homocentrism has been more extreme than the ‘inhuman’ of Jeffers” (162). Here is the assertion of Jeffers’s accomplishment. Here is documentation and validation of what no poet had accomplished before Jeffers. This is the foundation that needed to be built in order for Abbey and Snyder to pivot off in their own trajectories. Strongly and clearly acknowledged by Buell, Jeffers provided the clearing of the ground, the Copernican gift that paved the way for modern environmental poetry and literature. But alas, even while attributing so much to Jeffers, Buell cannot help but dip into the same jaded source of dismissal as his critical predecessors. Typically, instead of continuing to acknowledge Jeffers’s immense contribution, Buell moves away from the previous buildup and levels the charge of Victorian moralism. Because Buell privileges poems to the extent that the “persona’s relinquishment to nature’s anarchic authority seems complete” (165), Jeffers is found lacking because “he does not allow his speaker to engage in the relinquishment of self that he preaches” (163). Although Buell does commend Jeffers for some successful poems along these lines, he goes on to privilege Snyder simply because Snyder leaves out the “I” more often than not (166–67).

My sense is that Buell followed his logic of looking for relinquishment to a fault. By removing the “I” it is true that Snyder achieves a serene and Spartan kind of poetic Buddhism. But one might ask, where is the drama? Even Snyder, (as I mentioned above) when he was first trying to position himself as a nature writer, appreciated the drama proposed by Jeffers. Snyder wondered how to proceed toward a vision, “[I]f one wished to write poetry of nature.” He pondered focusing on the “tension” of the human set against “a nonhuman background? Like Jeffers?” (*Earth House Hold* 4). This early journal entry makes the same point I am asserting here. The tension between a nonhuman world

and self-consumed humans makes for instructive and dramatic poetry, especially if the genre is narrative verse. As I argued above, we are so thoroughly about ourselves, and Jeffers presents this tension between the serene and beautiful environment on the one hand and his troubled, struggling, desire-ridden characters on the other. I assume it is possible for Buell to privilege the aesthetic shape he does, but there is no reason to claim it is higher or ultimately superior to Jeffers. As usual, literary judgment builds into its rhetoric the need to subject writers to some litmus test. Why not acknowledge both achievements: dramatic tension on the one hand; Zen nothingness on the other? It's certainly legitimate to make a note of the difference, but to claim one is better, without acknowledging the provisional, personal, and ultimately unsubstantiated nature of the observation, does an unnecessary disservice to literature (in this case Jeffers) but certainly literary criticism in particular. This kind of aesthetic one-upmanship is something I truly wish our field would resolve itself to abandon.

The essential point, however, is to acknowledge and appreciate the high standing that Buell does deliver to Jeffers. What all of these critics have suggested is that Jeffers's teaching is the rough beauty of Buddhism; a realization that there is no knowledge that dominates, penetrates, and unlocks it all; there is no tidy story that ultimately saves us from the incomprehensible size and indifference of the universe: to be saved is a pompous and self-destructive dream. But there is a beauty that can be had only through the doors of relinquishment.

I have tried to accomplish several goals in this paper. First I wanted to remind readers of the singular poetic voice of Jeffers as he embraced, almost 80 years ago, a vision and a way of life we are only beginning to cherish and understand. Also I wanted to argue that his poetic testimony was the link between Thoreau, Abbey, and Snyder. I also wanted to say that it seems that with the advent of new-age biology, the environmental movement, and new critical theories, it has become easier to fully appreciate Jeffers's radical vision. Finally, I wanted to dare to hope that with all of these developments, the publication of the five volumes of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Tim Hunt, ed.) by Stanford University Press, the launching of *Jeffers Studies*, coupled with the focus on Jeffers in the three major critical texts under examination here, Jeffers might just have arrived, again.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See James Shebl, *In This Wild Water: The Suppressed Poems of Robinson Jeffers*.

<sup>2</sup> Oelschlaeger talks about the interest Jeffers has in change and fluidity all through his chapter on Jeffers in *The Idea of Wilderness*; I also make this claim in “Man-Devouring Stars,” and again in “The Poetics of Cultural Renewal and Collapse.”

<sup>3</sup> Some might object at the conflation of a line from poetry and a line from criticism but my response is as follows. Paul de Man and others have clearly shown the intertwined agenda of criticism with the object of its study (see *Semiotics and Rhetoric* (1979): “Literature as well as criticism—the difference between them being delusive” (677)). In addition, it seems odd that while we blur the lines between “literature” and “mere prose” (creative nonfiction), we would still want to draw strict distinctions in this case. And in sum, I offer an example from Russell Reising, who, when discussing the New Critical approach, said, “The New Critical view of poetic language as sensuous verbal texture generated in Ransom and Brooks an erotics of art in which *poetry and criticism respond sensuously and lovingly* to the world, in contrast to ‘science’ or ‘logic’ which prey possessively on a passive victim” (169 my emphasis).

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