

“*De Rerum Virtute*”: *A Critical Anatomy*

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The evolutionary unity of humans with all other organisms is the cardinal message of Darwin’s revolution for nature’s most arrogant species.

—Stephen Jay Gould

“*De Rerum Virtute*,” published in the *Hungerfield* volume (1954), is one of Jeffers’s most tightly structured and meaning-laden poems, presenting in condensed form his late philosophical-theological-ethical positions on God, Nature, and man. The Latin title recalls most obviously Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, *On the Nature of Things*, but by substituting *Virtute* (valor, strength, manliness, courage, etc.) for *Natura*, the poem announces as its subject the virtue or value of things themselves. Already in the quaintly archaic title Jeffers is asking some bold and surprisingly modern questions concerning the intrinsic value of things (as opposed to their use value for human beings), and the correct ethical rapport between the human and non-human worlds. The need to move from a human-centered frame of reference toward a more holistic or ecocentric view is of course the central tenet of Jeffers’s philosophy of Inhumanism. But even as “*De Rerum Virtute*” deliberately references some of the philosophical positions expressed in *The Inhumanist*, it reveals him moving beyond the negative stance of the earlier work toward a more positive articulation of the value of that more-than-human reality, and of the human capacity to bring that reality into focus. In the late period, if I read him aright, Jeffers seeks to overcome the human/inhuman dichotomy by envisioning a more comprehensive “transhuman” perspective in which nature’s revelation of value and the human mind’s translation of that value are seen as two complementary aspects of a single continuous process or event. “*De Rerum Virtute*” is a kind of epitome of this late perspective, offering in five tightly packed stanzas a concise summary of Jeffers’s mature worldview encompassing ethics, aesthetics, and religion. I offer this reading because I believe that what Jeffers has to say is important, and because the most direct route to unraveling his meaning is by adhering to the text as closely as possible and following the strands of his thought.

The first stanza begins, Hamlet-like, with the narrator holding up a skull and orating on human vanity:

Here is the skull of a man: a man's thoughts and emotions
Have moved under the thin bone vault like clouds
Under the blue one: love and desire and pain,
Thunderclouds of wrath and white gales of fear
Have hung inside here: and sometimes the curious desire of knowing
Values and purpose and the causes of things
Has coasted like a little observer air-plane over the images
That filled this mind: it never discovered much,
And now all's empty, a bone bubble, a blown-out eggshell. (CP 3: 401)

All the stock elements of the graveyard discourse on human *vanitas* are present: the skull serving as a *memento mori*, the grave tone of the narrator, the enumeration of various human follies. Among the usual vanities (passion, fear, etc.) it is noteworthy that Jeffers singles out the “curious desire” of knowing the “values and purpose and causes of things.” Jeffers’s approach to metaphysical inquiry and the human will to knowledge is almost clinical, even as he counts himself among those tormented individuals who seek the truth. While the image of the “little observer air-plane” representing human reflective consciousness would seem to point to the limitations of our epistemological reconnaissance, these lines still suggest a positive valuation of the inquisitive mind’s quest for truth, within the tradition of those first philosophers whose passion it was to investigate the origin and nature of things. The stanza concludes, however, on a negative note with a bleak and almost Schopenhauerian assessment of the limits of human knowledge and the emptiness of all our philosophical conceits, poignantly expressed in the image of the skull as “a blown-out eggshell.”

The second stanza assumes a more positive approach, and contains some of Jeffers’s most audacious cosmological speculations to date concerning the origin and meaning of the universe and of life. Deftly, he takes the skull-as-eggshell metaphor and turns it around by attributing to the egg itself a degree of intelligence and purposefulness:

That's what it's like: for the egg too has a mind,
Doing what our able chemists will never do,
Building the body of a hatchling, choosing among the proteins:
These for the young wing-muscles, these for the great
Crystalline eyes, these for the flighty nerves and brain:
Choosing and forming: a limited but superhuman intelligence,
Prophetic of the future and aware the past:

The hawk's egg will make a hawk, and the serpent's
 A gliding serpent: but each with a little difference
 From its ancestors—and slowly, if it works, the race
 Forms a new race: that also is a part of the plan
 Within the egg. I believe the first living cell
 Had echoes of the future in it, and felt
 Direction and the great animals, the deep green forest
 And whale's-track sea; I believe this globed earth
 Not all by chance and fortune brings forth her broods,
 But feels and chooses. And the Galaxy, the firewheel
 On which we are pinned, the whirlwind of stars in which our sun is one dust-grain, one electron, this giant
 atom of the universe
 Is not blind force, but fulfils its life and intends its courses. "All things are full of God.
 Winter and summer, day and night, war and peace are God." (CP 3: 401-02)

The opening salvo, "That's what it's like," points to the poet's craft as a maker and monger of metaphors, while also showing how Jeffers, as a master of his craft, can twist metaphors around to elicit new meanings. The logic of metaphor works both ways: just as the mind is like an eggshell, so too is the eggshell like a mind. Through this linguistic play, Jeffers prepares the ground for an idea which is both ancient and modern, namely, that the egg, along with the rest of nature, is endowed with the properties of mind and intelligence which is "like" the human mind. In this view, contrasting starkly with Cartesian dualism and mechanical reductionism, nature and mind are seen as two aspects of a single reality, and nature itself is deemed to possess an indwelling creative intelligence somewhat analogous to human intelligence.

Building on his knowledge of the new sciences of molecular biology and genetics, Jeffers points to the significance of the organism "choosing among the proteins" to develop into its particular morphology. It is worth noting that Jeffers wrote these lines at about the same time as the genetic code of the DNA double-helix was first cracked, *prima facie* evidence of the "limited but superhuman intelligence" inhering in nature. This is just one example of the extraordinary synchronicity between Jeffers's cosmological speculations and contemporary advances in physics and biology. While Jeffers followed closely the advances of the natural sciences throughout his mature career, his engagement with quantum physics and evolutionary biology in the late period seems to have opened up for him a whole new poetic universe, enabling him to combine science and poetry together to form a comprehensive worldview reminiscent of the great cosmologists of antiquity.

That Jeffers is not simply throwing around metaphors but is serious about offering an explicitly non-mechanistic perspective on evolution is made clear by the ensuing discourse on comparative morphology. Jeffers shared with

Goethe, Lamarck, and Ernst Haeckel (the founder of modern ecology) a developmental view of evolutionary processes in which each species reproduces itself “with a little difference from its ancestors” in a sequence of morphological transformations. In this view (closer to Erasmus Darwin than to his more famous relation) each species is related to every other species within a succession of life forms which together compose a single coherent narrative extending through time. This is very different from and in fact incompatible with the Darwinian model of random mutation and natural selection.

Where Jeffers really starts transgressing beyond the limits of established Darwinian theory is with his contention that all forms of life are related to each other as part of a single “plan” present from the beginning (“part of the plan / Within the egg”). Jeffers was well aware of the unorthodoxy of these views, which helps explain the shift in tone mid-stanza from one of statement of fact to one of opinion/belief: “I believe the first living cell / Had echoes of the future in it, and felt / Direction.” In Jeffers’s view, life did not simply evolve at random from lesser to greater complexity, but is part of an interconnected process, to be grasped backwards as well as forwards through time. This notion of evolution as somehow influenced from the very beginning by an end-oriented “direction” recalls the basic Artistotelean concept of “entelechy,” that the end of anything (*telos*) is already present or implicit in its beginning. Without maintaining that everything is predetermined, Jeffers did believe that there is a direction and coherence to how the cosmos and life came to be, and that there has to be an overarching relationship or narrative which connects all things across space and time and which has both a beginning and some sort of end-goal or purpose.

A similar *credo* is repeated a little further down: “I believe this globed earth / Not all by chance and fortune brings forth her broods, / But feels and chooses.” Even as Jeffers believed science to be an indispensable component of any unified worldview, he rejected the mechanistic picture of the universe presented then as now by mainstream academic science. According to the mechanistic view, the origin and variety of species can be explained by random biochemical and environmental encounters (“by chance and fortune”). Jeffers proposes instead the seemingly unscientific alternative view that the planet, considered as a whole, “feels and chooses” its way forward through time, and that the diversity of species and their dynamic interactions can be explained by the working through of the “superhuman intelligence” informing evolutionary processes.

In attributing to nature sentience and intentionality (and by implication, consciousness), Jeffers is aware that he is crossing over to a mythic and very ancient understanding of the world, which helps to explain the following deliberately archaic image of the earth as a mother “bring[ing] forth” her “broods.” Through this oblique tribute to old Mother Nature, Jeffers seems to be suggesting that the ancient understanding of the earth as a nurturing goddess (as

in Lucretius's *alma Venus*) is closer to the truth than the modern picture of the universe as the product of pure contingency. In another example of how Jeffers's cosmological musings point ahead to ideas and concepts worked out by later theorists, his use here of the goddess metaphor to explain the properties of self-organization and intelligence inherent in nature bears an uncanny resemblance to James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which holds that the globed earth can be understood as a single super-organism endowed with complex circuits of intelligence gathering, feedback, and creative adaptation. Today, many scientists believe that life could not have come about by pure chance, and that intelligence and purposefulness are intrinsic to the way the world is organized. In short, trends in modern physics and in the life sciences are bringing nature back to life in a way Jeffers seems to have anticipated.

The following almost dizzying analogy between very small and very large bodies, in which the sun is portrayed as but one "electron" in the "giant atom" of the universe (as in Niels Bohr's popular image of the atom composed of electrons swirling around the nucleus), serves to emphasize the interconnection and embeddedness of the various layers which make up the whole. In Jeffers's holistic cosmology, everything is connected to everything else in a series of nested dynamic relationships extending from the smallest particles to the largest stars. The universe as a whole can be conceived of as an autonomous self-organizing and self-creative structure or system which is both alive and inherently purposeful, pursuing its course not through the random vicissitudes of chance and fortune, but as the fulfillment of its destiny and being.

The final verse of the stanza, set off in quotation marks—"All things are full of God. / Winter and summer, day and night, war and peace are God."—is both an echo of the famous fragment of Thales of Miletus that all things are full of gods (*panta plere theon*) and a deliberate reference to Jeffers's own Faust-like interrogations at the beginning of "The Inhumanist" (compare the opening lines of Chapter I: "Winter and summer . . . rain and the drought; / Peace creeps out of war, war out of peace" [CP 3: 256]). Even as Jeffers was scornful of the "anthropoid God" of Judeo-Christian tradition, he was by no means an atheist, but more like what Lessing labeled Spinoza: "a man drunk with God"; or perhaps more correctly: "a man tormented by God." What Jeffers means by God is the whole, which encompasses and transcends the parts. Just as the total relation of cells in the body make up the organism, so in Jeffers's organic cosmology every part of the universe is connected to every other part, and it is the totality of those interrelationships which may properly be called God. This notion of God as the abiding singularity of the universe, conscious and alive, is worked out in some detail in "The Inhumanist," and his short-hand referencing of these ideas here suggests that the question of God is still paramount in his mind.

The third stanza interrupts these lofty speculations with a brief aside on the limits of human knowledge and an appreciation of the epistemological consequences not only of human mortality, but of the mortality of the sun and stars as well:

Thus the thing stands; the labor and the games go on—
What for? What for?—Am I a God that I should know?
Men live in peace and happiness; men live in horror
And die howling. Do you think the blithe sun
Is ignorant that black waste and beggarly blindness trail him like hounds,
And will have him at last? He will be strangled
Among his dead satellites, remembering magnificence. (*CP* 3: 402)

The repeated cry “What for? What for?” gets to the very heart of the tragic dimension of the human search for meaning within a seemingly indifferent universe. The rhetorical question—“Am I a God that I should know?” recalls the opening study scene of Goethe’s *Faust* where Doktor Faustus, in amazed reaction at the sign of the *Makrokosmos*, exclaims: “Bin ich ein Gott? Mir wird so licht!”—“Am I a God? Let the light shine!” Like Goethe, Jeffers was concerned with testing the limits of the human understanding of the world and, again like Goethe, believed the knowledge gained through observation of nature’s inner workings to be a kind of knowledge of God and thus, within the limited realm of human consciousness, a reflex of the greater self-consciousness of God. Such speculations are here pre-empted by the obvious implied answer that, no, he is not a God, but the point remains that Jeffers doesn’t use the name of God in vain.

The dominant tone of this stanza is of tragic pessimism, bordering on nihilism. It is as if, having in his time sufficiently contemplated the course of men’s fouled lives and more miserable deaths, Jeffers arrives at a state of passive resignation like the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, accepting without further metaphysical ado that the sun rises and sets over the just and the wicked alike, and that it makes little sense to fret about the evils in the world. But Jeffers goes beyond such canonical interpretations of the tragic view of life by noting how even the sun, source of all energy in the solar system, is finite and will burn itself out in the end. This is basic thermodynamics, of course, but raises an important question regarding the conditions of all human knowing. Entropy, and the fact that the earth and everything in the solar system face eventual but certain annihilation, would seem to prescribe certain limits as to how far our claims of knowledge can pass beyond the circumscribing factors of our present human condition—a condition which is itself determined by our relative position in space and time.

The following depiction of the sun's future as "black waste" and "beggarly blindness" would seem to point to the modern hypothesis of stars turning into "black holes" in which collapsed supernovas along with their "dead satellites" are sucked into highly compacted vortices, creating blind spots in the cosmic picture about which we know very little at all. At the same time, the elegiac and almost Keatsian image of the sun "remembering" his previous magnificence raises again the question of the role of consciousness within the larger time scales of the cosmos. Is it really possible that all thinking will be snuffed out? Or will there be some kind of remnant consciousness or remembering of earlier stages of existence even after life on earth is over? Without answering directly, Jeffers seems to suggest that if consciousness was part of the plan from the beginning there must be a role for consciousness throughout the entire unfolding of the cosmological drama until the end, although what future forms consciousness may assume is not worked out in any definitive eschatology.

The fourth stanza turns from the abstract to the particular, and to Jeffers's own position as an observing subject who no longer takes the stars for granted. This stanza also moves to address the central question of the poem, already implicit in the opening stanza, concerning the correct relationship between human beings and the larger community of life:

I stand on the cliff at Sovranes creek-mouth.
Westward beyond the raging water and the bent shoulder of the world
The bitter futile war in Korea proceeds, like an idiot
Prophesying. It is too hot in mind
For anyone, except God perhaps, to see beauty in it. Indeed it is hard to see beauty
In any of the acts of man: but that means the acts of a sick microbe
On a satellite of a dust-grain twirled in a whirlwind
In the world of stars. . . .
Something perhaps may come of him; in any event
He can't last long.—Well: I am short of patience
Since my wife died . . . and this era of spite and hate-filled half-worlds
Gets to the bone. I believe that man too is beautiful,
But it is hard to see, and wrapped up in falsehoods. Michael Angelo and the Greek sculptors—
How they flattered the race! Homer and Shakespeare—
How they flattered the race! (*CP* 3: 402-03)

Jeffers begins his discourse by situating himself at a specific place and time, here the mouth of Sovranes (Soberanes) Creek south of Carmel, gazing figuratively over the ocean at the violence raging in Korea "prophesying" "like an idiot." Or is it Jeffers himself prophesying like an idiot? As in "The Inhumanist," Jeffers only reluctantly and with irony assumes the mantle of the modern soothsayer whose role it is to point out, Cassandra-like, the horrible truth. War

and prophecy have been connected since the fall of Troy, and Jeffers believed it was part of his calling to point out the prophetic significance of the ongoing outbursts of violence in the world, even if, as here, he distances himself from the official role of prophet (justified or not). Whether it is the Korean War or Jeffers who is prophesying, the message is the same, namely, that modern technological civilization is founded on violence and pointed toward more massive violence (for earlier statements to this effect, see “The Purse-Seine” and “Self-Criticism in February”), and that the conflict in Korea can be seen as a prophetic foretaste of the inevitable mass disasters to follow.

In the first stanza, Jeffers developed the idea of a parallelism between human intelligence and the intelligence inherent in evolutionary processes. In this stanza, he explores the actual current dysfunctional relationship between human beings and the rest of planetary life, as well as the larger evolutionary implications of modern humanity’s ongoing destruction of the biosphere. That modern civilization is engaged in a perpetual war against nature is a staple of Jeffers’s outlook from the beginning. In the late period, jolted by the massive military technologies unleashed during World War II, and especially by the quantum leap in destructive capacities brought into play by thermonuclear warfare, Jeffers began to realize that humanity was becoming a macrophase power, capable of destroying the basic life-sustaining systems of the planet. From an evolutionary perspective this is quite an anomaly, an unheard-of aberration of the ecological order whereby one out-of-control species severely impacts the entire life-community of the planet. By identifying the acts of man with “the acts of a sick microbe” Jeffers highlights this pathological aspect of the human experiment, which in its uncontrolled proliferation and parasitism of other forms of life can be seen as a kind of epidemic—a planetary scourge. This diagnosis of the human condition, ecologically considered, echoes earlier statements to similar effect, such as can be found in “Orca” (published in *The Double Axe*): “the breed of man / Has been queer from the start. It looks like a botched experiment that has run wild and ought to be stopped” [CP 3: 206]. In spite of such reflexive outbursts (cf. Chapter L of “The Inhumanist”: “Lord God: Exterminate / The race of man” [CP 3: 308]), Jeffers was prophetically aware that the destinies of human evolution and of the evolution of life on earth are henceforward tethered together, for better or for worse, and that both human beings and the larger biotic community are entering into a new and unprecedented chapter in the unfolding history of life.

In this poem, consistent with the more optimistic outlook of the postwar period, Jeffers leaves the door open for a more positive, alternative future for humanity when he says that “something perhaps may come of him” after all. I take this to mean that Jeffers held out hope that human beings may yet evolve in a fashion adequate to the evolutionary challenges ahead. This is about as cheery as Jeffers gets about the prospects for the race, and his doubts on the

subject are made clear in the following proviso that “in any event / He can’t last long.” And yet, immediately following, he affirms as a matter of faith: “I believe that man too is beautiful.” And then again, as if inviting the reader to bear witness to his inner struggles and contradictions, this positive assessment is tempered by a critique of the arrogant, anthropocentric humanism of the Classical and Renaissance traditions: “Homer and Shakespeare— / How they flattered the race!”

The question remains: What indeed may come of man? And in what sense can man be called “beautiful”? The answer(s), which Jeffers seems to be edging his way toward, is that human beings need to break out of their anthropocentric autism and reinvent themselves at the species level as part of the larger biotic community. What I believe Jeffers is intimating, behind all the negations and provisos, is the possibility of an “ecological humanism,” a definition of humanity as part of, rather than separate from, the rest of nature. There are both critical and utopian dimensions to Jeffers’s anthropology, and while the emphasis in much of the poetry up to and including “The Inhumanist” is on the negative consequences of humanity’s historical illusions, here he seems to suggest the possibility of a more positive ordering of the relationship between the human and non-human worlds, even a kind of “self-overcoming” of humanity from its currently destructive and unsustainable modes of existence toward a new mode in which human beings co-evolve with the rest of life in a mutually beneficial manner and end in honor. How exactly this can be achieved is not worked out in detail, but it is a testament to the hopeful side of Jeffers’s character that he leaves the door open for such felicitous alternative scenarios.

The fifth and final stanza, like the final movement of a great symphony, recapitulates the main themes of the poem in a virtuoso presentation of Jeffers’s mature eco-theological worldview, involving the affirmation of the value and the beauty of the natural world (“things”) as well as a decidedly positive valuation of the human ability to capture and reflect that beauty:

One light is left us: the beauty of things, not men;
The immense beauty of the world, not the human world.
Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly
At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?
These plunging promontories and flame-shaped peaks
Stopping the sombre stupendous glory, the storm-fed ocean? Look at the Lobos Rocks off the shore,
With foam flying at their flanks, and the long sea-lions
Couching on them. Look at the gulls on the cliff-wind,
And the soaring hawk under the cloud-stream—
But in the sage-brush desert, all one sun-stricken
Color of dust, or in the reeking tropical rain-forest,

Or in the intolerant north and high thrones of ice—is the earth not beautiful?
Nor the great skies over the earth?
The beauty of things means virtue and value in them.
It is in the beholder’s eye, not the world? Certainly.
It is the human mind’s translation of the transhuman
Intrinsic glory. It means that the world is sound,
Whatever the sick microbe does. But he too is part of it. (*CP* 3: 403)

The use of the light metaphor (“One light is left us”) to suggest a kind of spiritual teaching points again to the religious dimension of this poem. But whereas in the Judeo-Christian tradition “light” is something from outside the world which comes into the world to illuminate the darkness (cf. John 1.5, “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not”), for Jeffers the light is the self-revelatory structure of God/Nature radiantly manifest to human perception. There is also discernable in these lines a sense of the spiritual neediness of the modern condition, that the traditional religious answers to the big questions are no longer sufficient, and that new sources of illumination (“light”) are needed to inspire the race at this critical juncture.

The emphatic directive to turn to the beauty of things, *not men*, to the beauty of the world, *not the human world*, reiterates the basic thrust of Jeffers’s Inhumanist philosophy that human beings need to break free from their human-centered ways of looking at things and embrace a larger view in which the non-human world assumes primary importance, expressed consistently from such early articulations as “Roan Stallion” (“Humanity is the mould to break away from”), to “Sign-Post” (“Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity”), to “Carmel Point” in the *Hungerfield* volume (“We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from”). Typically for Jeffers, this shift in perspective is cast explicitly in terms of a conversion experience, a *metanoia*, or mind-change involving real transformation of consciousness, analogous to the Christian idea of spiritual rebirth. In Jeffers’s view, the natural world is the true source of all meaning and value, and human beings need first of all to listen to and adhere to that reality, be born again as part of that reality. This is the “light” or teaching that Jeffers proclaims here and elsewhere with all the passion of a proselytizing preacher.

The following exhortation to “look . . . directly” at the natural world suggests a relationship between the observing subject and the objects of perception which is direct and participatory rather than analytical and detached. To see nature properly, Jeffers believed, we must cast off as far as possible our human prejudices and distortions and focus on things themselves. This is, once again, a very Goethean perspective, namely, that by dwelling in the phenomenon we can learn directly from the creative intelligence inhering in nature.

Goethe called this way of looking at things *Intellektuelle Anschauung*, usually translated as intuition, or intuitive knowledge (as opposed to discursive or analytical knowledge). Like Goethe, Jeffers believed that there exists an innate sympathy between nature's creativity and the divinatory powers of the poetic imagination, and that the natural beauty so revealed, far from being a secondary or inessential quality, is in fact an intimation of the inherent truth and goodness of nature which presents itself freely to our powers of perception, whether or not we accept the teaching.

As if to prove the point, the poetry in the following lines is some of Jeffers's finest to date, and belies the assumption that he suffered from any diminishment of his creative faculties in the late period. The resonances and alliterations in such phrases as *plunging promontories*, the *sombre stupendous glory* of the ocean, the *foam flying* at the *flanks* of rocks captures a sense of the palpable presence of nature in strong virile verse. His ear for language and literary tradition enables him to roll off Homeric- and Old Saxon-sounding epithets to superb effect, from the "storm-fed" ocean, to the gulls flying on the "cliff-wind," to the hawks soaring under the "cloud-stream." The rhapsodic evocation of natural forms in these lines makes the poetry itself seem an almost transparent medium for the self-expression of nature's beauty—no doubt the stylistic intent. For Jeffers, there is no question that art copies nature, and that the job of poetry is to reflect the beauty inherent in the natural world. As he put it in "The Beauty of Things" (also in the *Hungerfield* volume): "to feel / Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural / Beauty, is the sole business of poetry" (*CP* 3: 369).

This intensely lyrical and exuberant display of word-craft modulates back into the dominant religious tonality of the stanza with a rhetorical question which sounds very much like a catechism: "is the earth not beautiful? / Nor the great skies over the earth?" Jeffers's use, here and elsewhere, of a deliberately archaic literary-religious language, resounding in the sonorities of the King James Bible, raises some prickly questions as to how seriously we should take this aspect of his poetry. Is he being simply ironic and mocking, or does he really see himself, in some sense, as a religious teacher? And how do we, as readers and critics of Jeffers, approach this dimension of his work? Without belaboring the point, I would argue that we will understand this and other of Jeffers's poems better if we grasp that what he is offering is in many ways like a religious teaching, involving a coherent spiritual and ethical framework which speaks of ultimate values, truth, beauty, and God.

The proclamation of a new post-humanist philosophy and religion is of course the principal burden of "The Inhumanist." In fact, much of what Jeffers is up to here can be clarified by cross-referencing the earlier poem. In Chapter IX, for instance, the "old man" (Jeffers's cantankerous alter-ego) clarifies how our sense of earthly beauty points to the integrity and divinity of things them-

selves. Just as mathematics and physics provide the astronomer with metaphors to understand the universe, “so the human sense / Of beauty is our metaphor of their excellence, their divine nature” (CP 3: 260). And then in a key passage in Chapter XLV the old man assumes explicitly the role of teacher and prophet addressing “future children” who will come after him: “There is one God, and the earth is his prophet. / The beauty of things is the face of God: worship it” (CP 3: 304). That the earth and not Moses or Mohammed is considered God’s “prophet” is another way of saying that God reveals himself to us through the order and beauty of the natural world rather than through scriptural tradition. Human awareness and recognition of that beauty is thus a kind of worship, an adoration, a natural piety.

In this poem, with its focus on ethics, the revelation of the beauty of things is linked explicitly to the revelation of their intrinsic value: “The beauty of things means virtue and value in them.” Here, by a circuitous route, we have the answer to the riddle of the Latin title, namely, that the value of things is confirmed and made visible to us through the manifestation of their beauty. The logic here might seem a bit muddled, but it is important to keep in mind that for Jeffers aesthetics, ethics, and religion are not separate stages or modes of apprehension (as they are, say, for Kierkegaard), but outward aspects or “fields” of a single deeper matrix reality. Like the Neoplatonists, Jeffers believed in the fundamental unity of the good, the beautiful, and the true, so that the revelation of the beauty of things is also, in equal measure, the revelation of their truth and of their virtue and value (*virtus*).

Once again, as in the previous stanza, Jeffers seems bothered by epistemological doubts, an uneasiness apparent in the ensuing question/assertion “It is in the beholder’s eye, not the world?” This is of course the old Kantian query concerning the relationship between things-in-themselves (*Dinge an sich*) and our mental representations (*Vorstellungen*) of those things. The answer, which Jeffers now offers in self-confident and explicitly post-Kantian terms, is that beauty is *both* in the beholder’s eye *and* in the world. The following verse clarifies this relationship in a particularly felicitous construction: “It is the human mind’s translation of the transhuman / Intrinsic glory.” Once again, we are referred back to the conceptual world of “The Inhumanist,” as this is an almost verbatim quote from Chapter VIII of that poem: “The beauty of things— / Is in the beholder’s brain—the human mind’s translation of their transhuman / Intrinsic value.” Here, by substituting “glory” for “value” Jeffers not only avoids repetition, but intones once again the religious dimension (beauty as the manifestation of glory or *doxa*), and his homage to the “transhuman intrinsic glory” reads very much like a pantheistic doxology, a literal *gloria mundi*.

The term “transhuman” here seems particularly apt, and is perhaps a better description of what Jeffers means by ultimate reality than his more common

term “Inhuman.” The word derives from the opening canto of Dante’s *Paradiso* where it is used to signify a conversion experience and spiritual rebirth (“Transumanar significar per verba / non si poria”; “words cannot signify what it means to go beyond the human”). While Jeffers shares with Dante a poetics geared towards conversion, his understanding of what it means to go beyond humanity is closer to Nietzsche’s idea of the Superman (*Übermensch*) than to Dante’s embrace of the ineffable and inarticulate. “Transhuman” would seem preferable to “Inhuman” as well because it escapes the human/inhuman dichotomy and points to that reality which is beyond the human, rather than merely opposed to the human. For Jeffers, the human is not something to be simply negated in favor of the non-human (the “naïve” interpretation of Inhumanism), but to be overcome through a kind of self-transcendence or evolutionary leap, leading to the reintegration of a transfigured humanity as a co-evolutionary partner and participant in the greater transhuman reality.

“Trans-” also means “through,” and a possible complementary meaning of the term “transhuman” involves the sense that ultimate reality only appears via or through the human. Just as modern physicists have pointed out the significance of the mutual implication of the observing subject and the observed facts, so Jeffers was aware of the paradox that, in spite of the ontological priority of things themselves, it is only through the human that the transhuman reality comes into focus in all its glory. By suggesting that the revelation of the transhuman glory cannot be separated from the human translation of the same, Jeffers is pointing to a much more exalted definition of humanity than is found in the earlier poems. While this line of inquiry is not pursued here directly, it may be inferred that the more positive assessment of humanity’s future intuited in the previous stanza (“something perhaps may come of him”) is connected to the human ability to bring into conscious awareness the splendor of the transhuman world. This implies not only that human beings are part of the larger plan present from the beginning of evolution (“the plan within the egg”), but that the human sense for beauty is in fact one of the fulfillments, intentions, and purposes of the world. And since in Jeffers’s aesthetically charged eco-theology God/Nature wants the same sense of beauty that man wants, the human recognition of that beauty is one of the ways God comes to know himself.

If this interpretation of Jeffers’s creative evolution during the final period is correct, “De Rerum Virtute” can be viewed as a pivotal poem, marking a transition from the Inhumanist phase (roughly 1938–1947) with its mainly negative assessment of the human condition toward a later cosmological or Transhumanist phase (roughly 1948–1962) marked by a less critical and even positive valuation of the role of humanity within the unfolding cosmic drama. Thus while the poem explicitly references “The Inhumanist,” it also points ahead to ideas and concepts which come to the fore in the very late poetry,

especially in the grandiose vision of the evolving universe presented in the posthumously published *The Beginning and the End*. Many of the issues touched upon here—such as the purposeful organizational structure inherent in evolutionary processes, the idea that the entire universe can be understood as a single living organism, the awareness of the depth-dimension of human consciousness as one of the “sense organs of God”—all receive fuller treatment in the longer poem. These points of contact, along with the further elaboration of a “neo-Lucretian” style combining myth and science, suggest that the direction of his poetic ambition during the final period was to fashion an explicitly cosmological poetic discourse which would take as its subject the universe story itself, how the cosmos and life and human beings came to be. That Jeffers was never able to complete the larger poem only makes “De Rerum Virtute” that much more significant, both as a kind of précis of his mature worldview, and as a portal into the rich conceptual universe of his late cosmological imaginings.