

# *Jeffers Studies*

*Volume 4 Number 4 Fall 2000*

*Jeffers Studies*  
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Editorial Board: Robert Brophy, Senior Editor; Terry Beers, Co-Editor; Robert Kafka, Managing Editor; Peter Quigley, World Wide Web Editor. Copy-editing and typesetting: Greg Williams.

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## GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

Shorter manuscripts, suitable for numbers 1, 2, and 3 of each volume, in two double-spaced copies, should typically range up to 4,000 words. Longer essays should be between 5,000 and 9,000 words. Both should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped postcard for prompt acknowledgment. The author's name should appear on the initial page only. All copies are non-returnable. Citation of Jeffers's poetry should be from the *Stanford Collected Poetry*, abbreviated *CP*. Until the *Collected Letters* (Stanford) is available, citation of Robinson and Una Jeffers letters should be from Ann Ridgeway's *Selected Letters (SL)* (Johns Hopkins) or from the Una Jeffers Correspondent series in issues of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* (see *RJN* index, issue 100, Fall 1996). Formatting should follow the *MLA Handbook*, fourth edition, with parenthetical citations, endnotes, and works cited. A final revision of an accepted article should be submitted in hard copy and as an IBM-formatted Word file on a 3.5" floppy disk.

## News and Notes

For economy in publishing, the fourth number of each *Jeffers Studies* volume will no longer be perfect-bound.

### OCTOBER FESTIVAL

The 2001 Tor House Foundation Fall Festival will take place October 12–14 in Carmel. It will feature a bus ride to Jeffers Country on Friday with a reception at Tor House that evening. On Saturday, there will be panel discussions regarding the impact of the natural environment on Jeffers. The poet John Haines will be the featured speaker. Sunday will see the traditional poetry walk along Carmel's nature trail and beach.

### NEW JEFFERS PHOTOGRAPHS

The Bancroft Library has expanded the number of images of Robinson Jeffers on its California Heritage site to twenty-six, and of Una Jeffers to five. Here are found pictures not seen before—of Robinson with a Sherlock Holmes pipe, of a family picnic with Charles Erskine Scott Wood, of Robinson with an unidentified young man *circa* 1934, of Una with a laugh on her face, and another of her with Langston Hughes.

At <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/CalHeritage/>, enter “Jeffers, Robinson” in the search box. On the next screen, click on “California Faces” and then on “Container Listing.” Next, scroll down to “Robinson Jeffers” and click. At the bottom of the twenty-six images, you can click on the right arrow to go directly to the Una Jeffers images.

### ANOTHER PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Academy Foundation held an opening reception and premiere viewing of the new exhibition “Photographing People: Hollywood Moments by Leigh Wiener” at the Academy building on Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, Thursday, January 18, 2001.

Though the subjects were mostly movie stars caught in unposed immediacy, there was room also for Robinson Jeffers, whom Wiener photographed during his three-day stay at Tor House in 1956. Wiener's Jeffers photos became famous through appearances in *Life* magazine during the poet's life and, more substantially, scattered through the pages of Ann Ridgeway's *Selected Letters*. Some have lately appeared in *Jeffers Studies* (3.3 and 4.2–3), courtesy of Wiener's son Devik Wiener.

### MEDEA OUTDOORS

The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, “the most venerable summer theatre” in the Los Angeles area (*LA Times*), will stage Jeffers's *Medea* as part of its summer repertory, beginning July 28 and running through October 21. The Theatricum performs in a beautiful outdoor theater in the woods of Topanga, California. For more information, call 310-455-3723, or visit [www.theatricum.com](http://www.theatricum.com).

### NEW HOME FOR E-MAIL LIST

Steve Adkison, ongoing proprietor of the Jeffers List, has moved it from the University of Nevada, Reno, to Idaho State University, Pocatello. The old address for the list was [rjeffers@unr.edu](mailto:rjeffers@unr.edu). The

new address for the list is <rjeffers@mm.isu.edu>, and the web page for users of the mailing list is <<http://maillist.isu.edu/mailman/listinfo/rjeffers>>. There is also an e-mail-based interface; one can get information about using it by sending a message with just the word “help” as subject or in the body to: <rjeffers-request@maillist.isu.edu>.

## RJN ISSUES ON THE WEB

Rob Kafka is in the process of scanning issues of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* for web presentation. Those with an Adobe® Acrobat® Reader can view examples at <[www.uclaextension.org/jeffers/rjn](http://www.uclaextension.org/jeffers/rjn)>. The series (1–100) will be especially useful when Rob is able to engage search functions, making available a “Search All Issues” option, as well as “Search Una Jeffers Correspondent,” “Search Articles,” and other options. *RJN* was the Jeffers “publication of record” for thirty-five years (1962 to 1996), offering news on Jeffers events, book reviews, thesis and dissertation abstracts, articles, memoirs, poem explications, biographical materials, obituaries, and reports on manuscript collections, musical adaptations, recordings, and theater. From a one- and two-page newsletter in 1962, *RJN* grew into a full-fledged journal running at times to over 75 pages. The series “Una Jeffers Correspondent” includes letters to Judith Anderson, Remsen Bird, Phoebe Barkan, Albert Bender, Barth Carpenter, Rudolf Gilbert, Herbert Klein, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Blanche Matthias, Hazel Pinkham, and Ellen O’Sullivan.

## CONFERENCE PAPERS

Robert Brophy presented a paper, “Jeffers’s Big Sur: ‘The Face of God,’” in a panel titled “Scripture

and Place in American Poetry” for a conference sponsored by *Image: A Journal of the Arts & Religion*, Seattle, October 21, 2000.

James Baird contributed “Robinson Jeffers and Myth: ‘Everything Old is New Again,’” to the 35th annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, Norman, Oklahoma, October 27, 2000, “Going to the Territory: Filling Space with Myth.”

## UPCOMING CONFERENCES

The Western Literature Association 2001 meeting will be hosted by the English Department of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, October 17–20. Deadline for submission of papers or proposals is June 15. Send to <[Susan\\_Maher@unomaha.edu](mailto:Susan_Maher@unomaha.edu)>. For more information about the meeting, visit <[www.unomaha.edu/~english](http://www.unomaha.edu/~english)>.

The California American Studies Association (CASA) will hold its annual conference May 4–6, 2001, at the University of Nevada, Reno. This will be a joint conference with the Rocky Mountain ASA.

The 2001 American Literature Association Conference is scheduled for May 24–27 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Cambridge, Massachusetts. For the program, see <[www.americanliterature.org](http://www.americanliterature.org)>.

## Publications

### CONTINENT’S END

In a recent essay, “The Edge of the Continent,” Czeslaw Milosz meditates on the “savage landscape” of the Big Sur Coast in a contrasting theme reminiscent of his earlier tribute, “For Robinson Jeffers.” To an Eastern European whose landscape

has been kneaded with human hands and fertilized by human remains, and whose waters, as Jeffers says of Ireland in *Descent to the Dead*, have been “shed for tears ten thousand times,” this Sur Coast is somehow terrible. As he vividly pictures mountain slopes, redwood canyons, Pacific coves, creeks, and precipitous shores, Milosz epitomizes it all as “this desolation.” In contrast to European cathedrals, universities, literature, and art, “there never has been anything except this space, the ocean, the same sunrises and sunsets”—if Indians passed by or lived here, no building, not a stone testifies to their existence with the exception of the “cave of hands” that prompted the Jeffers poem (which Milosz reprints in mid-essay). He imagines then a Japanese castaway, possibly a poet, thrown up in time immemorial on this shore, and concludes: “He would experience loneliness so radical that it would destroy his very will to survive.” Thus this Lithuanian-Polish scholar, philosopher, and poet’s judgment on and appreciation of the final coast.

Czeslaw Milosz. “The Edge of the Continent.” In *Road-Side Dog*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1998. 119–21.

### CAVE OF HANDS

“Connection,” by Peter Nabokov (*Parabola* 6.1, 25–29), recounts a visit to the cave of Jeffers’s brief lyric “Hands” by a free-lance writer/journalist accompanying a group of archeologists. He describes a cavern fifteen feet deep and seventy-five feet long at a fault scarp of Vaqueros sandstone in Los Padres National Forest reached by a branch road off the Carmel Valley and through Robinson Canyon into the Santa Lucias above 2,000 feet. Below a twenty-foot-high cave ceiling, the “clouds of hands” are clustered in three panels, as many as 250 hands in all. Both left and right hands are por-

trayed, their stark, vertical white lines projecting a skeletal, spiritual quality, which is well-recorded pictorially by a five-inch by five-inch close-up photograph at the article’s head.

The essay discusses the cave gallery’s antiquity (organic contents carbon-dated at 3,190 years), its relation to the nearby Mission San Antonio, its visitors in the 1800s including coastal indigenous. It also chronicles and photographs a hundred and fifty foot monolith hand, carved by the elements a hundred yards outside and beyond the cave, jutting out from foliage, in shape much like Albrecht Durer’s “Hands in Prayer.” Mentioned also is the 1974 folk art survey *In Praise of Hands*, edited by Octavio Paz and including the Jeffers poem.

## AMERICAN POETRY ANTHOLOGY FROM GERMANY

*Americanische Dichtung: Von dem Aufangen bis zur Gegenwart (American Poetry from the Beginning to the Present)*, an anthology edited by Eva Hesse and Heinz Ickstadt, is now available from C. H. Beck of Munich. Part four of the set *English and American Poetry*, this volume includes seventy-four poets in all, ranging from “A Native American Song” and Anne Bradstreet to Audre Lorde and Joy Harjo, and features thirteen poems by Jeffers. The anthology’s apparatus is in German, and each poem has its German translation by Eva Hesse on the facing page. The Jeffers poems included are The Excesses of God; “For fifty thousand years”; To the Stone-Cutters; Shine, Perishing Republic; New Year’s Eve; “Eagle and hawk”; The Old Man’s Dream; The Day is a Poem; “Time will come”; The Great Explosion; The Bloody Sire; “The polar ice-caps”; and Cassandra, each with its own additional German title. Untitled poems, referenced by first lines, are indicated in quotation

marks. The anthology has 728 pages, including a 23-page afterword and 129 pages of commentary (biographic and publication information), of which Jeffers is allotted a full two pages. Publication year is 2000. Two ISBNs are given: ISBN 3 406 46463 7 for this volume and ISBN 3 406464 5 for the complete edition of four volumes.

Late in his life, Jeffers corresponded with Eva Hesse (his letters appear in Ridgeway's *Selected Letters*). In 1960, Ms. Hesse published translations of three Jeffers plays, *Robinson Jeffers Dramen: Die Quelle, Medea, and Die Frau aus Kreta (The Tower Beyond Tragedy, Medea, and The Cretan Woman)*, which were presented on stage and on radio/TV. In 1988, she edited the paperback volume *Robinson Jeffers: Unterjochte Erde (Robinson Jeffers: Subjected Earth)*, Munich: Piper & Co., with fifty-five poems, plus excerpts from Jeffers prose translated into German, fifteen photos, and a 53-page afterword.

## STANFORD PROMOTION

Stanford University Press has a full-page color advertisement in the April 12 issue of the prestigious *New York Review of Books* (p. 11), promoting its three 2001 Jeffers releases—the *Selected Poetry*, volume five of the *Collected Poetry*, and James Karman's edition of Morley Baer's *Stones of the Sur*, filled with marvelous California coastal photos.

The *Selected Poetry* advertisement is marked by quotations from David Rains Wallace's recent review in the *LA Times*, and *The Collected Poetry* advertisement features a stack of the five volumes priced at \$300, with quotes from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. The notice for *Stones of the Sur* is excerpted from the description in the Stanford University Press Spring catalog.

## JEFFERS IN BOOKS IN PRINT

*Books in Print* for 2000–2001 cites ten titles of Jeffers: *The Alpine Christ* and *Brides of the South Wind* (Cayucos), *Cawdor/Medea* (New Directions), *Collected Poetry* volumes 1 and 2 (Stanford), *Flagons and Apples* (Cayucos), *The Last Conservative* (Quintessence), *Selected Poems* (Vintage), *Songs & Heroes* (Arundel, two issues). It does not acknowledge *Collected Poetry* volumes 3, 4, or 5, nor *Selected Poetry* (Stanford). Under Jeffers Criticism, it cites thirteen items: *Fragments of an Older Fury* (Oyez), *Rhetoric in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Peter Lang), *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet* (Fordham), *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism* (University of Wisconsin Press and reprint), *The Excesses of God* (Stanford), *Shine, Perishing Republic* (Haskell House), *Of Una Jeffers* (Story Line), *Critical Essays on Robinson Jeffers* (Hall), *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California* (Story Line), *Jeffers Observed* (Quintessence), *An Introduction to Robinson Jeffers* (Reprint Service), *Robinson Jeffers: The Man and His Work* (without indicating 1934 or 1940 versions), *Robinson Jeffers and a Galaxy of Writers* (University of South Carolina), *Centennial Essays for Robinson Jeffers* (University of Delaware), and Ziolkowski's *View from the Tower* (Princeton).

## Collectors' Corner

### RARE JEFFERS BOOKS ON THE WEB

A search of <www.amazon.com> yields seventy-six matches for "Robinson Jeffers," including the new *Selected Poetry*, *Stones of the Sur*, and *Collected Poetry* through volume 4, but most of the items turn out to be out-of-print titles that would require

searches. And <www.ABEbooks.com> offers 1,019 books authored by Robinson Jeffers, 470 with "Robinson Jeffers" in their titles, 282 listed with "Robinson" and "Jeffers" as key words, and 1,454 under all search words. This selection includes some outrageous prices as well as very reasonable ones for a wide variety of titles.

### DILLARD, EISELEY, LOPEZ, JEFFERS

Another photo book with Jeffers poetry has turned up in the used/rare book category: *Visions of Wilderness: Photographs by Dewitt Jones* "with essays by Loren Eiseley, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and the words of Robinson Jeffers." An introduction is by Ralph Steiner. Portland, OR: Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company, 1980. 87 pages. Each piece of writing is anticipated and followed by photos. The selections are: "A Field of

Silence" by Annie Dillard from *Atlantic Monthly*, 1978; "Drought" by Barry Holstun Lopez from *River Notes: The Dance of Herons*, 1979; "The Flow of the River" by Loren Eiseley from *The Immense Journey*, 1953; and "The Treasure" by Robinson Jeffers from *Roan Stallion*, 1925. Photos accompanying Jeffers are of mountains, glaciers, icebergs, lakes, and surf. Jeffers is credited with winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1954. Promotion on the book's back cover reads: "Each day nature provides us with the opportunity to find those precious moments when looking becomes seeing. As a renowned photographer of the natural world, Dewitt Jones has captured such moments of understanding and has arranged these images into an absorbing photographic essay. Accompanying his pictures are the words of four other observers of nature who have shared parallel visions through their writings. It is an intimate and profound book for all who find meaning and gain insight from wilderness.

## *In Memoriam:* *Lawrence Clark Powell, 1906–2001*

Lawrence Clark (Larry) Powell, a Jeffers legend, died Wednesday, March 12, 2001, in Tucson, Arizona, at the age of 94. Born six years before Jeffers's first publication and surviving to see the five volumes of Stanford University Press *Collected Poetry*, he attended Jeffers's alma mater, Occidental College, a generation after the poet, was introduced there to Jeffers's poetry, taught in its halls for a short time, and then sought and earned a doctorate in this heretofore little known poet—by convincing his mentor, Professor Charles Cestre of the University of Dijon, France, that his subject was a significant, emerging American writer, important enough to be a dissertation topic. The work that ensued, *An Introduction to Robinson Jeffers* (currently available in facsimile reprint), would be converted into the first and only critical study of the poet for well over twenty years, *Robinson Jeffers: The Man and his Work*, appearing both in 1934 and 1940 editions.

It is not clear whether he wanted a university appointment for a teaching career; the Depression seems to have made the question moot. He returned from France to work as a shipping clerk at Vroman's Bookstore in Pasadena, at Fowler Books in Los Angeles, and at local rare book stores such as Jake Zeitlin's, whence he was drafted for the Los Angeles Public Library, then moving on to Berkeley to earn a certificate in library science from the University of California, and finally settling at UCLA, where he founded and became dean of the School of Library Service (recently absorbed into the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies) and built its library system into an institution of international renown. He served as chief librarian at UCLA's main administration from 1944 to 1961 and at the adjunct William Andrews Clark Memorial Library from 1944 to 1966. During a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1950 he scouted bookshops in Britain and the continent, supplying UCLA with priceless works and collections. The *Los Angeles Times* obituary of March 20th lists his honors and estimable positions: president of both the California Library Association and the Bibliographical Society of America, fellow of the California Historical Society, member of the Zamorano, Rounce, Coffin, and Grolier bibliophile clubs.

Over the years he lectured on Jeffers and with Albert Benders put the Occidental College Jeffers Collection on the Jeffers world map. For a man of his immense capacities and expertise, outreach and wide interests, it must be said that Jeffers was the love of his professional life. As a writer he was prolific, and his articles and books often included Jeffers as topic. One example of his direct

essays on Jeffers still in print is *California Classics* (1971), a collection of "Books of the West" articles for *Westways* magazine; among the volume's thirty-one chapters on books/authors is "Give Your Heart to the Hawks," the title of a Jeffers narrative but also an admonition epitomizing the poet's philosophy. After Jeffers's death, Larry Powell gathered with those interested in the poet's legacy in the living room of Tor House, Carmel, where projects, publications, and fundraising were discussed. From this meeting came the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* with Melba Bennett as editor, a publication which ended in 1996 with issue 100 and, in upgraded format, became *Jeffers Studies*.

At Occidental College, Powell's Jeffers collection fills five to six shelves of Special Collections. Here also is housed his Everson-Powell papers, which in 1994 became available in the 600-page *Take Hold Upon the Future: Letters on Writers and Writing, 1938–1946, William Everson and Lawrence Clark Powell*, edited by William R. Eshelman (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994). Here also is Powell's correspondence with Ward Ritchie, with whom he collaborated on several Jeffers projects including the Jeffers exhibits in 1935 and 1955 at Occidental's library and took part in the lecture series at the Jeffers 1987 Centennial Celebration. One of Powell's last benefactions to Occidental was the establishing of its Book Arts Program—to perpetuate the knowledge and love of books and book printing.

Larry spent his final twenty or so years in Tucson at the University of Arizona as a special consultant in the university's growth. During this time and into his retirement he wrote a multi-volume autobiography and more bibliographical works. Here also he published a volume in memory of his wife Fay and three novels in 1977, 1979, and 1992. Fittingly his memorial service was scheduled for the Singing Wind Book Shop near Benson, Arizona. Kevin Starr, California State librarian, has been designated Powell's biographer.

## *Research in Foreign Translation*

*Editors' Note:* Kamil Bednář was one of the most successful translators of Jeffers's poetry. His widow once wrote that a total of 120,000 volumes of these translations were sold, mostly during the Communist years, each beautifully bound and illustrated, sometimes including a disc of readings. The Czech public response reflects the mysterious power Jeffers had for these people under grim controls, his vision of sea and sky, planets and cosmos, his extraordinary sense of natural beauty nourishing their constrained lives. An edition was sometimes sold out practically before it reached the stores for sale. The following report on the papers of Bednář is from a student of Jeffers's poetry, Klara Paskova.

The Bednář papers, manuscript materials and some letters, are shelved in the archives of the Museum of National Literature (Pamatník Narodního Pisemnictví). These are things from 1950s and '60s. The Museum's telephone number is: 02/20517275 or 02/20516695. An auxiliary group (its title is difficult precisely to translate: "The Writers Association" = Obec Spisovatelů = "The Writers Community") can be very helpful. Their telephone number is 02/90004344.

The central library of Charles University (Prague) can be reached by the e-mail <marie.parakova@ruk.cuni.cz>. Ms. Parakova is the library's director. The library reference service can be reached by <hartmanova@lib.cas.cz> (telephone number: 02/24240556). Some of the correspondence of Kamil Bednář and Robinson Jeffers [sic] can be found in the Bednář anthology about Jeffers which was published as a book.

Our informant adds: "I wrote a diploma essay about Jeffers for the South Bohemian University in Ceske Budejovice, a graduate thesis to earn a "magister" degree for teaching English. The title of my thesis is not so impressive: 'Return to Epic in the Poetic Work of Robinson Jeffers.' It's written in Czech because I can express and hold the ideas better than in English. My study was an analysis of selected epic poems ("The Loving Shepherdess," "Roan Stallion," and "Hungerfield"). This thesis also searched out parallels in Jeffers's work and judged the importance therein of classical inspiration (mainly ancient myths). It also attempted to explain Jeffers's inhumanism, but that was a side issue. I became familiar with Jeffers and Bednář from my art teacher, Marie. My name, Klara, reminded her of Klara Walker—the heroine from "The Loving Shepherdess"—so she told me about that book. Together we tried to illustrate the tale. That was when I was 14. Marie loaned me books by Jeffers translated by Bednář. It's sad that all the books were published in the '60s and '70s and then

no more. So it's quite hard to get them—only when you have luck in a second hand bookshop. When I started to study English, Marie wanted to know whether the beautiful Bednář translations were the same as the originals so I started searching for Jeffers in their original language. My English teacher, Lloyd Rogers, who came from Monterey, was the easiest way to get close to Jeffers. My mind stayed in contact with Jeffers's poems so long because Jeffers wrote his poems just as they were written in those ancient times when the art was more impressive. These poems seemed similar to ordinary conversation and nevertheless were extraordinary."

# Review: The Literature of California

David Fine

*The Literature of California: Writings from the Golden State*. Vol. 1, "Native Beginnings to 1945." Edited by Jack Hicks, James D. Houston, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Al Young. U of California P, 2000. 633 pages.

Of the many anthologies of California literature that have appeared over the years, this new collection, the first of a two-volume set, is by far the most comprehensive and ambitious gathering yet, a monumental task of thorough scholarship and skillful editing by four prominent California writers and teachers. A second volume, covering the period since World War II, is now being completed. Published in the year 2000, the 150th anniversary of statehood, Volume 1 chronicles in over 600 pages the rise of California literature from Indian legends, songs, and creation tales to the flowering of fiction and poetry in the early twentieth century. What makes the collection especially useful is not only its far reach (going far beyond all previous anthologies) and its generous coverage of individual writers, but the splendid introductions the editors provide to each of its four sections: "Indian Beginnings," "One Hundred Years of Exploration and Conquest, 1769–1870," "The Rise of California Literature, 1865–1914," and "Dreams and Awakenings, 1915–1945." Each of these essay-length introductions provides an invaluable framework for the readings that follow, a way of relating writer to writer, work to work, preventing the kind of decontextualization, or fragmentation, that one finds too frequently in anthologies that give us little more than brief biographical notes to each of the writers they cover. Here we do have the biographical notes, but also the splendid integrating introductions.

Readers of Robinson Jeffers should be pleased on three counts with the coverage he gets. First, he is generously represented by seven lyric poems; second, there is ample representation of the writings of those who surrounded him in his years in Carmel—such friends and acquaintances as George Sterling (who wrote the first book on Jeffers in 1926), Hildegard Flanner, Mary Austin, Jaime de Angulo, Carey McWilliams, and John Steinbeck; and third, the editors in their introduction to Part Four ("Dreams and Awakenings, 1915–1945") place him prominently in the forefront of both a new regionalism in California (the sense of both being possessed by and possessing the land) and the rise of modernism in Californian and American poetry in these years. "The landscape fed the poet," they write, "and the poet took such fierce possession of the place

itself that one might argue that he still owns it." They go on: "American poetry came of age in the decade surrounding World War I with the works of Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and e.e. cummings; and Robinson Jeffers joined them as a major figure in the rise of American literary modernism. Almost single-handedly he set California in the national eye. . . . He created the literary region and drew it larger, as myth; and against a background of granite and hawk, winter gales and steel-head, he dramatized remnant families—father and son, brother and sister—in desperate struggle" (393–94).

Jeffers scholars may be disappointed over some minor but persistent inaccuracies in the biographical notes that precede the poems. At the risk of seeming to quibble about minor matters, it seems they should be cited. To begin with, Jeffers graduated from Occidental College at age 18, not 17; it seems less than accurate to say as the essay does that he was born into an educated family: his father was a seminary professor but there is no evidence that his mother was well-educated; on still another point the introduction states that Robinson graduated from medical school, although he ceased his study there after his third year. Finally, it appears misleading to state, as they do, that Jeffers moved to Europe with his parents for his education. True, they put him in various European schools from the 1890s to the opening years of the twentieth century and accompanied him at times especially in mediating the almost yearly changes, but the father returned home each time, the mother remaining from 1899 with their then two sons.

These matters aside, the treatment of Jeffers in the collection—the prominence he receives as California's premiere poet and the rich context in which he is placed as major regionalist and a force in American modernism—should please Jeffers's readers. He is the dominant figure in the final section of the volume's collection. As to his enormous influence on more recent California poets, that will have to wait until the publication of the second volume of this splendid anthology. That should be soon.



# *The Poet as Prophet:* *Some Notes on Robinson Jeffers*

John Haines

*Editors' note:* Adapted from the Keynote Address, Robinson Jeffers Association Conference, Carmel, California, February 2000.

Robinson Jeffers has long been one of my models in poetry, someone whose work I discovered at a fairly early age when I was just beginning to write seriously; he remains one of my lasting affections among modern poets.

I don't pretend to speak in what follows as a scholar, one whose research empowers him to speak at length of Jeffers and in critical detail. I speak as a poet, one who has learned from Jeffers, as from many other poets, what the art at its best can be. I might say also that it would not be easy for me to speak of poetry, of Jeffers and his work, and avoid reference to this turn of the century and the prospects before us.

In considering what I might say of Jeffers at this time, and not avoid the stated theme of the conference, which is Jeffers and Apocalypse, I've been drawn to a consideration of the poet as he appears in past literature as speaker to the people, whether as prophet in the classical, or biblical sense, or as dramatist of humanity's eternal struggle with the gods, with Nature, as well as with our human nature.

Whatever else I may have to say, there is little doubt in my mind that Jeffers is among the foremost of our modern poets, rare in any age and in ours an outstanding figure. His dismissal by one of our Ivy League critics as "a West Coast nature poet" is not only a failure of critical judgment, but a kind of East Coast snobbery and an insult. And if any writer of our time can be said to embody in his work the theme of apocalypse, it is he.

Precisely when I first encountered Jeffers's work I cannot say, but I do recall reading him during my first year as a student in New York in 1950–51. I recall also that he was being read by some of the young people I knew then, and I think his work was generally a part of the literary culture of the time. Having finished with my art studies in 1952, my first wife and I moved west to Monterey, drawn there mainly by Jeffers's example, to Carmel Valley, Big Sur, and the surrounding country. The valley, the coastline, were for us suffused with Jeffers and his writing, his poems and verse dramas.

Although my initial venture to Alaska after WW II had nothing directly to do with Jeffers (I had not read him, nor even heard of him), it does seem likely that his example lay in the back of my mind when I returned to the Richardson Homestead in 1954. I had then no program, no Hawk Tower to build, only an instinct as to what I wanted and needed to do—a vision, so to speak, requiring many years to clarify. Meanwhile, a life to live and work to do.

To what extent Jeffers influenced my own writing at an early stage would be hard to say now, though I sense in a few of my poems from the early 1950s something of his voice and verse style. One thing I can testify to is the force of his example, of his convictions and his stating of them. Here, for me at the time, was a poet who would speak openly and honestly on history, on politics and public life, and with no apparent regard as to the consequences. This was for me a lesson, one I did not forget, though my writing has steered far afield from the example offered by Jeffers, moving stylistically in other directions under the influence of very different poets, like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W. C. Williams, as well as numerous poets in other languages.

What concerns me most immediately at this moment is the voice of the poet as prophet and teacher; the poet as social critic, as speaker to the people. And what I find so consistent in Jeffers's work, from beginning to end, is that prophetic note which can on occasion become monotonous, perhaps repetitious, but which also embodies a truth of our times to be found nowhere else.

There is that voice, in literature, in the classics, in the Bible—a *passion*, if you will, that empowers the text and makes of it something more than a passing amusement, and mainly to be found in poetry, in verse, but also at times in certain works of fiction, and I would mention here as one prominent and neglected example, the German writer, Hermann Broch, and his major novels, *The Sleepwalkers* and *The Death of Virgil*.

What may be essential, and which is largely missing in poetry today, is that historical and philosophical perspective, to be gained mainly from a familiarity with the classics. I know that my own recent rereading of Greek and Roman history and literature has sharpened my sense of where we are at this moment in our history, teetering, as it were, between a faltering democracy and a kind of corporate imperialism. We have yet to see the outcome, but can perhaps admit the premonitions.

It is true of the classics, of all ancient texts and tales, that they embody the lasting truths of our human condition. To the extent that contemporary literature and art acknowledge this and learn from it, our poems and stories may survive the current market. I refer to that larger theme, so conspicuously absent from contemporary poetry. And it may be that in our modern era the proliferation of the public media has deprived the art of poetry of its older audience, and also of its ancient voice, that which speaks to us all.

To speak the truth as we see it: nothing else can justify our claims to art, and the art of poetry. As Jeffers once put it, "I can tell lies in prose." Yet even there, in our prose criticism, we are bound to truth, and I cannot imagine Jeffers lying even in prose! Indeed, his one major critical essay, "Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Years," demonstrates his need to speak directly and honestly. The gravity, the solemn authority in Jeffers's verse and prose—a quality that has all but disappeared from American writing:

Therefore though not forgotten not loved, in gray old years in the evening leaning  
Over the gray stones of the tower-top,  
You shall be called heartless and blind;  
And watch new time answer old thought, not a face strange nor a pain astonishing . . .  
("Soliloquy," *CP* 1: 215)

In my recent rereading of Jeffers I have discovered a number of parallels in the thought of writers like the Scottish poet Edwin Muir, and in a contemporary of mine, Hayden Carruth. I would like here to quote a few passages from Muir's prose writings. From an essay, "The Poetic Imagination":

We live in a world created by applied science, and our present is unlike the present of any other age . . . Applied science shows us a world of consistent mechanical progress . . . machines give birth to ever new generations of machines, and the new machines are always better and more efficient than the old, and begin where the old left off . . . But in the world of human beings all is different; there we find no mechanical progress . . . Every human being has to begin at the beginning . . . with the same difficulties and pleasures, the same temptations, the same problems of good and evil, the same inward conflict, the same need to learn how to live, the same inclination to ask what life means. (*Essays on Literature and Society*, 226)

And from a passage in Muir's diaries of the late 1930s, we find this:

The nineteenth century thought that machinery was a moral force and would make men better. How could the steam-engine make men better? . . . If I look back over the last hundred years it seems to me that we have lost more than we have gained . . . that what we have gained is trifling, for what we have lost was old and what we have gained is merely new. The world might have settled down into a passable Utopia by now if it had not been for "progress." (*The Story and the Fable*, 257)

Whether one agrees with all that Muir has to say here, I think his thought would find agreement with that of Jeffers in many respects. We can, for example, recall some lines and phrases from the poem "Science":

Man, introverted man . . .  
.....  
Has begot giants; but being taken up  
Like a maniac with self-love and inward conflicts cannot manage his hybrids.  
.....  
Now he's bred knives on nature turns them also inward . . .  
.....  
A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,  
. . . who would have dreamed this infinitely little too much? (*CP* 1: 113)

Or, as Muir says at the conclusion of his essay, "The Poetic Imagination": ". . . in spite of our machines, the habits of the human heart remain what they have always been, and imagination deals with them as no other faculty can" (227).

I'd like at this point to quote from a couple of poems recently published which I consider fairly typical of a good deal of current verse-writing. I will refrain from naming the authors. From a recent issue of one of our prominent literary journals:

On our long flight over the Atlantic  
the already drunk were served  
again and again their two little bottles  
of Scotch or vodka or whatever else  
they wanted—soon followed by another  
pair, and another—such cute miniatures  
that I wanted to save the bottles for children,  
and in fact tucked away a couple  
for that purpose, and one to use later  
for shaving lotion . . .

And from a recent anthology, some lines of a more formal variety:

Dad pushed my mother down the cellar stairs.  
Gram had me name each plant in her garden.  
My father got drunk. Ma went to country fairs.  
The pet chameleon we had was warden  
of the living room curtains where us kids  
stood waiting for their headlights to turn in.

Let us compare these lines with some sample passages from Jeffers:

Peace is the heir of dead desire,  
Whether abundance killed the cormorant  
In a happy hour, or sleep or death  
Drowned him deep in dreamy waters,  
Peace is the ashes of that fire,  
The heir of that king, the inn of that journey. ("Suicide's Stone," *CP* 4: 115)

The tide, moving the night's  
Vastness with lonely voices,  
Turns, the deep dark-shining  
Pacific leans on the land,  
Feeling his cold strength  
To the outmost margins: you Night will resume  
The stars in your time. ("Night," *CP* 1: 115)

Well, what is the difference here? On the one hand, in my first example, a simulated free verse that appears to have no more than the character of mediocre prose, and a near-total absorption with a trivial incident in one's personal life. And to impose, superficially, as in my second example, a more formal order on the lines, hardly improves the general character of the verse.

And then, with Jeffers, an underlying cadence learned from an early study of classical poetry; a solemnity that comes from attention to the world at large, to our natural and historical background; a verse grounded in that eternal reality on which human life has always been grounded. Or, perhaps we can say: it is the difference between poetry in the true sense of the word, and a sort of pas-time imitation of it—a way of writing all too easily sanctioned by contemporary schools of verse. The better part of what is published as poetry now originates, not from the deep necessity that characterizes the work of a poet like Robinson Jeffers, but as a careerist venture, a professional marker, so to speak, and from which the author may proceed, if he or she is lucky, to a higher rung on the professional ladder. But that kind of success has little to do with the deep and lasting achievement in a genuine work of art.

The stately measure of Jeffers's lines is not merely a matter of verse technique, but of a passionate conviction that energizes the verse lines and forms them into a pattern that will seem, to the alert reader, inevitable. And this is opposed to the non-verse of much contemporary writing: no substance, no conviction, just a form of self-amusement very much in tune with what has been called "the entertainment state."

And it is here that I would quote from the critical writing of Hayden Carruth, in speaking of an older discipline now mostly set aside:

You believe your writing can be a separate part of your life, but it can't. A writer's writing occurs in the midst of, and by means of, all the materials of life, not just a selected few. . . . And it isn't a paradox that you can choose necessity, if you seek the right objectives; and it will be no less inexorable because you have chosen it. Once you are in it, your writing will be in it too. (*Reluctantly*, 38)

It is here that the example of Robinson Jeffers makes a necessary appearance. He seems deliberately to have chosen his own necessity, as stonemason, builder, and poet, and to have made the most of it. The life and the work came together, the one nourishing the other.

In "Poets Without Prophecy," an essay written in 1963 and published in *The Nation*, Carruth had this to say of a contemporary shift in writing from substance to technique:

[T]here distinctly was something grand and ennobling in the idea that a poet was to be known not by his art but by his vision . . . something essential. And we have lost it. . . . Once the poet was our spokesman . . . and if he did not speak for all of us . . . if his poems lacked the larger vision of humanity, we said he was deficient in one of the qualities that, virtually by definition, make a poet. (*Working Papers*, 54–55)

And he goes on to discuss some of the major figures in modern poetry who

. . . came into the world at a time when the poet's direct responsibility to mankind at large hadn't quite been laughed out of existence. . . . [T]his erosion of the larger view has reached a point at which poetry has become almost totally apolitical. (*Working Papers*, 55–56)

I think that even a casual reading of contemporary poetry will verify the truth in that statement. And further (to quote again from Carruth): ". . . the poet, within himself, identifies and augments the general experience in such a way that it will excite a renewed susceptibility in everyone else" (58). He then goes on to quote the French poet, Théophile Gautier: "To be of one's own time—nothing seems easier and nothing is more difficult" (59).

It is true that this voice to which I refer, confirmed here by Carruth, can be heard at times in the work of other poets of our early modern period, and Jeffers was by no means alone, as different in their verse as most of them were. e e cummings, for example, did not hesitate to excoriate his contemporaries, as in:

pity this busy monster manunkind  
not. Progress is a comfortable disease,  
your victim, life and death safely beyond,  
plays with the littleness of his bigness . . .

And William Carlos Williams, as distant from Jeffers in his style and thinking as he was, could write often in that plainspoken voice of his, as in the darkness of wartime:

These  
are the desolate dark weeks  
when nature in its barrenness  
equals the stupidity of man . . .

Or, in another and earlier poem, speaking of what he refers to as “The Pure Products of America”:

as if the earth under our feet  
were  
an excrement of some sky  
  
and we degraded prisoners  
destined  
to hunger until we eat filth . . .

Who among our current generation of poets would speak so directly to a potential audience? A fair question, one that needs to be asked.

I think we can say that Jeffers is very much in that tradition, the only tradition that really matters: that of the poet and artist as speaker of the truth. The voice underlying the words has that necessary continuity I associate with a kind of mastery. In thinking of what we can call the permanent work of our time, Jeffers was, and is, of that company.

I don’t mean to imply that a poet who falls outside this tradition is to be dismissed as of no consequence. There are many styles and modes, voices in poetry and song, that give pleasure and for one reason or another are deserving of praise. My major concern here has been with that other, public voice.

Edwin Muir concludes one of his lectures in his important book, *The Estate of Poetry*, with the following remarks:

Our world presents the imagination with certain questions not asked before, or not asked in the same way. Public indifference [to poetry] may be expected to continue, but perhaps the audience will increase when poetry loses

what obscurity is left in it by attempting greater themes, for great themes have to be clearly stated. A great theme greatly treated might still put poetry back in its old place. (*The Estate of Poetry*, 93)

If that task is ever achieved, in our time or in the future of poetry, certainly Robinson Jeffers will be among those who made it possible.

I’m going to end by reading a poem written in the past year or so, and still unpublished. The sources of the poem are extensive, and I won’t attempt to list them here. I will acknowledge, however, that the first stanza owes something of its imagery to the New York writer and critic, Alfred Kazin, in his books written of his early years in Brooklyn and Manhattan: *Starting Out in the Thirties*, and *A Walker in the City*. A few images from his pages remained with me.

I can’t claim that Jeffers had any direct influence on the poem. In its verse and tone of voice it is very different from his work. I believe, however, that something in the background of the poem, in its point of view, its reference to Roman history, may place it in that tradition.

#### The American Dream

It would have to be something dark,  
glazed as in a painting. A corridor  
leading back to a forgotten neighborhood  
where a ball is bounced from street  
to street, and we hear from a far corner  
the vendor’s cry in a city light.

It would have to be dusk, long after  
sunlight has failed. A shrouded figure  
at the prow of a ship, staring  
and pointing—as if one might see  
into that new land still unventured,  
and beyond it, coal dust and gaslight,  
vapors of an impenetrable distance.

Too many heroes, perhaps: a MacArthur  
striding the Philippine shallows; a sports  
celebrity smeared with a period color.  
A voice in the air: a Roman orator  
declaiming to an absentee Forum  
the mood of their failing republic.

It would have to be night. No theater lights, a dated performance shut down. And in one's fretful mind a ghost in a rented cassock pacing the stage, reciting to himself a history:

"Here were the elected Elders, chaired and bewigged. And placed before them the Charter: they read it aloud, pass it with reverence from hand to hand.

"Back there in the curtained shadows the people's chorus waited, shifting and uncertain; but sometimes among them a gesture, a murmur of unrest.

"And somewhere here, mislaid, almost forgotten, the meaning of our play its theme and blunted purpose . . ."

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# *Where the Country of Lost Borders Meets Jeffers Country: The Walking Women of Robinson Jeffers and Mary Austin*

Carmen Lowe

The Country of Lost Borders is Mary Austin's literary landscape, a desert country that extends west from the Grand Canyon to California's San Joaquin Valley and south from Death Valley down into Mexico. Within this great expanse of desert and mountain, canyon and mesa, Austin locates most of her short stories and novels. Her adult life was rooted in the Californian desert from the time her family homesteaded there in the late 1880s until she finally settled in 1924 in Santa Fe at a house she called Casa Querida. Because Austin's literary landscape comprises desert lands, one rarely thinks of her or her fiction in conjunction with Robinson Jeffers, another California writer whose work conveys the reality of a harsh and austere region. Overlooking the Pacific Ocean from his home, Tor House, Jeffers wrote poems that delineated his own literary landscape of ocean cliffs and coastal mountains, redwood canyons and pristine beaches. Jeffers Country extends west from the coast ranges abutting the Salinas Valley to the Pacific shore and from Monterey south well beyond Sur. Although the works of Mary Austin and Robinson Jeffers cover different geographical territory, they share much of the same thematic territory, especially the idea that the land itself is the main character of their literature, for it above anything else determines human reality.

Mary Austin and Robinson Jeffers share a vision of nature that seeks to diminish "man's" self-importance and dominance over the "not-man," a vision that drew both writers to live in and write about sublimely austere regions of great natural beauty; however, the predominant critical view is that, given their differences in gender and genre, Austin and Jeffers write very different types of literature. For example, T. M. Pearce, in his discussion of the friendship between Jeffers and Austin, claims that, "No more dissimilar writers than Mary Austin and Robinson Jeffers have appeared in American literature," and as evidence he contrasts the "horror," supernaturalism, and "harsh human entanglement" of Jeffers's narrative poems to Mary Austin's more harmonious and benign sense of nature's influence, which Pearce reads as "more directive than

destructive” (257). Views like Pearce’s, however, are an oversimplification of both authors, for (as I argue later) Jeffers’s Inhumanism has at its core a profound empathy and gentleness, while Austin’s vision of human community within nature is based on her own brand of “inhumanism.”

In Jeffers’s work, this gentleness is revealed within his most remarkable and memorable heroine, Clare Walker of “The Loving Shepherdess,” a 1929 narrative poem that bears striking resemblance to Mary Austin’s 1909 short story “The Walking Woman.” The similarities between these narratives have prompted at least one scholar, Robert Ian Scott, to propose the possibility of Jeffers’s using Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman” as a source for “The Loving Shepherdess” (4). I agree that it is possible and likely that some time before 1929, when Jeffers began to write “The Loving Shepherdess,” he read Mary Austin’s vividly descriptive regional writing of California, perhaps *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) or *Lost Borders* (1909). However, whether Jeffers actually “used” Austin’s “The Walking Woman” as a conscious or subconscious source for “The Loving Shepherdess” is perhaps less important than the dialogue about nature, regionalism, gender, and genre that occurs between these works when they are compared. In fact, the dialogue carried on by these two works suggests that “The Loving Shepherdess” is not so much “influenced” by “The Walking Woman” as it is a response to Austin’s story or a rewriting of it. This essay will analyze the literary dialogue carried on between “The Walking Woman” and “The Loving Shepherdess” and argue that “The Loving Shepherdess” rewrites “The Walking Woman” and in the process deepens Jeffers’s own notion of Inhumanism.

## THE WALKING WOMEN

Some of the most apparent similarities between Jeffers’s “The Loving Shepherdess” and Austin’s “The Walking Woman” are the shared details of location, character, and theme. Both Jeffers’s narrative poem and Austin’s short story feature dispossessed women who wander remote areas of California. Austin’s walking woman roams the San Joaquin Valley, while Jeffers’s walking woman moves north along the coast then into the Carmel and Salinas Valleys before dying in the San Joaquin Valley. The walking women of Jeffers and Austin also bear the same last name: Walker. Clare Walker’s name befits her nun-like poverty and self-renunciation, while Austin’s character has lost her given name in her years of wandering and is called Mrs. Walker by the local people. At different points in their lives, both Walkers are shepherdesses: Mrs. Walker discovers a new life while rescuing a flock of sheep, and Clare Walker loses her life in a futile effort to protect her sheep. “The Loving Shepherdess” and “The Walk-

ing Woman” also share a similar narrative structure, for both the story and the poem take place after the significant action has occurred; the traumatic events that turned each woman out of society are recounted when the wandering woman meets in the wilderness a sympathetic interlocutor willing to hear her life story. From each woman’s story emerges an examination of the role of nurturing in the hostile natural habitats in which the walking women learn to survive. For example, images of failed motherhood are central to both works: Mrs. Walker has had a baby and lost it, while Clare is pregnant and knows that neither she nor the baby will survive the fruitless labor. In both works, however, human nurturing and human loss are diminished and subsumed by the austere beauty and indifferent cycles of the natural environment.

Despite these similarities, there are some significant differences between Austin’s “The Walking Woman” and Jeffers’s “The Loving Shepherdess.” The most obvious difference is that of genre: “The Walking Woman” is a short story in the realist tradition with a focus on the social realities that women face; “The Loving Shepherdess” is a poem whose realistic details and narrative easily obscure its symbolic structure.<sup>1</sup> Although Clare Walker is Jeffers’s most realistic and believable character, she is still more representative of archetypal and natural forces than she is of social forces.<sup>2</sup> Another notable difference is that Austin’s nameless Walking Woman is portrayed as an independent, willful woman—a proto-feminist—, while Clare Walker is utterly passive, meek, and self-sacrificing. The differences in character are part of the separate thrusts of the works. Austin’s “The Walking Woman” is about the consolidation of a woman’s ego, the *discovery* of the self via a close interaction with nature. Jeffers’s “The Loving Shepherdess” is about the loss of the ego, the *shattering* of the self via a close interaction with nature. These significant differences are in their very opposition part of the dialogue carried on between these two works.

## THE WALKING WOMEN AND THEIR BIOREGIONS

One of the most pervasive similarities between Jeffers’s poem and Austin’s story is the way in which both works portray the landscape and the way the walking women interact with it. Each narrative portrays its bioregion—a geographical area unified by landscape, climate, vegetation, and animal life—as an essential part of the narrative action. Therefore, each walking woman acts as an interpreter of the bioregion she traverses. The bodies of the walking women, then, become consistent with the respective bioregions to the point at which each woman becomes a figure for some aspect of nature itself.

Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman” is about a semi-fictional woman who has lost her own name in her solitary walks through the California desert from

the lower San Joaquin Valley to the Mojave, from Tule Lake to the Little Antelope Valley. Austin introduces her Walking Woman as a force of nature, a mysterious presence so completely consistent with the desert that this nameless woman can at times disappear into it:

The first time of my hearing of her was at Temblor. We had come one day between blunt, whitish bluffs rising from mirage water, with a thick pale wake of dust billowing from the wheels, all the dead wall of the foothills sliding and shimmering with heat, to learn that the Walking Woman had passed us somewhere in the dizzying dimness, going down to the Tulares on her own feet. (*Stories* 255)

This opening description immediately locates the story in a specific geographic region of California, and introduces the desert terrain as hostile to human life, a landscape of “dead” foothills and “shimmering” heat, the only water in the form of mirages. And in the midst of the Chaos-like landscape of unformed dust, haze, and “dizzying dimness,” a woman can walk without being seen. This, however, is the vision of the desert as seen from the safe confines of a stage coach, the single connection between remote towns that kicks up all the dust that blocks out a true appreciation of the desert. An occupant of that stage coach, the narrator of the story, is fascinated by this mysterious woman who can traverse such hostile terrain, and the story recounts her efforts to know and understand the Walking Woman and the desert places she wanders.

The mystery behind the Walking Woman resides in what she does: she walks across the desert, with no apparent home or destination, carrying nothing but a blanket and a black bag, occasionally keeping company with shepherds, miners, cowboys, and other marginal people. She does not have a name, but people call her “Mrs. Walker,” and the reports of her that reach town are distorted, skewed, and contradictory. The story sets up a subtle comparison between the mirage-like character of the desert, how one’s perspective of it shifts, and the mirage-like character of the Walking Woman, whose appearance also shifts according to one’s perspective. Some people see her as lame, walking with a limp, or homely, with a twisted face and body. Others say that she is handsome and straight in body and mind. The only way to get a correct vision of the Walking Woman is to meet her in the desert, which the narrator does, finding her strong and, if not handsome, at least healthy and normal looking. But she notices that the Walking Woman does have a sort of twist to her face that seems to come and go. Thus, the story highlights the difficulties of perception, especially the skewing and obscuring of the Walking Woman and the desert she epitomizes, while emphasizing the accuracy of vision that the Walking Woman has attained.

As Austin demonstrates in *The Land of Little Rain*, “seeing” desert places requires a fundamental shift of perspective and an awareness of how the desert defines its own boundaries by the shape of the land, the slopes which determine patterns of wind and water flow and, thus, the placement of seasonal lakes and plants. The shape of the land, its seasons, and its sparse water-holes determine the movements of animals and their habits. As a wanderer in the desert, the Walking Woman survives by not imposing assumptions upon the desert, but by moving according to its own rhythms of wind, water, and weather like a migratory animal. Thus, she comes to know the region better than anyone, for she is an authority on its history—natural and human—and her knowledge “about trails and water-holes was as reliable as an Indian’s” (*Stories* 257). The story gives her credit for knowing the truth about remote and incredible incidents, the truth about the wild creatures and wild places. On foot in the desert, the Walking Woman gains an intimacy with the land and an accuracy of vision that belies the mirage-like obscurity and skewing of the perceptions of society.

Robinson Jeffers’s Clare Walker also demonstrates the limitations of human society. The poem opens with a description of the utterly meek Clare being tormented by a group of cruel school children who mock Clare’s poverty, her outlaw status, and her gentleness toward her small flock of sheep. Like Austin’s Walking Woman, the true reasons for Clare’s wandering remain a mystery, but it is clear that she finds solace within the beauty of the sea pastures and redwood forests that she passes through. Walking with her staff of rosy madrone wood, Clare comes to represent the bioregion itself, one mapped not by geographers but by Clare’s almost instinctual wandering.<sup>3</sup> In her movement north from her home somewhere south of Big Sur, along the coast to the Carmel River, then northeast to the San Joaquin River, Clare crosses and unites Jeffers’s literary landscape and demonstrates its organic cohesiveness. While Jeffers’s earlier long narrative poems describe one or two limited areas in great detail, Clare’s migration covers all of Jeffers Country and allows him to review and link these places together. More than any other poem, he focuses on the relation of place to place and the minute details of the bioregion, such as the names of the weeds that the sheep eat and the wildflowers:

. . . I long for that place  
Like someone thinking of water in deserts. Sometimes we hear the sea’s thunder, far down the deep  
gorge.  
The darkness under the trees in spring is starry with flowers, with redwood sorrel, colt’s foot, wakerobin,  
The slender-stemmed pale yellow violets,  
And Solomon’s-seal that makes intense islands of fragrance . . . (*CP* 2: 102–03)

Despite the beauty of this pastoral description, Jeffers’s poem reveals that the coastal bioregion is a harsh and austere one.

In contrast to Austin's *Walking Woman*, who seems perfectly comfortable walking about the blazing hot desert, Jeffers realistically portrays Clare's suffering during her year-long exposure to the bare elements of nature. As she walks on and loses her beloved sheep one by one, she also loses her shoes, the ragged dress she wears under an old cape, and the remnants of her sanity. Winter storms are coming up the coast, and the late autumn grass, dried over the hot summer, leaves little sustenance for her sheep. When the last ewe giving milk goes dry, Clare loses her only reliable source of nourishment. Yet despite her misery in the rain and wind, her hunger and anxiety for her sheep, Clare's journey involves an intensely joyful connection with the land and its wildlife. Living entirely out of doors, bathing in and drinking from streams, Clare experiences moments of ecstasy in the beauty of her natural surroundings. Her moods seem intimately connected with the variable weather of the coast ranges, changing from sunny joy to unexplained weeping as the fall weather changes from sun to rain. In her simplicity and beauty, she seems to be a fertility goddess, one associated with the fall rains which follow Clare north up the coast. However, Clare is a failed fertility goddess. Not only is she incapable of sustaining her diminishing flock, but the rains she seems to bring come too late to renew the burnt grasses.

## THE AESTHETICS OF RELINQUISHMENT

The way in which both Jeffers's *Clare Walker* and Austin's *Walking Woman* interact with their respective bioregions participates in what Lawrence Buell calls "the aesthetics of relinquishment." Buell describes two types of relinquishment within the environmental imagination. The first type is a "voluntary simplicity" of relinquishing material possessions for a closer union with the natural world (144–45). Both "The *Walking Woman*" and "The *Loving Shepherdess*" are narratives of loss which feature this type of relinquishment, but Austin's story in particular explores this type of voluntary simplicity, for "The *Walking Woman*" mediates between a woman's identification with nature and her urgent need for individual autonomy in a world where it is frequently denied her. The second type of relinquishment is "more radical . . . to give up individual autonomy itself, to forgo the illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one's environment" (Buell 144). "The *Loving Shepherdess*," in describing the life and death of *Clare Walker*, imagines what such a radical self-relinquishment would be like. In both Austin's story and Jeffers's poem, relinquishment in the form of profound loss leads to greater awareness of the natural environment and humanity's place within it.

In "The *Walking Woman*" and in her other stories, Austin asserts that relinquishment is necessary for survival in the desert, for the desert strips away the inessential and leaves behind in its survivors a type of purity. During her desert walks, then, the *Walking Woman* loses her name, any home she had, and most of her material possessions. She also gains invaluable freedom by losing the conventions of society and its confining feminine role. The *Walking Woman* further escapes the confinement of the conventional female role by gaining, and eventually losing, what she considers the three essentials of a happy life: meaningful work, love, and a child. The *Walking Woman* discovers these essentials during a sandstorm when she helps a shepherd save his flock. The sandstorm changes the *Walking Woman*, for by learning to move within its blinding power, she discovers her abilities as an individual rather than as a lady who must be protected. The *Walking Woman*'s response to the sandstorm is the paradoxical key to Austin's perspective of humanity's relation to a bioregion. The *Walking Woman* surrenders to the force of the storm, but also resists it by refusing to let it take her life or the lives of the sheep. In a way, the storm gives the *Walking Woman* a new life by bringing her to the edge of survival, what Austin describes elsewhere as the "bare core of things." The *Walking Woman*, then, in surviving the sandstorm, is shaped by it. She finds her true humanity by her combined surrender and resistance to natural forces, a humanity open to love and nurturing which the *Walking Woman* discovers in helping the shepherd—a complete stranger—and then falling in love with him and having a child with him.<sup>4</sup> Yet the story rejects mating and reproduction as a woman's sole role, for the baby dies, the shepherd moves off with his flock, and the *Walking Woman* remains alone in the desert. Although she has lost the most treasured things in her life, the *Walking Woman* is content with once-having-had and seems to live her life without normal human desires for companionship or possessions. Like the desert she has come to love, the *Walking Woman* is remote, frequently inaccessible, and not defined by man.

Like "The *Walking Woman*," Jeffers's "The *Loving Shepherdess*" is a narrative of relinquishment, only with a more profound process of loss. Clare's troubles begin when the naive and motherless teenager becomes pregnant and her boyfriend shoots her father in an argument. The father dies, the boyfriend flees, and Clare's pregnancy ends in miscarriage. The miscarriage reveals that Clare's pelvis is deformed so that childbirth would kill her and the baby. The narrative suggests that a similar defect killed Clare's own mother. As both mother and father are dead, Clare inherits her family's sheep farm on the coast, which she also loses. A spring storm wrecks a ship near Clare's home, and a horde of desperate shipwrecked people take over the farm and begin to kill Clare's sheep for food. Because she loves the sheep, Clare leads the flock away, abandoning her farm and spending the summer in a truly pastoral existence. The problem is that Clare becomes pregnant again. Convinced that she will die when the baby



is due in April, she begins an unexplained journey north as if that direction will save her, her baby, and her sheep. Yet, she projects her fear for herself onto fear for her sheep, paranoid that the shipwreck people will pursue her north into central California's sparsely settled coast ranges to eat her sheep, metaphorically gobbling up the last of California's unenclosed spaces and its pastoral heritage. The involuntary losses that set Clare in motion are followed by Clare's voluntary self-sacrifice and desire to give away the few remaining possessions she has, including the meager scraps of food she is given. Self-sacrifice becomes a mania for Clare: she wants to sacrifice her self for her sheep, her body for the sexual comfort of strange men, her life for the baby that cannot be born. All Clare's efforts end in loss, and Jeffers addresses her directly as a figure for his literary landscape at the "continent's end," a figure for the bedraggled, abject end of humanity,

Walking with numbed and cut feet  
Along the last ridge of migration  
On the last coast above the not-to-be-colonized  
Ocean, across the streams of the people  
Drawing a faint pilgrimage  
As if you were drawing a line at the end of the world . . . (CP 2: 74)

While "The Loving Shepherdess" is framed by the history of land-use in California and Clare's psychological response to her losses, the focus of the poem is a detailed examination of the experience of losing oneself in the wilderness and dissolving the artificial boundaries that humans erect between themselves and their environment.

## LOST BORDERS AND RELINQUISHED BOUNDARIES

Mary Austin's *Walking Woman* and Robinson Jeffers's *Clare Walker* are outside of social boundaries, living a marginalized or outcast life. Yet the social dispossession of these walking women highlights the ways in which the land upon which they walk is bounded. "The Walking Woman" concerns itself with property and boundaries and brings to conclusion a book organized around the idea of man-made boundaries imposed upon what cannot be bounded. As a feminist, Austin saw a correspondence between the bounding of nature as property and the bounding of women as property. Thus, the *Walking Woman's* unsettled wandering and personal freedom correspond to the desert's unbounded and unowned expanse:

A *Walking Woman* is the precise opposite of a confined woman; the endless mobility—not an escape journey, but simply endless mobility—is a powerful symbolic challenge to the enforced physical restriction of women at a moment in history when they had only recently worn clothes designed to suggest that they "glided" rather than walked on two feet. (Jaycox 9)

Throughout her works and especially in "The Walking Woman," Austin pits society with its boundaries and conventions against the boundless, convention-defying desert. The *Walking Woman* began her solitary walks through the desert after an illness brought on by the strain of caring for a sick relative. The story implicitly contrasts the confining, domestic space of the sick-room to the wide-open spaces of the desert. The irony is that the sick-room, which is supposed to be a place of feminine nurturing and healing, becomes a place that causes sickness, while the desert, which is supposed to be deadly—no place for a lady—becomes the location of healing. The arid vitality of the desert and its resistance to boundaries give the *Walking Woman* her health and her sense of self.

"The Walking Woman" ends with a validation of the Self that the *Walking Woman* has found in her desert travels. Watching her saunter off into the desert like a Western hero, the narrator notices that, "She had a queer, sidelong gait, as if in fact she had a twist all through her. Recollecting suddenly that people called her lame, I ran down to the open place below the spring where she had passed. There in the bare, hot sand the track of her two feet bore evenly and white" (*Stories* 262). These straight and even footsteps end the story and the book *Lost Borders*, a type of validation of the *Walking Woman's* path, her chosen way of life. As tracks, they reinforce her presence and her reality, but these tracks in the sand also emphasize the ephemeral nature of her migratory existence. The *Walking Woman*, because she does not settle anywhere, does not permanently mark the desert any more than a mirage. She stands for the antithesis of settlement, domestication, and the forms of property they entail. Through her journeys and her migratory life, the *Walking Woman* provides a summation for Austin's efforts to write the desert, acting as a model of female independence and a symbol of the power of the desert—not as in Austin's usual portrayal of the desert's power to kill, but its power to possess those who love it and to resist all attempts to be possessed.

Possession of the land is also a major theme in Jeffers's "The Loving Shepherdess," which demonstrates the subdivision of the land, its appropriation and re-articulation by people who have little love for or knowledge of the bioregion they dwell within. The poem highlights the contrast between *Clare Walker's* impoverished generosity and the greediness of the ranchers and other landowners she encounters. She must seek good pasture for her sheep, but is barred or chased off any land grazed by cattle. She encounters one large and

beautiful ranch which will be sold and subdivided by the greedy sons of the dying rancher. In another scene, almost Dickensian, she stands out in a cold rain, feverish with illness and hunger, and spies through the window of an isolated house while a family sits in physical comfort but emotional despair, hating each other. They chase Clare away. She also stops at the fictional ranches and abandoned farmhouses that were the scenes of disaster from Jeffers's earlier works. Houses in Jeffers frequently signify the confined space of human entanglements, the location of tragedy. A wanderer in the wilderness, Clare seeks to escape the house of negative human desires and disaster—her father's house—and turns out to find a new home in all of nature. Yet her access to unenclosed spaces is jeopardized by the rampant so-called "development" which concerned Jeffers at the time he was writing "The Loving Shepherdess." In a letter dated April 1929, Jeffers writes to Arthur Davison Ficke, "Mal Paso Canyon . . . has just been subdivided by a development company. The devils . . . The ranch at Point Sur, that I took liberties with in last year's book, has lately been bought by some wealthy person who intends to breed polo-ponies there. Indeed most of the ranches about here are being bought by wealthy people for horse-breeding—which is certainly more decent than subdivisions . . ." (*SL* 148). Like Clare, the California coast is entirely giving, available to everyone, and undone by its utter beauty and desirability.

"The Loving Shepherdess" describes Clare Walker's resistance to the borders of property, but the poem is more concerned with exploring the breakdown of personal and bodily boundaries. Just as Jeffers focuses on the physical details of the bioregion, he focuses on the body of Clare, her coloring and leanness, her nakedness as she walks about semi-nude and bathes out of doors.<sup>5</sup> The remarkable physicality of Clare highlights her peculiar mental state, indeed her saintliness, by emphasizing how she perceives no boundaries between herself and others and, being boundariless, loves all people and all creatures. For Clare, love is a physical thing, and she loves all things in a physical way. Thus, when she gives her body to any man who desires sexual comfort, she engages in a strangely abject but sin-free sacrament of physical communion, and, as Herbie Butterfield adds, sacrifice:

. . . Clare's generous promiscuity is but a partial expression of a larger vision that extends beyond the human to embrace all beings, all things, all deeds even . . . Within such a comprehensive pantheism, her individual body might readily be sacrificed, given away, or literally incorporated elsewhere. (204)

Indeed, Clare's first experience of feeling the boundaries between herself and nature vanish was during her first orgasm:

["]One morning of great white clouds gliding from the sea  
When I was with Charlie in the hollow near the madrones, I felt a pleasure like a sweet fire . . .  
.....  
The clouds were as bright as stars and I could feel them . . . ["]  
"Through the shut lids of my eyes while the sweet fire  
Poured through my body: I knew that some dreadful pain would pay for such joy.["] (*CP* 2: 84–85)

Although Clare believes "[t]hat all our pain comes from restraint of love" (*CP* 2: 88), she knows that the pleasure of physical communion, the ecstasy of having no boundaries, will result in a pain she cannot perceive, the absolute unboundedness of death.

Although Clare fears death and tries to prevent it from taking away her beloved sheep, she also seems to desire death in the same way that she desires physical communion with people, animals, and the entire natural world. The intensity of Clare's desire for physical communion with animals is demonstrated by her profession of love for a hawk: "There was one of those great owly hawks / That soar for hours, turning and turning below me along the bottom of the slope: I so loved it / I thought if it were hungry I'd give it my hand for meat" (*CP* 2: 89). This passage emphasizes Clare's tremendous empathy, but it also demonstrates Clare's subconscious desire for self-sacrifice, for a communion with death itself. The hawk in this poem, as in many of Jeffers's poems, represents the death that swoops down unexpectedly and carries off its prey, as in the scene in which Clare witnesses a hawk attacking a heron. When she sees the heron chased into the woods by the hawk, Clare is truly terrified and cries, "Oh what can save him, can save him?" (*CP* 2: 62). Because Clare has lost her sense of personal boundaries, she cannot distinguish between the fear she feels for the heron's death and fear of her own approaching death that hawk and heron foreshadow.

Yet the creature she most identifies with is one that is also on a journey to death, a salmon migrating back to its spawning pool to reproduce and die:

Far up the Carmel Valley  
The river became a brook, she watched a salmon  
Row its worn body up-stream over the stones  
And struck by a thwart current expose the bruised  
White belly to the white of the sky, gashed with red wounds, but right itself  
And wriggle up-stream, having that within it, spirit or desire,  
Will spend all its dear flesh and all the power it has gathered, in the sweet salt pastures and fostering  
ocean,  
To find the appointed high-place and perish. Clare Walker, in a bright moment's passage of anxious feeling,  
Knowing nothing of its fate saw her own fate reflected. (*CP* 2: 104–05)

Like the salmon, Clare is impelled to keep moving by powerful and mysterious forces. Driven by instinct, the fish will tear its body to pieces to reach its spawning grounds, then die. Driven by fear and forces beyond her control, Clare mimics the salmon's self-sacrifice. As the end of pregnancy and the end of her life near, Clare begins to follow the streams. She follows the Carmel River inland, and the narrative, after a gap of a few months, picks her up along the San Joaquin River, where she dies alone. However, unlike the salmon's self-sacrifice, Clare's death will bring no continuation of life, for at the end of the poem Clare dies in a fruitless labor just as she realizes that all of her sheep have died: "In the evening, between the rapid / Summits of agony before exhaustion, she called / The sheep about her and perceived that none came" (*CP* 2: 106). Her migration, then, is pointless. In fact, Clare's entire journey is a lesson in pointlessness, the inhuman fact that there is no *telos* but death. Jeffers frequently demonstrates the non-importance of humanity, as he does here, demonstrating that Clare's excessive pity and urge to save others via self-sacrifice has no place in a world where everything is sentenced to death.

Many of Jeffers's poems celebrate death as a reunion with the earth and its biological life; death is the way in which Jeffers's characters exceed their humanness and overcome the boundary of consciousness that had separated them from the life of the earth. In "Vulture," for example, to be eaten and digested by a vulture is a joyous communion: "To be eaten by that beak and become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes— / What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment; What a life after death" (*CP* 3: 462). "The Loving Shepherdess," however, withholds that comforting thought of communion with nature and emphasizes finality and fruitlessness instead. Throughout her journey, Clare had sought to deny boundaries or overcome the physical boundaries of the body through an ecstatic (but transient) union. Yet at the moment of her death, Clare (and the reader) come to the sad truth of our fundamental separation from others, a profound existential loneliness that defines the human condition. Of course, this sense of separation is a psychological one, as Jeffers asserts throughout his poetry, for humanity is not separate from nature except through a type of self-awareness that focuses too much on the human mind. What Clare (or perhaps the reader) realizes at the moment of her death when her beloved sheep fail to appear, is that she has been living a delusion, that all of her efforts to cheat death through love and nurturing have failed. Even though Clare is virtually egoless in her giving and abjection, she is in fact building her ego through these very things. In fact, she extends her ego by breaking down the barriers between herself and others. But the clarity that arrives when she realizes her sheep are all gone is the final shattering of that communal ego. Although Clare has at last broken through what may be called the borders of consciousness, her death brings no resurrection of humanity's hopes.

## INHUMANISM AND NURTURING

The stories in Mary Austin's book *Lost Borders* describe the way in which a place that defies human attempts at delineation, confinement, and settlement causes "the borders of conscience [to] break down" (*Stories* 156). These borders of conscience include the petty laws of social custom as well as the sublimely terrifying confrontation with the desert's indifference to mankind, for as Austin writes, "Of all its inhabitants it has the least concern for man" (*Stories* 45). Here, where Austin's brand of regionalism intersects with her rejection of anthropocentrism, is where the similarities between her and Jeffers are most pronounced.

In 1932 Mary Austin wrote a brief article, "Regionalism in American Fiction," articulating the primacy of the bioregion in her fiction and arguing for a more critical notion of what literary regionalism means: "The first of the indispensable conditions [of a true literary regionalism] is that the region must enter constructively into the story, as another character, as the instigator of plot. A natural scene can never be safely assumed to be the region of the story when it is used merely as a back drop" ("Regionalism" 105).

While Austin is considering here the role of the bioregion only within fiction, her comments parallel exactly the role of the bioregion within Jeffers's poetry: "Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees / Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters" (*CP* 3: 484). Jeffers describes how his poetry

... grows rather intimately from the rock of this coast. Someone said to me lately that it is not possible to be quite sane here, many others feel a hostility of the region to common human life. Immigration overpowers a place, at least for awhile, but where the coast is thinly peopled it seems really to have a mood that both excites and perverts its people. (*SL* 68)

Austin agrees, stating that "there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment" ("Regionalism" 97). For both Austin and Jeffers, people do not possess the land; the land possesses people.

Austin had been writing this radical regionalism as early as her 1903 *Land of Little Rain*, in which she seeks to capture the human attitude that the southwestern desert breeds,

... a certain indifference, blankness, emptiness if you will ... no bread-envy, no brother-fervor. Western writers have not sensed it yet; they smack the savor of lawlessness too much upon their tongues, but you have these to wit-

ness it is not mean-spiritedness. It is pure Greek in that it represents the courage to sheer off what is not worth while. Beyond that it endures without sniveling, renounces without self-pity, fears no death, rates itself not too great in the scheme of things; so do beasts, so did St Jerome in the desert, so also in the elder day did gods. Life, its performance, cessation, is no new thing to gape and wonder at. (*Stories* 71–72)

The attitude expressed here is what Jeffers would describe forty-five years later as Inhumanism.<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasize, however, that Austin's "inhumanism" is not the same as Jeffers's. Jeffers's art seeks to demonstrate the ontological non-significance of humanity by shifting attention to the cycles of the natural world; Austin's art focuses on how one becomes *more* human (in the sense of becoming more humane, less self-centered, less caught up in social custom) by losing some of that "humanity" via a life-threatening encounter with the natural world. Thus, Austin's fictional characters enact real human behavior and real human conflicts, while Jeffers's characters represent natural and unconscious forces that act upon humanity; Austin's emphasis is social and communal, while Jeffers's is symbolic and archetypal.

Regardless of the differences and similarities in their "inhuman" attitudes toward the human position within the natural world, Austin's inhumanism most likely did not inspire Jeffers's Inhumanism, though perhaps gave it more depth. I believe that, for both writers, this attitude came directly from keen observation of and love for their respective bioregions. Indeed, Austin herself, in describing how little birds seeking winter shelter in mountain ravines routinely starve, admonishes her reader, "you are not to pity them. You of the house habit can hardly understand the sense of the hills. No doubt the labor of being comfortable gives you an exaggerated opinion of yourself, an exaggerated pain to be set aside. Whether the wild things understand it or not they adapt themselves to its processes with the greater ease" (*Stories* 109). For Austin, understanding nature requires a certain detachment from human emotion and the importance of one's own life. Like Jeffers, Austin locates pity within anthropocentrism and views it as a hindrance to a clear sense of the processes of nature. Both writers arouse our pity for our fellow creatures, then purge it via a tragic confrontation with the inhuman indifference of the natural world.

The central theme of Jeffers's "The Loving Shepherdess" is also the idea of pity. What Jeffers explores in "The Loving Shepherdess" is the paradox of pity, the way in which it both ennoble humanity and degrades our abilities to clearly perceive, understand, and accept the ways of nature. Pity becomes a form of *hubris*, the tragic yet noble flaw of Clare Walker, the too-loving shepherdess. While the poem demonstrates that empathy is an ennobling human virtue that seems to come spontaneously to people who work closely with nature, the poem also demonstrates the limits of pity and the fact that even human empathy has

no final place in the scheme of things. Thus, the poem traces the tensions between the spontaneous instincts of pity, empathy, and nurturing and the realization that the universe is ultimately indifferent to these very ennobling virtues. This tension is most evident in the mystical vision shared by Onorio Vasquez and Clare, a vision interpreted by Onorio as the primal indifference of the universe and by Clare as the primal necessity of nurturing within that same universe.

In his vision, Onorio sees a single small point of light surrounded by blackness, which he interprets as the beginning of the universe, the eye of God. Here, Onorio's vision corresponds with Jeffers's Inhuman vision of the universe. But then, unable to understand his vision fully, this eye of the universal God becomes the mystic's own eye reflected, a solipsistic and empty universe. Onorio revels in the absolute fact of the dissolution of everything. The fact that all things come from one being and return to it gives him an inhuman solace. Onorio's vision reveals a universe absolutely inhuman and indifferent with no space for nurturing.

Clare has the same vision, but she interprets it differently:

I did have a strange dream. I went out across the starlight  
Knocking through flight after flight of the shiny balls  
And got so far away that the sun and the great earth  
And beautiful moon and all the stars were blended  
Into one tiny light, Oh terribly little,  
The flame of a pitiful little candle blown over  
In the wind of darkness, in the fear of the night. It was so tiny  
I wanted to be its comfort  
And hold it and rock it on my breast. One wee flicker  
In all the wild dark. (*CP* 2: 99)

While all the stars of the universe contract into one solipsistic eye for Onorio, for Clare the stars contract into one precious flicker of life. The existence of life, not its dissolution, excites Clare. Although her interpretation of the vision is less intellectual than Onorio's, it is more profound in that Clare understands the preciousness of life, the fact that it exists at all, and her urge to protect and preserve that flicker of light puts Onorio's abstracted mystical detachment to shame. Onorio Vasquez has gone too far: he has abstracted himself from the physical world. Further, his way of mysticism is emotionally very easy, since everything is reducible to one ultimate truth. Clare's way, though foolish, irrational, and impossible, is noble. While she does not have Onorio's intellect and is utterly incapable of abstraction, her pity and her love for all living things engages her profoundly with life.<sup>7</sup> While Onorio represents the detached almost mystical ability to accept the harsh fact of dissolution as necessity, Clare

reveals the hidden, empathetic core of that same Inhumanism, the pity that must always be cherished but set aside.

Clare's mystical vision also demonstrates how Clare, in her saintly excess of pity and generosity and in her communion with the bioregion and its creatures, becomes more than human. When Onorio Vasquez counsels Clare to get an abortion to save her own life, Clare responds that her never-to-be-born baby is living in a golden world of its own: ". . . I am its world and the sky around it, its loving God. It is having the prime and perfect of life, / The nine months that are better than the ninety years. I'd not steal one of its days to save my life" (*CP* 2: 94). In her utter selflessness, Clare sees herself as a type of wandering planet supporting life. Her nine months of carrying life correspond to the billions of years that Earth will carry its biological life, only to be extinguished at last. Even though the evolutionary existence of life is frequently harsh—the side of life that Jeffers tends to portray—nurturing is equally important, an evolutionary strategy employed by a multitude of creatures via symbiosis and the rearing of offspring. Clare represents this spirit of nurturing on planet Earth, and in her mystical vision she voices the nobility and importance of the urge to nurture. In her visitation to Jeffers Country, Clare Walker allows Jeffers to re-evaluate an aspect of nature he often overlooks: the intense and spontaneous nurturing qualities of nature that co-exist and thrive within the harshness of nature, the pointless persistence of life despite the inevitability of extinction.

## NURTURING AND FEMININITY: CONFRONTING THE FEMININE TRADITION OF LITERARY REGIONALISM

For Jeffers, nurturing is part of nature's "excess"—"the great humaneness at the heart of things"—, a beautiful extension of the basic processes of life, which seems to have only the indifferent cycles of dissolution and rebirth at its core ("The Excesses of God," *CP* 1: 4). As Mark Mitchell notes in his discussion of "The Excesses of God," Jeffers associates the excess of nature with its "feminine" qualities (119–20). Jeffers emphasizes, however, that our vision of nature (always filtered through projections of human gender onto the non-human) prevents us from understanding that this "excess" of nature, the "high superfluosity" of beauty, is not extraneous in the sense of being unnecessary or merely additional, but is truly "at the heart of things" ("The Excesses of God," *CP* 1: 4). The "feminine" qualities of nature, then, are perceived as an excess or a superfluosity because they exceed our androcentric understanding.

Like Jeffers, Mary Austin refutes the notion that the feminine is an "excess" and locates a feminine drive for nurturing at the core of existence. In Austin's

time, femaleness was associated with an excess within existence, and women were additional, peripheral, not quite necessary, and were, moreover, expected to reify their status as excess through a process of self-decoration and the accumulation of objects and social rules of propriety. Mary Austin, however, rewrites this notion in her desert stories by demonstrating what is left after the desert burns off the excess trappings of civilization, eliminating by force whatever is unneeded, decorative, or a hindrance. Her female characters, especially, are transformed by the desert, reduced to an essential femaleness after the excess fluff of societal conventions has been burned off by desert necessity. Austin goes so far to gender the desert female in order to demonstrate that a woman can be both beautiful and cruel, nurturing and heartlessly indifferent (*Stories* 159–60).

The desert represents the forsaking of so-called civilization, as well as an austere purity that forces Austin's desert women—usually betrayed and abandoned by men—to "come very near to the bare core of things" (*Stories* 93). At this point, survival depends upon what Austin calls "mother wit," the deepest instinct which resides in all female creatures, an intelligence for nurturing life under the harshest conditions. What may seem contradictory, but which Austin stresses is not, is the complicity between harshness and nurturing within nature. The keenness of "mother wit" is in fact honed on a life lived "very near to the bare core of things," a life stripped of all but the most basic necessities and dependent on the meager offerings of a harsh bioregion. For Austin, nurturing is inseparable from the harshest functions of evolution, for "mother wit" is only revealed at the bare core of existence.

Both Jeffers and Austin probe the role of nurturing within the seemingly cruel processes of nature, and both gender this capacity as feminine. Unlike Austin, however, Jeffers seems not to believe in gendered "essences" within humanity or nature.<sup>8</sup> Austin believes in a feminine essence within women, female creatures, and all of nature. Thus, her "nature writing" is inseparable from her feminist writing in that both seek to enhance the position of the feminine within human society. Yet, Austin also seeks to reshape what the "feminine" means; thus, Austin's portraits of the feminine desert and tough heroines emphasize a femininity that is as vital, resilient, and resourceful as life itself. In portraying certain attitudes as "masculine," Austin focuses on self-interested greed, lust, brutality, and the desire to have ultimate power over women and nature. As in many of her stories, "The Walking Woman" demonstrates the parallels between women and land as property, as valued (or rather devalued) for the wrong reasons by conventional society.

Likewise, Jeffers sees parallels between the social conditions of women and humanity's abuse of the planet. Mark Mitchell has pointed out that Jeffers's Inhumanist effort to shift attention from "man" to "not-man" includes women in the "not-man" category (117–18). Indeed, Jeffers's female characters repre-

sent natural forces—such as sexuality, death, and regeneration through violent action—that are misunderstood, abused, or severely bounded by “man.” And his male characters frequently represent the laws of patriarchy that in Jeffers’s poetry are always shattered by natural facts. Thus, in “The Loving Shepherdess,” the tragedy that sends Clare Walker wandering is triggered by an argument between two men who have property claims on her: her father and the father of the child she is carrying. After Clare loses her father, her boyfriend, and her unborn baby, Clare decides that she does not belong to one person, and her deliberate promiscuity reinforces her excess, her body as something outside of the law.<sup>9</sup> Like many of Jeffers’s heroines, Clare’s feminine sexuality—sensuous, pleasurable, non-reproductive—is opposed to the law of the father as symbolized by houses and the patriarchal families they contain. In most of Jeffers’s narrative poems, the house ends up destroyed by the uncontrollable excess of feminine sexuality and the natural forces it represents.<sup>10</sup>

By creating a character like Clare Walker, Jeffers takes on some of the concerns of Mary Austin and her feminine literary tradition of writing nature: women’s causes, the distribution of property, the value of nurturing. He also features ways in which women share the social position of the natural world as something to be exploited. And he features a woman’s frank sexual desire as something beautiful. But Clare’s excessive pity and generosity makes her almost a parody of the “natural woman” featured in works by Mary Austin and Sarah Orne Jewett. Indeed, Clare’s attention to her flock, while sometimes touching, becomes a parody of over-attention to the sometimes-petty problems of the human “flock.”<sup>11</sup> For Jeffers, the main problem with the feminine literary tradition is that in those narratives nature is always secondary to the progressive social concerns of the authors. Jeffers, however, wants to radically “dehumanize” humanity’s perception of the natural world and the universe. Despite the provocative social problems that “The Loving Shepherdess” reveals and despite the reader’s attraction to the provocative Clare Walker, the central fact of “The Loving Shepherdess” is that human concerns are peripheral.<sup>12</sup>

Jeffers’s emblem for this inhuman vision is, of course, the hawk. In contrast, Mary Austin, following the example of Sarah Orne Jewett, chooses a different bird—the heron—as emblem for the image of women allied with nature and the concept of the potential for a harmonious and fair human society that has learned to live within its natural environment. Austin uses the heron in the last story of *The Land of Little Rain*, a description of a small California town that has transformed its arid bioregion into an oasis, a humble place where communal nurturing and harmony are key. Austin claims this town is a real place, but refuses to reveal its location: “Where it lies, how to come at it, you will not get from me; rather would I show you the heron’s nest in the tulares” (*Stories* 143). The heron’s nest here alludes to “A White Heron,” Sarah Orne Jewett’s 1886 short story about a nature-loving girl who allies herself with the heron and

protects its nest from the gun-toting male ornithologist who wants to kill the rare bird as a prized specimen. Although the bird hunter has befriended the girl and seems an ideal husband, by protecting the heron and refusing to reveal the location of its nest, the heroine protects what is free, wild, and invaluable within herself. By alluding to this story, Austin suggests that her ideal community is, like the heron’s nest, a center of nurturing in alliance with the “feminine” natural world and against the “masculine” forces of destruction. By identifying herself with the girl who refuses to reveal the location of the heron’s nest, Austin reinforces her alliance with a certain tradition of nature writing dominated by women writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rose Terry Cooke, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Susan Cooper, Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and Celia Thaxter.<sup>13</sup> This feminine tradition asserts, as does “The Walking Woman,” an essential correspondence between women and nature on a biological level and also asserts that, on a social level, women can find freedom and self-possession through an identification and alliance with nature.

Given the importance of the heron to Austin and women’s literary regionalism, Jeffers’s use of the heron in “The Loving Shepherdess” is especially intriguing.<sup>14</sup> Here, the heron symbolizes Clare Walker, her frail grace, and her confrontation with the hawk-like death that eventually grips her within its talons. Jeffers describes Clare as a heron, “her grotesque cloak / Blown up to her shoulders, flapping like wings / About the half-nakedness of the slender body” seconds before he describes how “A heavy dark hawk balanced in the storm / And suddenly darted; the heron, the wings and long legs wavering in terror, fell, screaming, the long throat / Twisted under the body; Clare screamed in answer” (*CP* 2: 61).<sup>15</sup> In “The Loving Shepherdess,” the heron represents Clare’s beauty, grace, and solitude; the fact that the doomed heron is probably flying from its feeding grounds to its nesting area when it is attacked by the hawk also reinforces the heron as a figure for nurturing. The “dark hawk” is death, the indifferent force that shatters the individual, that cuts off—yet reinforces—the drives of renewal, life, nurturing. The struggle between the white heron and the dark hawk is also part of Jeffers’s reworking of the Christ story in “The Loving Shepherdess,” an aspect analyzed by many Jeffers scholars including Butterfield and Brophy, and the religious allegory of the poem should not be overlooked. For example, Brophy reads the “thrice-falling” heron as a symbol of Christ and a reflection of Clare’s role as an ironic Christ figure (“Afterword” 146). However, Jeffers’s symbolism is complex, layered, and multiple, and Clare’s heron can stand for the failure of saviors of all types, including those who would reform society through a nurturing communalism.

“Hawk” and “heron,” then, become interesting symbols for two strains of writing nature. The heron is the emblem of nurturing for the American tradition of women’s nature writing. The hawk is Jeffers’s symbol of the Inhuman forces of nature which shatter the individual, a figure adopted by Ted Hughes

when he imagines “Nature thinking” in the form of a roosting hawk that proclaims, “My manners are tearing off heads” (qtd in Gifford and Roberts 68). The “hawk” strain of nature writing is primarily “masculine” and favored by modern poets, while the “heron” strain is primarily “feminine” and favored by writers of realist prose fiction. “The Loving Shepherdess” seems to mediate these strains in Jeffers and respond (directly or not) to the feminine tradition by interrogating the place of nurturing and pity in a world ruled by hawks.

As in the different interpretations of the shared vision of Onorio and Clare, Jeffers enfold the concerns of the feminine tradition of literary regionalism within his harsh Inhumanism to give both more depth and complexity. As a metaphor for these two literary strains, the hawk hunts the heron in “The Loving Shepherdess,” but the reader never knows if the heron survives, for both birds disappear into the woods. Thus, Jeffers does not entirely reject the feminine tradition of literary regionalism, but he does reject its focus on the consolidation of the human ego, and in his rewriting of this tradition in “The Loving Shepherdess” reveals nature as profoundly liberating because it shatters the limitations of the human ego. Clare’s painful end shatters her delusion that self-sacrifice will protect her flock and cuts off the hope that nature will always be gentle and kind. Yet somehow the tragic realization that occurs at the end of “The Loving Shepherdess” is far more liberating—for the reader and for our idea of nature—than an ending which would allow her to merely walk off into her own desert.

## A CONCLUSION TOWARDS A BEGINNING

Despite their different treatment of similar themes, Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman” and Robinson Jeffers’s “The Loving Shepherdess” share some remarkable similarities: both are narratives of women who wander specific bioregions near California’s San Joaquin Valley; both Austin’s Walking Woman and Jeffers’s Clare Walker are sometime shepherdesses who are homeless and possessionless, sexually liberated, of questionable sanity, whose stories question the idea of man-made boundaries and demonstrate the role of nurturing within the most hostile habitats.<sup>16</sup> These similarities bring up a question about literary history: Did Mary Austin’s “The Walking Woman” inspire Robinson Jeffers’s “The Loving Shepherdess”? Jeffers never mentioned Mary Austin as an influence for any of his works, but a closer examination of the literary relationship between Austin and Jeffers suggests that Jeffers had an awareness of and interest in Austin’s work long before his initial letter to her in 1929.

Although Austin and Jeffers did not meet until 1930, they lived in the same small village at the same time: they both lived in Carmel from 1914 to 1924.

Mary Austin first came to Carmel in 1903 on a visit with George Sterling. In 1906, she bought a house there, and she, Sterling, and Jimmy Hopper formed a tight-knit trio of bohemian writers that became the nucleus of Carmel’s fledgling artist colony. However, by 1914, when Jeffers moved there, Mary Austin was travelling so frequently that she was hardly ever home. At one point, Austin and Jeffers were even next-door neighbors, and Edith Greenan’s biography of Una relates an amusing incident of their proximity. One day in 1917 when the Jefferses were living in an isolated log cabin outside Carmel village, they heard a voice intruding into their solitude. Una said the voice was “ringing through the trees, a woman’s voice, loud and threatening: ‘Blood . . . savagery rampant . . . shoot them down’” (Greenan 29). The Jefferses were “astounded and delighted by this outburst,” and the next day inquired around the village; they discovered they had heard Mary Austin practicing an anti-war speech in her backyard (Greenan 29–30). She lived just across the gulch from the Jefferses’ cabin.

Although Mary Austin and Robinson Jeffers were neighbors and shared the same circle of literary friends (including George Sterling, James Hopper, Mark Van Doren, Arthur Davison Ficke, Lincoln Steffens, Albert Bender, and, later, Mabel Dodge Luhan and her circle), we know little about their relationship as writers. We do not know how familiar Jeffers was with Austin’s writing before 1929 when he and Austin began corresponding. Letters reveal that Jeffers read at least one of Austin’s books before that time—*The American Rhythm*, first published in 1923. Other letters imply that he was much more familiar with Austin’s writing. In a 1926 letter to George Sterling, Jeffers participates in some literary gossip about Mary Austin by relaying what Jimmy Hopper has said about her: “[Hopper] thinks it pitiful that Mary abandoned her first and proper field” (SL 61). This letter suggests that Jeffers had discussed Austin’s writing with Sterling and Hopper, who believed that Austin’s “first and proper field” was the literary regionalism of her highly successful and widely admired first books: *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), *The Flock* (1905), and *Lost Borders* (1909). Jeffers’s repeating Hopper’s assessment of Austin’s talent suggests that Jeffers himself had read enough of her work to come to the same opinion. Yet whether Jeffers actually read Mary Austin’s *Lost Borders* and its final story “The Walking Woman” before he wrote “The Loving Shepherdess” is still unknown.

I find it interesting that Jeffers was drafting “The Loving Shepherdess” just as he was beginning his correspondence with Mary Austin. Although it is not clear who started the exchange of letters and books, it seems that Jeffers began their correspondence in the winter of 1928–1929 by sending Mary Austin a copy of his recently published *Cawdor*. Austin reciprocated with her 1915 *The Man Jesus* and a letter.<sup>17</sup> In his reply to this letter, Jeffers mentions that he has just finished his own portrayal of Jesus in “Dear Judas,” and he tells Austin, “I

(like thousands of others) have long admired your works and your life" (*SL* 142), a statement that presents Jeffers as a long-time reader of Austin's writing. From Una's letters to Mary Austin, it seems that both the Jefferses read her works, for Una writes in 1932 that she and Robin think *Earth Horizon* is better than anything Mary has written so far (*Literary America* 258).<sup>18</sup> This statement suggests that both Una and Robinson Jeffers were familiar with Austin's writing. Yet whether "The Walking Woman" was among the works they read aloud to each other and their children at Tor House cannot, as yet, be answered.

To conclude, the literary and social relationship between Mary Austin and Robinson Jeffers merits further study. Both writers are now receiving much critical attention; yet, still, they are rarely examined together. Mary Austin is a favorite of feminist theorists and scholars interested in literary regional prose, while Jeffers appeals primarily to poets and scholars interested in poetry. Gender and genre, once again, keep these two writers apart. Although this essay has proposed the possible impact of Austin on Robinson Jeffers, one must also consider Jeffers's impact on Mary Austin. One month after "The Loving Shepherdess" was published in *Dear Judas*, Mary Austin wrote an editorial in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in which she declared: "... I do seem to discover the great poet, a poet of Greek dimensions in Robinson Jeffers. At least I feel that no undergraduate need feel under any obligation to forego the thrill of being alive in his time" (590). In conferring this honor on Jeffers, perhaps Mary Austin recognized a literary kinship between Jeffers Country and her own Country of Lost Borders.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Brophy's argument that Jeffers's narrative poems take on a symbolic structure based on the tragic rituals of myth also applies to "The Loving Shepherdess."

<sup>2</sup> In a panel discussion on the female archetype in Jeffers, Mark Jarman argues that the most compelling aspect of Clare Walker is "the physical fact of her body" and her "depth, reality, believability" (112). While this is true, Betty Adcock is also correct in her remark in the same panel that "Jeffers characters are as much forces of nature or of fate as they are people. As such, they are larger, more bitter, more awful, more profoundly compelling than ordinary people" (134).

<sup>3</sup> See Mark Jarman's comments on the relevance of the madrone-wood staff in linking Clare to her bioregion (115).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Austin's frank discussion of women's sexuality outside of marriage is why *Lost Borders* was considered immoral. Female sexuality is another paral-

lel between Austin's Walking Woman and Jeffers's Clare Walker. The important difference is that the Walking Woman pursues free love for purposes of self-fulfillment, while Clare pursues a self-destructive promiscuity in order to enact a sacramental self-sacrifice.

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting parallel between "The Loving Shepherdess" and "The Walking Woman" is the narratives' interests in conveying the physical details of the women's bodies. "The Walking Woman" pays great attention to Mrs. Walker's face, mannerisms, voice, and style of walking, especially in determining if her body is twisted or straight.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Buell remarks that Austin is "fomenting the same doctrine of the 'hard and brutal mysticism' of the desert region that Edward Abbey later invokes to puncture armchair romanticism" (176). Abbey, of course, owes much of his "inhuman" doctrine to Jeffers.

<sup>7</sup> For a different interpretation of the shared vision of Onorio and Clare, see Brophy's "Afterword" to *Dear Judas*. Brophy sees Clare's intense desire to protect the universe as a denial of life because it is an attempt to suffocate it in the womb.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent discussion of Jeffers's attempts to avoid gendering nature, see Patrick D. Murphy, 162–63.

<sup>9</sup> Even in the poem, Clare's own body seems to acquit her from the accusation that she, not her boyfriend, killed her father. She has a miscarriage in the middle of the trial, is rushed to the hospital, and is then beyond being judged. The trial no longer has any bearing upon her life.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Austin apparently objected to the sexual content in Jeffers's poetry, for in a December 1929 letter to her, Jeffers responds, "You are right of course about the unessentialness of sex as a motive in literature" (*SL* 162).

<sup>11</sup> Brophy reads "The Loving Shepherdess" as "an ironic parable" of the human illusion of saviorism ("Afterword" 150).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffers realizes that "The Loving Shepherdess" will be easy to misinterpret, and he places within his narrative a character who misinterprets Clare and her journey. The old man who lives in the house of hateful human entanglements romanticizes Clare and wishes that property would be abolished and people could live wild and free like Clare. He is so self-absorbed that he does not notice the physical misery that such a life has exerted upon poor Clare, and for the poem he represents the type of person who wants a herd-like social movement. Clare does not represent any sort of social movement or the abolition of property or even women's rights; she represents the tension within Jeffers's own Inhumanism between turning away from humanity to face the essential indifference of the universe and retaining the sweetness of love, nurturing, and generosity.



<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of Austin's relation to what is variously called women's literary regionalism, women's environmental writing, and local color, see Marjorie Pryse, xiv–xvii, and Lawrence Buell, 44–49 and 177.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, the animals that appear in Jeffers's poems reflect the fauna of the coastal region: snowy egrets, great egrets, great blue herons, and black-crowned night herons all dwell in Jeffers Country. Jewett's heron is the great egret (*Casmerodious albus*), a large, snow white bird with a long neck and "a magnificent veil of white plumes" on its back during the breeding season (Udvardy 419). Jeffers frequently describes the herons that appear in his poems as "night-herons," which could refer to the black-crowned night heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), a smaller, greenish-gray bird with a short neck and none of the elegance of its taller cousins, or could simply function as a description of the way some type of heron flies from the shore to its nest after sunset. The heron in "The Loving Shepherdess" is most likely a great egret like Jewett's heron. Jeffers describes this heron as a long-necked "wide heron" flying with difficulty over the redwoods. "Wide" could refer to a bird with a large wingspan, as the great blue heron and great egret both have, or could refer to a bird heavy with fish. "Wide" is also homophonous with "white," suggesting a bird whose color opposes that of the "dark hawk" that hunts it. Another reason for the heron's being white is that it foreshadows Clare's death: through Una, Jeffers was familiar with the Gaelic superstition that white birds flying at night are omens of death (Greenan 31).

<sup>15</sup> A few lines earlier, Jeffers had compared Clare to the moon waning like a falling white bird: "Her look went westward to the day moon, / Faint white shot bird in her wane, the wings bent downward, falling in the clear over the ocean cloud-bank" (CP 2: 60).

<sup>16</sup> One reason for the similarities between the lives of two characters created by two different writers is that Austin's Walking Woman and Jeffers's Clare Walker were both based on real women. "Mrs. Walker" was a woman who wandered the California desert around Bakersfield in the late nineteenth century; Mary Austin saw her in 1889 and recorded this description in her unpublished "Tejon Notebook":

Over on the Temblor we met the Walking Woman. I had heard of her. The cow-boys call her Mrs. Walker but nobody knows her name. She told one of the women at Temblor that her first name is Jenny, but she answers to Mrs. Walker. . . . They say she has just as good sense as any body, except that she is a little crazy. Mother says she looks like a woman who has had a child. (qtd in Wyatt 76)

Jeffers credits his version of a walking woman to a footnote in Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* that details the life of a seventeenth-century shepherdess

called Feckless Fannie who wandered the hills of Scotland with a dwindling flock of sheep (Butterfield 201).

<sup>17</sup> This letter is missing, but the exchange of books is mentioned in the first letter that Jeffers writes to Mary Austin (SL 142). Perhaps James Karman's work on Jeffers's collected letters will shine light on who initiated the correspondence between Austin and Jeffers and why it was initiated.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Austin, Robinson Jeffers, and Una Jeffers continued to exchange letters and books until Austin's death in 1933. Some of the letters are collected in Ridgeway's *Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers* and some are in T. M. Pearce's *Literary America*.

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## *The End of Prophecy: "The Double Axe" and the Nuclear Sublime*

Robert Zaller

*Editors' note:* This essay and the following response by James Karman were sides of a diptych presentation on "The Double Axe" at the Robinson Jeffers Association Conference, February 2000.

For Robinson Jeffers, the poet was the seer of his tribe, and poetry a species of prophecy. In part this grew out of the poet's relation to the incantatory and divinatory elements of language—for the rhythms of poetic speech, as Jeffers asserted in such poems as "Natural Music" and "Continent's End," echoed the great rhythms of natural process itself, and those tidal forces in turn encompassed the local destinies of great societies and civilizations ("The Broken Balance"; "Prescription of Painful Ends"). Prophecy was not concerned with the future as such but with the perdurable present, since all times were merely points on the arc of the great interlocking circles that constituted natural process. To prophesy was to place the present moment in relation to past and future, since particular events gained meaning only from the perspective of the whole. The prophetic function was therefore not one of prediction, but of reconciliation. The angry prophetess Tamar speaks this truth when she says that "all times are now, to-day plays on last year and the inch of our future / Made the first morning of the world" (*CP* 1: 63), as does the Cassandra who sees, though futilely, "all the wars to be" (*CP* 1: 142). It is almost a condition of prophecy in Jeffers that the witness of the future be greeted with unbelief, for too clear a vision must paralyze the will, unless, as in Tamar's case, it is a will to destruction.

Of Jeffers's prophetic heroes, it is Arthur Barclay who most deliberately conflates vision and action, for, as he asserts, "God thinks through action"; i.e., in God alone is thought and action simultaneous. The figure who contrasts with him most clearly is the humble seer Onorio Vasquez, whose visions reveal beauty but no purpose and are therefore inefficacious. The temptation of the strong prophet is, consequently, to approach the condition of Godhood, for only in so doing can the disjunction between the power to see and the power to act be

overcome. This effort is doomed to fail, as it does both in Barclay's case and in that of the Jesus of "Dear Judas," but it subserves the large tragic purposes of Jeffers's theodicy, and therefore escapes the constraints of mere hubris or pathology.

After "The Women at Point Sur" and "Dear Judas," Jeffers eschewed the figure of the prophet for nearly twenty years, or more properly assimilated it to the first-person persona he developed in the didactic shorter poems of the period before and during World War II. It was only in "The Double Axe," the poem written at the war's end and in the apparent imminence of a third and still greater war, that he sought again to incorporate the vision of prophecy in dramatic form, and created a protagonist as close to an alter ego—and at the same time to a divinized figure—as he ever permitted himself.

This figure is called by Jeffers the Inhumanist, though that appellation appears only as the title of "The Double Axe's" second half and is explained only by reference to the prose preface of the volume in which it was originally contained, and which is omitted from *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*.<sup>1</sup> In the poem itself, he is referred to generically as "the old man," as if, refusing all social identity, he owns to no given name.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, however, the closing lines of "The Double Axe" connect so seamlessly with those of "The Women at Point Sur" as to suggest a resurrected albeit deeply purged Barclay:

When the sun stood westward he turned  
 Away from the light . . .  
 . . . . .  
   After three days,  
 Having not tasted water, he was dying and he said:  
 "I want creation. The wind over the desert  
 Has turned and I will build again all that's gone down.  
 I am inexhaustible." (CP 1: 367)  
 . . . . .  
 About midnight he slept, and arose refreshed  
 In the red dawn. (CP 3: 312)

The "red dawn" of "The Inhumanist" is no ordinary sunrise, but the aftermath of the nuclear conflagration with which the poem ends. Writing at the onset of the atomic age, Jeffers was the first American poet to explore what Rob Wilson calls the nuclear sublime, although Wilson gives him no credit for it.<sup>3</sup> Unlike his successors in the genre, however, Jeffers's approach is squarely within the Puritan apocalyptic tradition, if not tied to its dogmatic assumptions.<sup>4</sup> For that tradition, the apocalypse was a foreordained event, the appointed terminus of history. No one could know certainly its day or its duration, though its coming would be announced by signs and perhaps by a final age of

terrors and wonders, a purgation before judgment. This purgation was not purely spiritual; it involved a series of actual wars with the forces of Antichrist. These events required active response from the faithful. As Jeffers had put it in "Going to Horse Flats"—and John Cotton could have put it no better and perhaps little differently—: "It is certain the world cannot be stopped nor saved. / It has changes to accomplish and must creep through agonies toward new discovery. It must, and it ought: the awful necessity / Is also the sacrificial duty" (CP 2: 542–43).

Jeffers did not of course imagine a final end to creation or even in the near term to history: nor did he conceive a judgment separate from that visited by humans on themselves.<sup>5</sup> But he did imagine a divine purpose and a divine consciousness active in the universe, even bringing it down to the level of speech in such poems as "Apology for Bad Dreams" and "At the Birth of an Age," as well as in "The Inhumanist" (CP 3: 270, 308). The long train of wars that he envisioned as having begun with those of his own time would continue,<sup>6</sup> apocalypse upon apocalypse, each a brief flaring on the surface of the planet like the novae that blazed momentarily in the heavens, all a part of the same inscrutable order. The error of his Puritan forbears, Jeffers thought, was to imagine that creation was coterminous with humankind, both beginning and ending with it: "It is not true that the word was in the beginning. Only in the long afternoon comes a little babble: and silence forever" (CP 3: 305).

Apocalyptic rhetoric had long been part of Jeffers's arsenal, but always within a limited and finite context. Barclay had spoken of the need to "scour" encrusted doctrine, and Jeffers used the figure again in "November Surf": "The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep, / Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm that prepares up the long coast / Of the future to scour more than her sea-lines: / The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more numerous, / The rivers mouth to source pure . . ." (CP 2: 159). Apocalypse, then, was purification, renewal. Nothing was permanent but God ("you Night will resume / The stars in your time"), but even the uttermost annihilation was only the prelude to new birth: "Then she will be alone, pure destruction, achieved and supreme, / Empty darkness under the death-tent wings. / She will build a nest of the swan's bones and hatch a new brood, / Hang new heavens with new birds, all be renewed" ("Night," CP 1: 115; "Shiva," CP 2: 605).

The ultimate serenity of this vision was tested by a new world war, whose horrors obsessed Jeffers far beyond 1945. In "The Inhumanist" he imagined again the death of the sun and the galaxy: "Vast is the night" (CP 3: 261). In a later section of the poem he faced the even more nightmarish vision of universal entropy, only to resuscitate the cycle with an affirmation that seems somewhere between faith and will:

He felt in his mind the vast boiling globes  
 Of the innumerable stars redden to a deadly starset; their ancient power and glory were darkened,  
 The serpent flesh of the night that flows in between them was not more cold. Nothing was perfectly cold,  
 Nothing was hot; no flow nor motion; lukewarm equality,  
 The final desert. The old man shuddered and hid his face and said,  
 "Well: God has died." He shook like an epileptic and saw the darkness glow again. Flash after flash,  
 And terrible midnight beyond midnight, endless succession, the shining towers of the universe  
 Were and were not; they leaped back and forth like goats  
 Between existence and annihilation. (*CP* 3: 293)

This passage is critical in Jeffers, for it marks his most definitive rejection of the image of cosmic heat-death predicated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, an image that had haunted the mind of his generation.<sup>7</sup> Such a "final desert" would truly represent the death of God, not the Nietzschean rejection of the tribal deity ridiculed by Jeffers in "The Inhumanist" as a mere projection of "human fears, needs, dreams, justice and love-lust" (*CP* 3: 257) but the extinction of the universal creator. This death is intolerable, however, and Jeffers, having echoed and amplified Nietzsche's famous dictum ("Well: God has died"), immediately recants his far greater blasphemy by invoking the image of eternal recurrence, of inextinguishable hope.

Yet atomic weaponry—the new physics applied—had, for Jeffers, disturbed the cosmic equation in a way that even the threat of entropy could not; it had introduced derangement, disorder. Writing in 1944 on the eve of the Normandy invasion, he could still will himself to find a kind of "ghastly beauty" in the "Enormous and doomed weight" of the Allied and Axis armies that were like the "enormous opposed presences" of mountain and ocean sprung to action ("Invasion," *CP* 3: 131–32). With Hiroshima, however, "the awful power that feeds the life of the stars ha[d] been tricked down / Into the common stews and shambles" ("Moments of Glory," *CP* 3: 198). Even if the mushroom cloud were only a "squib" beside the galaxies, it signified a Promethean transgression that had deeply troubling implications, because it was no hero that had stolen fire from the heavens but a race of pygmies projecting the shadow of its evil:

Life's norm is lost: no doubt it is put away with Plato's  
 Weights and measures in the deep mind of God,  
 To find reincarnation, after due time and their own deformities  
 Have killed the monsters: but for this moment  
 The monsters possess the world. Look: forty thousand men's labor and a navy of ships, to spring a squib  
 Over Bikini lagoon. ("What of It?," *CP* 3: 208)

The "monsters" are not the sailors themselves, dwarfed by the scene they create, nor the scientists and politicians behind them, but something sprung

from their collective efforts, a civilization run amok. Jeffers had foreseen these "monsters" in an earlier, wartime poem, "Diagram" ("you children / Not far away down the hawk's-nightmare future: you will see monsters" [*CP* 3: 120]), and although he saw too their eventual demise (and even, in "What Is Worthless" [*CP* 3: 200], some redemptive possibility in the nuclear genie), his fears very much outran his hopes. In another postwar poem, "The Inquisitors" (*CP* 3: 209–10), he pondered the question of whether a nuclear holocaust might not extinguish all planetary life, and in "The Inhumanist" God himself, entangled in his creation, is heard to cry, "I am caught. I am in the net" (*CP* 3: 270).

With these issues in mind, we can examine more closely the figure of the Inhumanist. We have noted a continuity, if not a kinship, between the Inhumanist and the figure of Barclay; but this is a Barclay stripped to essentials and purged beyond illusion. The Inhumanist camps on the ruined Gore farm, whose story is the subject of the first part of "The Double Axe"—camps, that is to say, in the ruins of narrative, for the story has no sequel, and the isolated events that befall the Inhumanist or to which he is witness, while fodder for his ruminations, remain mere fragments. Ostensibly he is a caretaker, equipped with a watchdog and the double-bladed axe that gives the poem its title, but the site he occupies has nothing to be guarded; it exists as a space of meditation, a place already scourged by fire. To invoke the title of another Jeffers poem, this is truly a place for no story, where passion has been enacted and embers alone remain. In choosing it, the Inhumanist chooses the retrospectively human; unlike the solitary protagonist of "An Artist" (*CP* 1: 390–92), who in a genuine wilderness is compelled to sculpt his monstrous titans, he no longer needs to invent what has already been told. This is a prophet who has chosen to live among the dead.

The double axe is not only the poem's reigning symbol but its co-protagonist as well. It sounds of its own accord through a full range of vocalization (screaming, barking, neighing, buzzing, yelling, and giggling) that stops just short of articulate speech, and expressively exceeds it in the way that natural force (thunder, earthquake, storm) can. It is an independent actor, coming and going of its own accord, slaying intruders, and prompting the Inhumanist's own action. The Inhumanist himself glosses its symbolic function, noting that it was a god in ancient Crete, and, like many other pagan deities, both fructifying and destructive (*CP* 3: 258). But the "two-edged sword" has a potent Christian signification as well. In Hebrews 4:12, it is the Word that divides in order to unite, and slays that it may save:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.  
 (KJV)

To the Puritans, the Word was made efficacious only through preaching, and preachers were prophets in the Old Testament sense of those who spoke with the mouth of God.<sup>8</sup> For Jeffers, words were merely tools for describing an ineffable, inhuman God beyond human speech, the “little babble” in the long afternoon of the cosmos. What “speaks” for God in “The Double Axe” is the axe itself, whose vocalizations, as acts both below and above the level of articulate speech, return the biblical metaphor of Hebrews 4:12 to its original purity. Its theme is regenerative violence, and in the midst of human carnage it suggests the divine proclivity for renewal by destruction (“you are hungry to hack down heaven and earth,” the Inhumanist tells it [CP 3: 310]). At the same time, it is associated with the “wisdom” of divine process, and the Inhumanist suggests that his own wisdom is lodged in the axehead (CP 3: 272).

The Inhumanist remains, then, a prophet, though a prophet in the wilderness whose preferred discourse is soliloquy. When he is beset by others who come to him for refuge, for wisdom, or for salvation, he sees in them not only the “transgressors” whose pride and folly have ravaged the planet but also the image of his own temptation, his will to power, and when he slays the most importunate of them with his axe, the face that turns toward him is that of his youthful self (CP 3: 301).

The prophet, then, does not dismiss humanity, but remains tied to it, and, in the poem’s last moment, he affirms solidarity with his fellows by offering shelter to a dying man.<sup>9</sup> If the human present and its foreseeable future is “a burning brazen wheel” (CP 3: 311), there is a future, and the prophet keeps faith with it. When Jeffers speculates about the entropic death of the cosmos, only to reject it in favor of a vision of eternal recurrence, he rejects as well an end to history, for human destiny has not run its course. Even atomic war will leave the race but “slightly scorched. It will slough its skin, and crawl forth / Like a serpent in spring” (CP 3: 311). The metaphor suggests both the cycle of renewal and the persistence of sin. Humanity has yet to be fully tried: God is not done with it yet.

The fulcrum of the poem, as Jeffers himself noted,<sup>10</sup> is section XLV, in which the Inhumanist, riding alone in the natural church of the mountains, hears the “crying” of “future children” in “the enormous unpeopled nave of the gorge,” and in this thronged solitude delivers the sermon that, as he believes, the present age cannot hear:

Moderate kindness

Is oil on a crying wheel: use it. Mutual help

Is necessary: use it when it is necessary.

And as to love: make love when need drives.

And as to love: love God. He is rock, earth and water, and the beasts and stars; and the night that contains them. (CP 3: 304)

Jeffers had said this before, most explicitly in “The Tower Beyond Tragedy” and “Meditation on Saviors”: excessive love (except love for the immanent God) was introverted and self-consuming, and bred the great pride that went before an apocalyptic fall. This, he believed, was the condition of his time. He saw the world wars that had marked it and the bomb that was its ultimate product as events along a continuum of apocalyptic violence that presaged the eclipse of the West. He was thus a solitary exception to the postwar triumphalism that celebrated America’s role in both wars as the victory of “democracy” over “dictatorship,” and saw in America’s atomic monopoly the providential means to contain, if not the moral right to destroy, the world’s sole surviving dictatorship, Stalinist Russia. For Jeffers, real democracy had been betrayed in favor of the “corrupting burden” of imperial power that America was now condemned to assume, and which yoked its destiny to the blood-feuds of a decadent Europe (“Historical Choice,” CP 3: 122). As an opponent of the war, however, Jeffers was a fatalist rather than a pacifist; having entered it, he felt, America had no choice but to fight to victory (“Fourth Act,” CP 3: 113–14). He ranged himself neither on the side of fascist supporters like Pound nor on that of conscientious objectors like William Everson, Robert Lowell, and William Stafford. His position was unique, and thus fulfilled the self-prophecy he had made ten years earlier in “The Great Sunset”: “To be truth-bound, the neutral / Detested by all the dreaming factions, is my errand here” (CP 2: 535).

In “Cassandra,” a shorter poem from *The Double Axe*, Jeffers predicted again the rejection of his vision; the prophet, he wrote, was “to men / And gods disgusting” (CP 3: 121). He was correct on both points. Even a sympathetic critic, Selden Rodman, accused him of sitting “in that properly inhuman stone tower of his waiting exultantly for the Bomb” (Karman 257–58), and more than forty years later Rob Wilson described him as “all too gleeful” at the prospect of atomic annihilation (60). Wilson excluded Jeffers from his treatment of poetic responses to the nuclear age, presumably on these grounds, for the admissible tropes in his discussion are shock, numbness, despair, and resistance, and Jeffers’s attempt to set the war and the bomb within the framework of apocalyptic (including his refusal to bewail their inevitable, and in ethico-religious terms, not unmerited consequences) could only appear as frivolous or bizarre from such a perspective. Rodman apparently had the same thought when he described Jeffers’s attitudes as “totally irresponsible, politically, poetically, [and] humanly” (Karman 158). It is a tribute to the bitter and uncompromising force of Jeffers’s vision that intelligent critics continue to misread his purposes to the present day, but it signifies as well their failure to recognize his place in the apocalyptic tradition of American letters.<sup>11</sup>

As Jeffers’s prophecy was misunderstood, so was his prophet. The Inhumanist is commonly supposed to have been a spokesman for the poet, if not a self-portrait *in extremis*. There is truth in this, of course—was Zarathustra not

Nietzsche?—but the Inhumanist is a thaumaturgic figure too, and even, at some points, tinctured with divinity. His axe, like Siegfried’s sword, is a magical implement, where not a divine figuration. But it represents human violence too. On one level, it symbolizes technology run amok, for Jeffers regards *techne* not as an aspect of human mastering but as a Promethean enterprise, epitomized in the sacred power of the atom that has now been “tricked down / Into the common stews and shambles” (“Moments of Glory,” *CP* 3: 198). The Inhumanist himself, who shares the sins of the “transgressors,” cannot control the axe. Weary at last of the “violences” it has brought into the world, he flings it into the sea, but it instantly comes to life again, resurfaces, and returns to its “owner”:

[I]t flew a long flashing arc, dived gannetlike  
 And breached the wave . . .  
 . . . . .  
 But presently the sea boiled,  
 The water blackened and a broad corpse came up, it was one of those eight-armed monsters, beaked and  
 carnivorous . . .  
 its bulk was all hacked and mangled, and a fury of sharks  
 Fed on its wounds. But the axe floated clear among the shark-snouts,  
 And swam like a small gray dog in the whirling surf under the gull-sky, and came to the cliff and climbed  
 it, and came  
 To the old man’s hand. (*CP* 3: 309)

The axe returns “tamely” to the Inhumanist after its act of carnage, like a faithful dog; but masterfully, too: it owns its owner, since he cannot dispose of it and it will not be separated from him. These thaumaturgic and Promethean elements (the magician whose powers eclipse him; the hero whose transgression binds him) are reenacted at a third and higher level, however. Section XXIX of the poem presents a vivid and disturbing image. The Inhumanist’s daughter, who has taken refuge with him, wakes in the middle of the night to an “angry noise”:

She found her old father  
 Working the treadle grindstone behind the house, grinding an axe, leaning the steel on the stone  
 So that it screamed, and a wild spray of sparks  
 Jettted on the black air. (*CP* 3: 282)

The girl interrupting him, the Inhumanist admits that hatred for human evil, and for the divided humanity in himself, has moved him to fury. Jeffers then drives the image to the meaning implicit in its first iteration:

He stooped over the stone, the steel screamed like a  
 horse, and the spark-spray  
 Spouted from the high hill over land and sea. It was like the glittering night last October  
 When the earth swam through a comet’s tail, and fiery serpents  
 Filled half of heaven. (*CP* 3: 282–83)

The spray of sparks that “jets” and “spouts” in the heavens clearly suggests a kind of celestial genesis. The axe blade that screams like a horse on a hill under a shower of light recalls the epiphanic scene between California and the stallion in “Roan Stallion.” The “serpents” figure the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction symbolized by the opposed blades of the double axe itself. In this densely worked image, then, the Inhumanist is a divinized figure wielding cosmic powers, while at the same time he remains a very human one venting anger and frustration at his tribe. When he wakes in the morning, he tells his daughter that she may merely have seen his “ghost,” for he has “slept like a rock.” This colloquialism is immediately turned, for Jeffers next describes “that opaque gray monster the ocean, incessantly / Gnawing his rocks” (*CP* 3: 283). The gnawing of the rocks, like the grinding of the axe, is symbolic of natural process; but if the Inhumanist himself is now by metaphorical association the subject of that process, it must be borne in mind that Jeffers’s deity participates in every created form and energy. The section ends with a gesture both of cosmic and political renunciation, as the Inhumanist declares: “I will grind no more axes” (*CP* 3: 283). It is precisely such renunciation, however, that is finally impossible on either level. God cannot cease to act; the Inhumanist cannot cease to suffer the ignominy of his human, incarnate condition.

If there is an element of the Christ in the Inhumanist’s suffering witness and a touch of Moses in the prophet who hears God’s “great virile cry” across the heavens and whose prayer is answered in God’s own voice (*CP* 3: 270, 308), the climax of “The Double Axe” occurs when the Inhumanist “becomes” God by an act of ecstatic insight that reveals to him the divine simultaneity in all things. He addresses this presence as “Dear love,” but as the moment unfolds he realizes that what he perceives is “beyond love” because it abolishes the subject/object distinction entirely. Love, then, remains as the will to abolish otherness, to experience the other as oneself. On a creaturely level this cannot be sustained without contradiction and annihilative collapse; this is the fate of the incestuous passion in the poem’s first half, whose title, “The Love and the Hate” (*CP* 3: 214–55) is fully explicated only by “The Inhumanist” itself. Divinity alone can resolve the paradox of unity and division through the cyclical alternation of cosmic creation and destruction.

Love was, therefore, a conditional value for Jeffers, at least on the human plane. As an aspiration toward the divine, it was a means of self-transcendence and even an aspect of divine actualization; as pity or narcissistic self-regard,

however, whether individual or collective, it was a calamity for the race.<sup>12</sup> In Jeffers's view, humanity suffered both from an excess of self-love and from a lack of that love which, whether expressed as aesthetic responsiveness or disinterested scientific inquiry, turned it toward divine reality. The aesthetic emotion, as Jeffers described it in "Invasion," was simultaneously a counsel of engagement with that reality and detachment from the self, but science too, as the Inhumanist asserts, is "an adoration; a kind of worship" (*CP* 3: 292), and its goal, the search for truth, was, as Jeffers said elsewhere, "better than good works . . . / Holier than innocence and *higher than* love" ("Curb Science," *CP* 3: 199; emphasis added). Love then, was finally a means; only "truth" was "an end" (*CP* 3: 199), and what truth revealed about God was earnestness and grandeur, not love. Absolute love, creation without destruction, was as impossible to divinity as human love was without hate. In the heavens this expressed itself as an Empedoclean oscillation, whether of galaxies drawn too close by gravity or predators by hunger:

The old man heard

An angry screaming in heaven and squinted upward, where two black stars  
Hunted each other in the high blue; they struck and passed,  
Wheeled and attacked again, they had great hate of each other; they locked and fell downward and came  
apart  
And spiralled upward, hacking with beaks and hooks and the heavy wings: they were two eagles;  
He watched them drift overhead, fighting, to the east . . . (*CP* 3: 264)

In the end, the Inhumanist's vision of God—and, it is perhaps fair to say, Jeffers's ultimate vision too—is that of a glorified predator whose prey can only be himself:

"What does God want?"

. . . . .  
[ "I see he despises happiness; and as for goodness, he says What is it? and of  
evil, What is it?  
And of love and hate, They are equal; they are two spurs,  
For the horse has two flanks.—What does God want? I see here what he wants: he wants what man's  
Feeling for beauty wants:—if it were fierce as hunger or hate and deep as the grave." ] (*CP* 3: 259)<sup>13</sup>

The dying witnesses of the atomic war that engulfs the poem in its final pages describe it as "the end of the world" (*CP* 3: 311), but in Jeffersian terms humanity can do nothing outside divine purpose, and in that sense the world cannot end. As for that purpose, it remains as inscrutable for Jeffers as for his Puritan forbears. Man's ethical predicates, in his view, cannot measure God, and human passion is but a pallid reflection of the divine *agon*. Aesthetic emotion

offers a plummet, but only an emotion seized of an inexpressible and, in human terms, a horrific passion—"fierce hunger or hate"—could penetrate the divine reality. Jeffers made a last approach to what this implied in a late, untitled quatrain, to which Melba Berry Bennett, editor of *The Beginning and the End*, gave the appropriate title of "Tear Life to Pieces" (39):

Eagle and hawk with their great claws and hooked heads  
Tear life to pieces; vulture and raven wait for death to soften it.  
The poet cannot feed on this time of the world  
Until he has torn it to pieces, and himself also. (*CP* 3: 445)

The prophet rending his clothes and his flesh, not simply in despair but participation, predator and prey in one—it is with this final image, perhaps, that Jeffers would leave us.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The published preface, and the longer draft from which it was taken, are printed in the 1977 Liveright edition of *The Double Axe* (xxi–xxii; 171–75).

<sup>2</sup> "My name,' the old man answered, 'is Jones or McPherson or some other word: and what does it matter?'" (*CP* 3: 305).

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, 228–63, but see p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of this point see my "Jeffers's Heavenly Meditations." *Jeffers Studies* 3.4 (Fall 1999): 55–70.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the old man's soliloquy in section XLI of "The Inhumanist": "God does not judge: God *is*. Mine is the judgment" (*CP* 3: 299).

<sup>6</sup> "No doubt, alas, that more wasting / Wars will bleed the long future" ("Invasion," *CP* 3: 131).

<sup>7</sup> See treatment in Martin.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of this trope among Puritan preachers, see Crockett, 8ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "Meditation on Saviors": "I pledged myself awhile ago not to seek refuge, neither in death nor in a walled garden, / In lies nor gated loyalties, nor in the gates of contempt, that easily lock the world out of doors" (*CP* 1: 396).

<sup>10</sup> "[I]t occurs to me that section 45 of Part II of 'The Double Axe' might be read as preface to this volume. It seems to me to express quite briefly the intentions implicit in these poems and previous ones" (*The Double Axe*, 171).

<sup>11</sup> See Robinson and Gery. Robinson's comprehensive work contains no reference to Jeffers, though it is interesting that the key figures he cites in the development of an American apocalyptic, Emerson and Poe, are precisely those cited by Jeffers as his own most formative influences. Gery deals with Stevens

and Eliot, but likewise does not allude to Jeffers. I owe the former reference to Bill Costley.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. “Meditation on Saviors,” where Jeffers says of love: “[I]t is worst turned inward, it is best shot farthest” (CP 1: 401).

<sup>13</sup> Jeffers had presented the divine *agon* in the image of Heautontimoroumenos, the self-hanged or self-tormenting God in *The Women at Point Sur*, “Apology for Bad Dreams,” and “At the Birth of an Age” (see *The Cliffs of Solitude*, 145, 146–50, 242n33); in later poems he preferred that of the self-hunter, perhaps reflecting his interest in nebular astronomy. Thus, in “The Inhumanist”: “Why does God hunt in circles? Has he lost something? Is it possible—himself? / In the darkness between the stars did he lose himself and become godless, and seeks—himself?” (CP 3: 256). Later, “God” describes himself as “caught” and “in the net” (270). The image of the hunter’s (or fisher’s) net is, of course, one of the most recurrent in Jeffers; the image of God as lost or trapped, however—a concept that had not appeared in his verse since “The Alpine Christ”—may also reflect the agitation and existential doubt that runs through all of Jeffers’s wartime poetry.

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# The End of Prophecy: A Response

## James Karman

When I was given my instructions for this essay, I was told to use Robert Zaller’s paper as a springboard for my own thoughts—so that’s what I will do. I will begin, though, with a summary of the four main themes found in Robert’s essay.

1. “The Inhumanist” as a final sermon in which the anti-persona of Arthur Barclay from *The Women at Point Sur* returns as Jeffers’s alter ego, the nameless old man.

2. “The Inhumanist” as a “heavenly meditation” wherein the old man, Jeffers’s double, seeks God and finds him in the fierce, unyielding forces of the natural world.

3. “The Inhumanist” as the first major American poem to register the shock of the atomic bomb and thus to communicate a sense of “the nuclear sublime.”

4. “The Inhumanist” as an apocalyptic vision, rooted in the Bible and informed by the Puritan tradition—a vision, however, that sees the Day of Doom as one point on an ever-turning wheel of creation and destruction, not as the very end of time.

Along with these four main themes, several others are addressed, most notably:

The importance of section XLV of the poem, which is described as the fulcrum.

The critical response to the book as a whole, which included deep-seated antagonism and widespread incomprehension.

The double axe itself—the implement—as key symbol and, in some ways, central protagonist.

All of these main and subordinate themes (so eloquently presented) deserve comment, but within the short time allotted I can only pick one. I’ve decided to focus my attention on the last—the double axe itself.

Though Robert refers to the axe repeatedly throughout his essay, I’ll focus attention on one key passage.

. . . the Inhumanist is a thaumaturgic figure . . . , and even, at some points, tintured with divinity. His axe, like Siegfried’s sword, is a magical implement, where not a divine figuration. . . . On one level, it symbolizes technology run amok, for Jeffers regards *techne* not as an aspect of human mastering but as a Promethean enterprise, epitomized in the sacred power of the atom



that has now been “tricked down / into the common stews and shambles.” The Inhumanist himself, who shares the sins of the “transgressors,” cannot control the axe. Weary at last of the “violences” it has brought into the world, he flings it into the sea, but it instantly comes to life again, resurfaces, and returns to its “owner”: . . .

The axe returns “tamely” to the Inhumanist after its act of carnage, like a faithful dog; but masterfully, too: it owns its owner, since he cannot dispose of it and it will not be separated from him.

All of these observations about the double axe are valid—but Robert himself alludes to other levels beyond the ones he identifies. His analysis can be strengthened, I believe, and Jeffers’s poem can be better understood if, perhaps together, we talk more about them. I don’t think the symbol of the double axe has ever been adequately explored.

From my perspective, the double axe is more than a magical implement, more than a symbol of technology run amok, more than a symbiotic partner with a will of its own, more even than a manifestation of God—it seems to be poetry itself, Jeffers’s poetry, the weapon he wields but does not control, the tool he uses but does not understand, the force he adores but also fears, the instrument of his own destruction.

That will be my final point, but to get there I would like to use Jeffers’s own statement concerning the axe—the one Zaller cites in the excerpt just shared. Here is the full text (from section VI):

Cutting oak fence-posts, he stopped to whet his axe edges. He considered the double-bladed axe: “In Crete it was a God, and they named the labyrinth for it. That’s long before the Greeks came: the lofty Greeks were still bushmen. It was a symbol of generation: the two lobes and the stiff helve: so was the Cross before they christened it. But this one can clip heads too. Grimly, grimly. A blade for the flesh, a blade for the spirit; and truth from lies.” (CP3: 258)

I’ll return to each sentence in this prose paragraph in turn and comment on them.

*In Crete it was a god, and they named the labyrinth for it.*

I think it’s worth noting that Jeffers knew and understood the aniconic significance of the double axe (“labrys” in Greek)—that it was not just a symbol of divine power, it *was* a divine power: Labrayndeus, Axe God.

“Labyrinth,” as he says, means “place of the double axe.” This particular god dwells in a unique kind of temple, a place of mystery and twisting paths. The labyrinth itself has its own vastly over-determined symbolism, but among its

meanings are these: attaining realization after ordeals; finding one’s way to the deep center; initiation concerning the mystery of life, death, and rebirth; a rite of passage from the profane to the sacred; a confrontation with danger; a knot, a paradox, an answer to a riddle. (The riddle: “What is at the center of a labyrinth?” The journey to find out leads to a Zen-like answer: “You are.”)

*That’s long before the Greeks came: the lofty Greeks were still bushmen.*

Jeffers, as everyone here knows, is referring to the Minoan civilization which flourished in the second millennium B.C.—before the Greeks and before the Mycenaeans.

We should remind ourselves, though, that this was a goddess-based culture, as the evidence at Knossos attests. Votive figurines of snake goddesses, decorative moon symbolism on household objects, stylized bull horns everywhere—all point to a cyclical, feminine view of the world and a religion of eternal return.

In regard to the bull symbolism—which brings the ancient practice of bull sacrifice to mind—we should at least mention that in Part I of *The Double Axe* a bull is killed: Bull Gore.

*It was a symbol of generation: the two lobes and the stiff helve: . . .*

The double axe was indeed a feminine symbol *par excellence*, standing for life, death, and rebirth. In the hands of the Great Mother, the womb and tomb of the material world, it was a symbol of creative and destructive power.

It is essential to note here that late in “The Inhumanist,” as bombs are falling and the end of the world seems to be at hand, a young man, on the run, confronts the old man. After a brief exchange, the young man asks, “Are you laughing? . . . No one else laughs.” No, the old man says, “it was my axe. She has the last laugh.”

Yes, *she* does—and knowing the axe is feminine illuminates the deeper dimensions of its nature.

*[S]o was the Cross before they christened it.*

Jeffers, as we know, always thought of Christianity as one attempt among many to comprehend the primal mystery of life. Its central image—the crucifixion—perfectly expresses the notion of divine sacrifice that Jeffers believes in, the *agon* that turns the wheel of space and time. But Christianity comes late to the notion; one finds it all over the world in different forms (Attis, Osiris, Adonis, Tammuz). And the cross itself, like the Egyptian Ankh, both point to earlier revelations.

*But this one can clip heads too. Grimly, grimly.*

The old man's axe is violent and dangerous; people are afraid of it—and they are afraid of the man who wields it. In fact, the axe becomes increasingly agitated as the poem progresses and all the more uncanny. As Robert says in his essay, the axe laughs, yells, barks, neighs, and buzzes. At one point, when the old man is talking to a German scientist (section XXXVI, *CP* 3: 289–94), it begins to scream like an eagle, especially when the scientist says that God is dead. The old man has to huddle it against his thigh and then talk louder and louder to be heard. Eventually, the axe becomes so agitated he has to take off his coat to wrap and muffle it. Soon thereafter, it starts clipping heads—indeed, grimly: Vere Harnish in the sand, the two robbers which it kills by itself, the man of terrors (who turns out to be a spirit double), and finally, when the old man throws it into the sea, a giant octopus.

*A blade for the flesh, a blade for the spirit; . . .*

Here is where we begin to see the connection between the axe and Jeffers's poetry.

Part I of "The Double Axe" (the poem, not the book) is titled "The Love and the Hate." In a brilliantly orchestrated concatenation of symbols, Jeffers compares Houlton Gore to Christ. If "Anti-Christ" weren't an already overloaded term, one could use it for Houlton, because he functions as Jesus's dark twin, his shadow, his opposite. From the first page, when the lupin are described as archangels, to the use of biblical patterns of speech throughout—"Father, have mercy" (*CP* 3: 232); "Take it in remembrance of me. This is my body / That was broken for nothing. Drink it: this is my blood / That was spilled for no need" (*CP* 3: 243–44); "You are my lord and my king" (*CP* 3: 245)—to the gruesome doubting Thomas scene, to the fact that Houlton's mother is named Reine ("Queen" in French) and functions as a debased Mary, Jeffers creates the Christian primal scene, turned inside out and upside down. All for a point: "I am the only dead body that has had the energy to get up again / Since Jesus Christ," says Houlton (*CP* 3: 241). "His whip was love, they say. Mine . . . fury."

The love of Jesus, with all it contains in all of its forms and permutations, and the hate of Houlton, with all of its merciless rage, are two sides of the same coin. Together, in the dense symbolism of the poem, they form one edge of the double-bladed axe: the love and the hate. That's the blade for the flesh.

The blade for the spirit—the other half of the axe and thus the other half of the poem—is "The Inhumanist" or Inhumanism, with all it offers for a release from love, hate, and all the other manic passions, and with all it promises for an authentic experience of God.

What you get when you swing this axe and cut through the world's illusions is—*truth from lies*.

This is the one thing that Jeffers prided himself on throughout his career. As he says again and again in different ways, "[t]o be truth-bound, the neutral / Detested by all the dreaming factions, is my errand here" ("The Great Sunset," *CP* 2: 535).

He paid a price for this, of course. In "The Inhumanist" the old man is accosted by a person who screams, "You have betrayed us, you have betrayed humanity. You are one of those that killed hope and faith, / And sneered at Progress; you have killed the lies that men live by" (*CP* 3: 310). Jeffers heard this so often, he says it to himself in "Self-Criticism in February" (*CP* 2: 561): "If only you could sing / That God is love, or perhaps that social / Justice will soon prevail." No, Jeffers declares, "I can tell lies in prose."

Besides, as he says in "Triad" (*CP* 2: 309), the affair of the poet "who wishes not to play games with words" is "to awake dangerous images." In another poem (untitled, *CP* 3: 445), he adds, "The poet cannot feed on this time of the world / Until he has torn it to pieces, and himself also."

Self-sacrifice is central to Jeffers's understanding of himself as a poet, as we know from poems like "Apology for Bad Dreams" (*CP* 1: 208). So it comes as no surprise in "The Inhumanist" when the old man kills his double, the man of terrors, his younger self who lived in the world of love and hate, and says "No man has ever known himself nor surpassed himself until he has killed / Half of himself" (*CP* 3: 301). He then puts the body in a boat with two robbers, sets it afire, and pushes it out to sea. "The old man laughed with gray lips. 'There,' he said, 'goes myself, my self-murdered half-self / Between two thieves.'" Exactly—think about this—what old man God would have said about his young double, Jesus.

The outspoken old man, free of the world but deeply fatigued, tired of the violence, tired of fighting for truth, tired of cutting himself to pieces, throws his weapon into the sea. After hacking an underwater creature, however, and roiling the waters with foaming blood, the axe makes its way back to the old man's hand.

Several times in his poetry, Jeffers tempts himself with the possibility of throwing away his career, of not writing. In "Northern Heather" (*CP* 2: 413) he contemplates the benefits of silence. "[I]n the ebb of the mind / Between two poems, / When imagination is clearly a trap and all words / A noise about nothing," the question occurs, "Why will you climb up the turrets of another folly?" But, of course, the words come back on their own, the poems form themselves again. Like the axe that homes to the old man's hand, the poems return ("The Day Is a Poem," *CP* 3: 16) "crusted with blood and barbaric omens, / Painful to excess, inhuman as a hawk's cry."

## Contributors

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