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# ARTS AND LETTERS

## SHINE, PERISHING REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

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Pity the humble letter. No province of literary culture has been as deeply affected by the advent of new media. More formal literary genres may be undergoing an evolution, but they will probably adapt. The letter, however, has been almost obliterated in the blink of an historical eye. I have a few correspondents who doggedly send the occasional print epistle, but they arrive in the mailbox looking like little lost dinosaurs desperately seeking withered forage beneath a cloud of meteoric dust. Within a matter of decades (years? months?) teachers will no doubt have to explain to bemused and astonished students what letters were, not what they are, comparing them to rotary-dial telephones, typewriters, the telegraph, moveable type, and the work of the scribes at Lindisfarne. The letter had its day, and it was interesting while it lasted, but the technology and social circumstances that produced it have about as much chance as a pterodactyl.

The demise of the letter, in particular the literary letter, is a great loss. I try to console myself by imagining scholars and critics of the future surfing the searchable, emoticon-studded e-mails and Tweets of poets, philosophers, and diplomats with the greatest of ease; but I wonder if that experience will ever rise to the astonishment of encountering a manuscript that one knows was inscribed by a living hand holding a pen (or even pressing a key) to leave unique ink on real paper that then made its deliberate way across the physical rather than merely digital creation. Good examples would be the long fierce letters of July 9 and 11, 1912, that Una Call Kuster, later Una Jeffers, penned to her husband at the time, the wealthy and successful Los Angeles attorney Edward (Teddie) Kuster, whom she had married in 1902, when she was seventeen and he was twenty-four. In those letters, written when she was traveling in the British Isles, she finally tells Kuster exactly how she feels about their troubled marriage and how those problems led to her affair with the young poet and sometime wastrel Robinson Jeffers, whom she married on August 2, 1913, the day after her divorce from Kuster was finalized (and the same day that Kuster married his second wife, Edith). These letters are astonishing, revealing as powerfully as any documents of the time, the gulf that opened between not only the poetries but also the sensibilities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in America.

James Karman, ed. *The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers*, vol. I, 1890–1930. Stanford University Press, 2009. 1,016 pages. \$95.

Jeffers lived a long and prolific life, yet his readers had to wait more than three decades after his death in 1963 before his collected work began to appear in comprehensive order. Then, during the 1990s, Stanford University Press published the five-volume *Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Tim Hunt, a careful edition including a volume of scholarly manuscript annotation. Stanford is now in the process of doing the same for Jeffers's substantial correspondence, wisely including many letters from Una as well. The project includes approximately 3,000 letters over 70 years, which are held in 79 public repositories along with more than 30 private collections and 15 previous publications. While some of the letters have appeared in print, these resources are widely scattered, variously edited, and many in the final collection have never been published. The entire undertaking—meticulously transcribed, annotated, and indexed by the editor, James Karman, and handsomely printed—is one of the major archival projects under way in American poetry, especially when considered of a piece with Jeffers's *Collected Poetry*. The first volume of the *Collected Letters*, which takes Jeffers from childhood into the initial phase of the tremendous fame he achieved beginning in the mid-1920s, appeared in the summer of 2009; the second and third volumes are due in 2011.

None of this would matter if Jeffers did not matter, but he does, and the *Collected Letters* has the potential to help us revise not only how we think of him but also how we think about the arc of an entire century of American poetry. Jeffers is among the greatest of modern American poets who presents an alternative to modernism. He was quite blunt about his differences with that movement from the beginning of his career and never wavered, seeing the entire development as a mere branch of mannerism. In the preface to his *Selected Poetry* (1938) he writes that he had long ago realized that “modern” poetry (the quotation marks are Jeffers's) was “fantastic, abstract, unreal, eccentric; and was not even saving its soul, for these are generally anti-poetic qualities. [Poetry] must reclaim substance and sense, and physical and psychological reality. This feeling has been basic in my mind since then. It led me to write narrative poetry, and to draw subjects from contemporary life; to present aspects of life that modern poetry had generally avoided; and to attempt the expression of philosophic and scientific ideas in verse. It was not in my mind to open new fields for poetry, but only to reclaim old freedom.”

Working from these premises and favored with talent, good luck, and a superb education, Jeffers created what many of the modernists, the New Critics, and their poetic and intellectual successors believed was impossible: a diverse and accessible body of work founded on a coherent vision that embraces everything from the beauty of the natural world to the science that seeks to understand it, to politics, philosophy, and the full range of literary history. In doing so he sought to fulfill a modern Virgilian *rota*, publishing popular and successful original lyrics, many of which are about “the trans-human magnificence” of the natural world, but also about politics, love, and

family; mid-length and book-length narratives that frequently depict archetypally tragic lives of farmers and ranchers; and full verse dramas that are often explicitly adapted from classical sources (*The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, *Medea*, *The Cretan Woman*), but that also include original works (*Dear Judas*, *At the Birth of an Age*, *At the Fall of an Age*, *The Bowl of Blood*) that address overarching political, historical, religious, and philosophical themes.

It is not unreasonable to connect Jeffers with the high modernists in his ambition, for in many ways he set out to do, and perhaps did achieve, exactly what Eliot, Pound, and others called for but never fully accomplished themselves. For, even as Eliot and Pound sought new kinds of art that were modern and yet rejuvenated “kulchur,” they were also deeply invested in the idea that, out of key with their time, it was impossible to fulfill this vision in the modern world. “Wrong from the start” even to try, as Pound puts it in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” Small wonder, then, that they and others who shared their views found Jeffers so threatening, either ignoring him despite his serious purpose and his fame, or denouncing him in reviews and eventually writing him out of the literary curriculum.

To look more closely at but one strand of this debate over poetic ambition, consider Eliot and Jeffers as dramatists, where I believe Jeffers has the last word. In his witty and damning review in 1918 of Gilbert Murray’s translation of Euripides’s *Medea*, Eliot does not call for more “accurate” translations but rather for a language that is alive and contemporary, a rejuvenation of the classics by poets, not scholars: “we need a number of educated poets who shall at least have opinions about Greek drama, and whether it is or is not of any use to us. And it must be said the Professor Gilbert Murray is not the man for this. Greek poetry will never have the slightest vitalizing effect upon English poetry if it can only appear masquerading as a vulgar debasement of the eminently personal idiom of Swinburne. These are strong words to use against the most popular Hellenist of his time; but we must witness of Professor Murray ere we die that these things are not otherwise but thus.” Notice the sarcasm of the final clause. Eliot closes by calling on his contemporaries to integrate all of modern life into “better translations”: “If we are to digest the heavy food of historical and scientific knowledge that we have eaten we must be prepared for much greater exertions. . . . We need an eye which can see the past in its place with its definite differences from the present, and yet so lively that it shall be as present to us as the present. This is the creative eye; and it is because Professor Murray has no creative instinct that he leaves Euripides quite dead.” Eliot’s critique of Murray still rings true. In Murray’s translation of *Medea*’s first speech, heard from within the temple, he writes, “Oh shame and pain: O woe is me! / Would I could die in my misery!” This may well be rym dogerel.

Jeffers chose another path, but he fulfilled Eliot’s call for rejuvenation of classic verse drama better than Eliot ever did. Jeffers’s father was a scholar of

Old Testament languages at Western Theological Seminary, and Jeffers was one of the greatest linguists of all American poets, able to construe Greek, Latin, and Old English with ease and fluent (or close) in French, German, Spanish, and Italian. Yet he eventually used this knowledge, not as a scholar, but as a poet, in exactly the “vitalizing” way that Eliot called for. Compare Jeffers’s adaptation and expansion of the same lines from Euripides quoted above in his tremendously successful adaptation of *Medea*, published in 1946 and then produced to great acclaim with Dame Judith Anderson on Broadway in 1947:

Hear me, God, let me die. What I need: all  
 dead, all dead, all dead,  
 Under the great cold stones. For a year and a thousand years and another  
 thousand: cold as the stones, cold,  
 But noble again, proud, straight and silent, crimson-cloaked  
 In the blood of our wounds.

Obviously Jeffers has expanded the Greek at substantial length, which is why he described his play as “freely adapted from the Greek.” Murray’s “shame and pain” and “misery” have been transformed into bloody horrific heroism, a reenvisioned holocaust rather than fragments shored against ruins or the pastiche of the *Cantos*.

In the austere final lines of Jeffers’s play, Medea describes her triumph over Jason:

But I, a woman, a foreigner, alone  
 Against you and the might of Corinth,—have met you throat for throat,  
 blood for blood, betrayal for betrayal,  
 And for a shameful evil an unendurable punishment. —Now I go forth  
 Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars: —not *me* they scorn.

The terrifying thing about Jeffers’s adaptation is the resolute, ferociously rationalized violence of its heroine. Medea is not merely a jilted vengeful woman. She is like a force of nature and therefore magnificent and sublime in the way of, say, a natural disaster. This Medea simply refuses to give an inch, let alone to forgive. She would rather be inhuman, “cold as the stones,” more like the earth itself, which has no conscience and feels no remorse. This is her great appeal in Jeffers’s version, something he takes from his original and magnifies, both to entertain and to instruct. Her vengeful rage is heroic because it connects to the primal vitality of the cosmos itself, a vitality Jeffers everywhere represents as a divine, fierce “inhuman” beauty, very much including its annihilating violence and stupendous, indifferent force, which also has a distinctly modern ring. Even if, in keeping with Greek

myth, that nature is anthropomorphized in his play—the stars have “cold eyes” that despise weakness and can scorn—it transcends any human drama. It is ancient, it is modern, it is disturbing, it is vital.

We could pursue an argument similar to the one about Jeffers’s verse dramas with respect to his lyrics as well as his narratives. Many of the lyrics exalt the integral beauty of the “inhuman” natural world, much as his *Medea* suggests they would, particularly the Big Sur coast where he and Una lived from 1914. The longer works reconfigure classical tragic themes and narratives in the same landscape, which he saw as timeless: “this coast crying out for tragedy.” While Jeffers has been faulted in his longer works for being weak on realistic character development, that is a willful misreading, for realism was not his purpose—his characters are tragic personae driven to destruction by forces greater than they can know or understand, exactly like Oedipus, Antigone, and Medea, and they commit comparably taboo hubristic acts of incestuous coupling and murderous destruction. One should imagine them wearing masks as they speak.

Battles over Jeffers’s reputation have been intense; but, while he has had many admirers (Millay, Masters, Horace Gregory, Everson, Milosz, Edward Abbey, Bukowski, Dana Gioia, Mark Jarman, and even the Beach Boys, who set “The Beaks of Eagles” to music in the 1972 *Holland Album*), his passionate detractors (Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur, Robert Fitzgerald, Kenneth Rexroth, Helen Vendler) have more or less succeeded in characterizing him as “hysterical” and excluding him from English department curricula and the critical mainstream. As Vendler once put it, he is “a finally unsatisfying poet, coarse, limited, and defective in self-knowledge,” whose “unpurged sadism” and “fascination with the socially deviant” are manifestations of “moral timidity.” Despite some growing interest in academic circles since the publication of the *Collected Poetry* and his continuing popularity with the public (a new anthology of *Selected Poetry* from Stanford is selling well, and other volumes remain in print), Jeffers is still often absent from what purport to be authoritative studies of modern poetry, or is consigned to minor status, as if he were a coterie poet. The general view of his work since 1950 among many poets seems to have been, as Robert Bly once commented in a talk, “Well, there was Jeffers out there on the California coast, vibrating weirdly.” A wide range of noted critics presents Jeffers as a misanthropic hermit who spent his days staring at hawks, rocks, and fog while cooking up lurid jeremiads of incest and destruction.

We return to the *Letters*, for what they reveal to us is that Jeffers is not who many people have thought him to be, and that in fact the misconceptions about who he was may have something to do with his achievement. For, as the first volume of the *Letters* reveals, Jeffers led a rich, passionate, generous, and generally happy personal life. After the Jefferses moved to the small artists colony of Carmel, they did live far from the centers of literary and cultural power for their entire lives; and there is no question that after

sowing oats as a frat boy at Occidental College in Pasadena, Jeffers grew into someone who was quite reserved in public, shunned the limelight of his great fame in the 1920s and 1930s, and preferred the company of family and friends. And yet he was not the caricature of a hermit and misanthrope hostile critics have supposed. That vision is an ignorant reconstruction from the poems uninformed by what we now know of the life.

The letters from both Robin and Una show that their lives were not only full of love for each other and their twin boys (Garth and Donnan, born in November 1916), but also that they were close with friends and cordial to admirers from around the country and the world, many of whom visited Carmel to meet Jeffers and even became close as a result. A short list of some of the better known among these correspondents and visitors would include Ansel Adams, Mary Austin, Witter Bynner, Bennet Cerf, Clarence Darrow, Babette Deutsch, Max Eastman, Lincoln Kirstein (who contacted Jeffers about staging *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* in 1926, when he was an undergraduate at Harvard), Sinclair Lewis, Mabel Dodge Luhan (with whom the Jefferses had a long and tortured relationship), Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Harriet Monroe, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Genevieve Taggard, Louis Untermeyer, Mark Van Doren, Leonard and Virginia Woolf (the Hogarth Press published several books by Jeffers), and many others well known in their day if not in ours, in addition to scores of friends who had no major literary or professional ambitions. The Jefferses liked their privacy, but they were not recluses; and his poems are a highly self-conscious and artful project of modernized pastoral lyrics and Aristotelian tragedy, not an advice column.

A collection of letters as large and thorough as those presented here is a bit like a play, filled with hundreds of characters who appear and disappear, whose responses we do not see, and whose lives we must fill in as best we can, especially if they themselves are not as well known as the protagonists. Karman has done an extraordinary job of tracking down every single name and providing clear notes and brief biographies of every correspondent and even those merely mentioned in passing, along with discussions of major books and events to which the writers refer, from the illustrious to the obscure. Still any reader has to do a lot of imaginative reconstruction to understand many of the events that happen in the forty years covered by the first volume; there are gaps in time, presumably some letters missing, murky personal events, and so on.

The second half of the book, beginning in mid-1924, is where Jeffers's star ascends into public view. It is the earlier part of the volume, however, where much of the most exciting drama unfolds, as Jeffers changed from a dissolute graduate student into a strong poet, and it is material worthy of a romantic film. Some of the most exciting letters come from Una, who holds the stage for several hundred pages. In the preface to his *Selected Poems* Jeffers wrote of her that "she is more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed

and rather heroic,—or like a falcon—than like any ordinary person,” and her own words and actions only confirm Jeffers’s assertion about his poems that “by her presence and conversation she has co-authored every one of them.” Before now we had a good deal of secondhand information about Una, but some of her letters here (many appearing in print for the first time) practically singe the page and make Jeffers’s own estimation of his wife seem, if anything, an understatement.

Jeffers and Una met in the spring of 1906, when both were enrolled in advanced German at the University of Southern California, a course in which they read Goethe’s *Faust*. At this point and for several years afterwards, Jeffers was at loose ends. He had been graduated from Occidental at the age of nineteen in 1905, and in the following years enrolled in various graduate programs in comparative literature, medicine, and forestry at various schools in America and abroad. While he excelled in all of them, he never took another degree. Instead he joined a fraternity at the University of Southern California, wrote strained juvenilia, drank, and apparently lived the life of a rake. He and Una remained friends as she completed her studies, earning an M.A. in philosophy in 1910, and then they fell in love and began their affair.

Those who doubt Jeffers’s ability to love, and to love passionately, will find Una and Jeffers’s love letters a challenge. Many of his early letters were lost when seized by Teddie Kuster, but we do have a draft of a letter he wrote to her in 1910, when he was 24, she 27, and their affair was still secret:

Una, dearest,

I did not *see* you last night, but I *felt* your thought and your presence—plainly—for I do not think I imagined them only—And I lay wakeful and longed for you—but for a little while I was a little happy— . . .

How I desire your voice—your eyes—your lips—my very dearest!—

And to-day is black—and to-morrow is black—but the next day there is the hope of light—darling—

Ordinary enough material, perhaps, for a passionate young lover, but this is only the beginning of a romance that lasted more than forty years and developed in astonishing ways. As their lives converged the letters only become more and more ardent, until, in 1912, when they know they will be together, Jeffers writes to Una—in a series of letters that includes fiery and earnest statements of love in almost every other line—that “you are integrating my personality,” which indeed it seems that she did.

The heart of the matter lies in Una’s choice of Jeffers over Kuster. In 1910 Una and Teddie had been married for about eight years. There were no children. He worked hard as a lawyer in the firm he had founded and was involved in all sorts of community enterprises. Because he destroyed most of



Jeffers's letters, we primarily have Una's letters in the early part of the volume, both her passionate and tender letters to Jeffers and her long letters to her husband. Many of those were sent when Una was on a tour of the British Isles, where she spent about six months in 1912 after Kuster had discovered the affair. The trip seems to have been a good-faith effort on Una's part to break with Jeffers and make the marriage work, and there are no letters to Jeffers during this period. Instead we have a long numbered series of letters back to Teddie in which Una describes her travels and protests again and again that she loves him, despite certain undertones suggesting otherwise.

On July 9, however, Una received a letter in which Teddie made clear his intention to file for divorce and accused her of destroying their marriage, and then in a letter on July 11 Una blasts him so that the earth nearly tilts on its axis. If, as Virginia Woolf suggested, that "In or about December, 1910, human character changed," these letters were probably involved. Una begins by saying that "you are always talking about having a straight talk with me—I will now have one with you," and then moves directly to an accusation that still has the power to impress because of its passion, intensity, and furious assertion of her own erotic identity: "When you married me I was absolutely and utterly unsophisticated. In all matters of sex excepting as to highflown romantic ideals, I was as innocent as an infant. *You* awakened desire in me and *you* left that desire unsatisfied."

Both letters are significant cultural documents and worth quoting in full, but a few passages will have to suffice:

For many years I kept hidden—way down in my heart—and almost forgotten by myself at times,—a deep bitterness, and a sense of injustice done me. I *knew* it was normal, my passion—I knew it was right it should be satisfied and I felt I was being cheated.—If after a while I was to blame for many things—that is another matter—I have been talking about this in its incipency. I came to feel you were not my equal sexually. . . .

Why, oh Teddie *why* in that first year did you not realize my need and my condition and in some way meet it? You could so easily have found out that sex—instead of being as you then treated it, a force to be ignored, unthought about, was when rampant and neglected, a force which would rise up and smite us both. As I write now all that old seething rebellion I have kept down these long years makes me tremble with rage.

It seems clear from the context that Teddie probably suffered from premature ejaculation and not only refused to address it but could not even understand Una's frustration. The difference between her and many others then and now was that despite her relatively simple background, she was intellectually gifted and spiritually intense, and she had read Freud, Havelock

Ellis, and others: "After a few years I began to read and *know*. At last during the preceding few years I have known enough about the physiology [sic] and psychology of sex to see the rights of my case. Where I had felt vaguely cheated, (or sometimes that I was a monster of abnormality), I now knew definitely, and grew to know (also) I was under, rather than oversexed." And then, finally, the crux: "Therefore it seemed to me merely a nice and fitting thing when Fate gave into my hands a man much more equal to any demands or desires I could ever make or feel."

So much for Jeffers as a cold fish. Teddie's responses to Una's pyrotechnics, which Karman has interleaved as notes for these letters, show him to be a nineteenth-century man dealing with a twentieth-century woman, e.g., "It was, and still is, my idea, 'provincial' though it may be, that your kind of sophistication, subsequently acquired, was a kind of impurity." The divorce soon followed. Because Teddie was so well known, there was a scandal with a series of sensational articles in the *Los Angeles Times* that attributed the divorce to Una's "advanced ideas of social obligation."

Perhaps the most fascinating outcome of all the passionate jockeying for Una's affections came later, when Teddie apparently forgave Jeffers for being "a cowardly, dissipated cur" and also forgave Una for leaving him. Kuster and his new young wife, Edith, moved to within a short distance of the Jefferses' home in Carmel, where all four remained fast friends. Indeed, some years later, after her own divorce from Teddie, Edith wrote a memoir of that time about Una, titled *Of Una Jeffers: A Memoir*, once again testifying to Una's extraordinary charisma; and Teddie and his third wife, Ruth, also remained close neighbors and friends of the Jefferses. As for Robin and Una, they lived their lives passionately and together, if at times tumultuously. In 1938 Jeffers almost certainly had an affair, arranged by Mabel Dodge Luhan, which will be documented in the second volume of the *Letters*. When Una learned of it, she attempted to kill herself by lying down in a bathtub in Luhan's New Mexico home (so as to avoid making a mess), holding a handgun to her chest, and pulling the trigger. The bullet bounced off a rib, she survived, and the Jefferses and the Luhans parted company. Jeffers and Una managed to work things out and stay together until her death from cancer in 1950. He never remarried.

Because of Jeffers's growing fame after the publication of *Tamar and Other Poems* in 1924, the second half of the first volume of the *Letters* is quite different from the first. Una's letters are filled with social information about travel, friends, children, and home life. Jeffers's own letters deal more and more with business, responses to admirers (often with apologies at having taken so long to reply), and statements on poetry, poets, and poetics consonant with his tragic modern antimodernist view of things. In 1927 Jeffers wrote a brief letter to James Rorty and Mark Van Doren after the latter published a positive but somewhat puzzled review of *The Women at Point*

*Sur* in the *Nation*: "The book was meant to be . . . an attempt to uncenter the human mind from itself. There is no health for the individual whose attention is taken up with his own mind and processes; equally there is no health for the society that is always introverted on its own members, as ours becomes more and more, the interest engaged inward in love and hatred, companionship and competitions. These are necessary of course, but as they absorb all the interest they become fatal. . . . The book was meant to be a tragedy, that is an exhibition of essential elements by the burning away through pain and ruin of inertia and the unessential."

Throughout, one also finds memorable aphorisms. To George Sterling in August 1924: "existence would be rather a shallow affair without non-existence to back it"; from a response to an anonymous query about his work in 1928: "Every personal story ends more or less in tragedy; comedy is an unfinished story"; from a 1929 letter to Arthur Davison Ficke (poet and coauthor with Witter Bynner in 1916 of *The Spectra Hoax*) while on a ship to Ireland: "It would be disgusting to die away from home, except in some great cause, and there are no great causes." The discussions of metrics alone should change our views of modern poetry, as Jeffers knew his stuff and clearly did not conceive of his work as free verse as practiced by the vers-librists, but averred that he felt a "demand for metre."

The mix of a vibrant social life, Una's energy, the domestic life of the Jeffers family, and the discussions about the work and about poetics make assertions of Jeffers's isolation and misanthropy seem ignorant and absurd. After all this is a man who claimed in 1928 that "My own life is hitherto much happier than most live, and quite ridiculously contented with its personal and natural environment." This is "vibrating weirdly"? The publication of the *Letters* will do more than any critic ever could to counter such shallow readings of Jeffers, which are almost always coupled and confused with personal attacks, such as Yvor Winters's suggestion in a review of *Dear Judas and Other Poems* in 1930 that if Jeffers really believes what he is saying he should take the next "logical step" and commit suicide. Jeffers had a coherent yet tragic take on life, which is very different from leading a tragic life per se, or, for goodness' sake, encouraging others to slit their own throats.

As the record repeatedly shows, Jeffers's generosity and love for friends and family were unailing. When his good friend and critical champion, the poet George Sterling (famous then but now forgotten), committed suicide after an alcoholic binge in November 1926, the Jefferses' letters are filled with love and sorrow for weeks. On November 19 Jeffers wrote of Sterling to Alfred Bender, who had published some of Jeffers's poems in an anthology in 1925 and had become a friend: "He was a great man, and generous beyond belief, a master of beautiful words and thoughts. Perhaps his great misfortune lay in being one of the foremost and most sensitive minds of a time when romanticism overlapped materialism—the needs of a spiritual period

were still felt and nothing to satisfy them. But I don't know. The essential is that we love him, and are sorry, and you and I are very proud to have been his friends." Misanthrope, indeed.

The Jefferses' love for their twin boys, Garth and Donnan, is also palpable throughout. Writing to the Berkeley professor of Spanish Sylvanus Griswold Morley in 1927, when the boys would have been about eleven, Jeffers observes of children that "People who haven't had them have left half their possible life in the darkness; I'd as soon have gone without sight or hearing," and the letters are full of small details that affirm this love. Jeffers read to Una and to the boys "an hour or two each evening," and the list of books they went through is prodigious. He appears to have been a conscientious and loving father.

All the foregoing and much more suggest that Jeffers has been willfully misconstrued by his harshest critics for decades. Consider what may be his best-known lyric, "Shine, Perishing Republic." After observing that America is settling "in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire," he turns to thoughts about his sons:

But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from  
the thickening center; corruption  
Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's  
feet there are left the mountains.

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever  
servant, insufferable master.  
There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught—they say—  
God, when he walked on earth.

The dramatic situation of the address to his sons is transformed when one realizes that when Jeffers wrote the poem, in the early 1920s, Garth and Donnan could have been at most six or seven years old. They presumably had not come to their father asking, "Daddy, how much should we love mankind?"; and he presumably did not show this poem to them then. No, this is not an argument with the world, but rather one with himself; only a man who loved deeply and understood the suffering associated with such love would go to such great pains to warn himself to be moderate in it.

We see the same passion in one of the final poems Jeffers wrote for Una, almost a decade after she had died. Melba Berry Bennett first published this poem as "Cremation" in the posthumous collection *The Beginning and the End and Other Poems* (1963):

It nearly cancels my fear of death, my dearest said,  
When I think of cremation. To rot in the earth  
Is a loathsome end, but to roar up in flame—besides, I am used to it,

I have flamed with love or fury so often in my life,  
 No wonder my body is tired, no wonder it is dying.  
 We had great joy of my body. Scatter the ashes.

These are not the words of a man who did not love, but rather those of someone who knew passion and love's cost and was haunted by the voice of a deep true love years after her death. And he didn't need a Ouija board to hear it.

To read poems like "Shine, Perishing Republic," "Cremation," and many others in light of the *Letters* is to be reminded of how great poetry can rise out of the daily facts of a life. In the case of Jeffers it is also to be reminded all the more powerfully not only that he has often been badly read, but also that the questions of how and why to write poetry in the modern world remain unsettled; it must not, among other things, necessarily be difficult to be any good, and rumors about the death of poetry were as much an exaggeration in his time as in ours.

To read the passionate words in this book, inscribed by living hands now dust, is to live more intensely. What a loss that the genre of writing that made such an extraordinary thing possible is passing away. And yet not blameworthy: shine, perishing republic of letters. There is enough material that provokes such contemplation in Jeffers's and Una's *Letters* to keep readers, critics, poets, and scholars busy for years.

## EMILY AND OTHERS

JEROME MAZZARO

As the subtitle of Lyndall Gordon's *Lives Like Loaded Guns* indicates, the book is as much about the family as it is about Emily Dickinson and the controversies involving her papers. It begins with an identification of the people involved and an overview of the Homestead, where the poet spent much of her life. Family background leads to an account of Dickinson's education and a loose narrative of her life centering on what have become the "talking points" of most Dickinson biographies: her friendship with Susan Norcross Dickinson; The Master behind "The Master letters"; her recurrent mysterious illness; the love for Judge Lord; and her brother's affair with

Lyndall Gordon, *Lives Like Loaded Guns: Emily Dickinson and Her Family's Feuds*. Viking Books, 2010. xx + 492 pages. \$32.95; William C. Spengemann, *Three American Poets: Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. xvi + 228 pages. \$28 pb.