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Two Minds of a Western Poet

ESSAYS

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Some Narrative Poets of the American West

Let me tell you a story:

When I was a boy in Bellingham, Washington, a small town on the Puget Sound, closer to Vancouver, B.C., than to Seattle, my family moved to a big house on a hill overlooking the bay. In my teenage years, against my mother's wishes, I would climb out my bedroom window and onto the roof of that house, clamber up to its peak and, clinging to the edge of a brick chimney, look out over the Sound at the San Juan Islands. A would-be writer on my own shingled Parnassus, I thought I lived in a land without poetry, a land no one had written yet. The great writers were elsewhere, Back East or further afield, and I dwelt in a resonant vacancy. Westerners often used to have this feeling—true or not, it seemed our landscapes had not yet found their poets. I dimly knew that someone called Roethke had lived in Seattle, but nothing more about West Coast writers had touched my virgin ears. It would be decades before I read Czeslaw Miłosz's early reaction to the coast, "Far West": "All reputation at last overthrown. / No years, no clocks, no memory of how, kneeling, we panned gold. / The saddles creaked and in the bison grass statues fell apart. / Till there was what was fated. Only the earth and sea."

But there were books in our house. Lots of them. Somehow I stumbled on a small, green paperback anthology, *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse,* edited by Oscar Williams. Among the lines I found there were these: "Here the human past is dim and feeble and alien to us / Our ghosts draw from the crowded future." It seemed true enough. I knew the Lummi Reservation and worked on an archeological dig in a Salish village, but the past here was somehow less culturally sanctioned than that of Greece

or Rome or even the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. I read about "This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places. . . ." The voice seemed closer to what I saw from my mother's roof than the impressive Modernism of Pound or Eliot. Out beyond the wide mouth of Bellingham Bay the lights of gillnetters burned all night. The purse seiners motored in from around the point.

> A sudden fog-drift muffled the ocean,
> A throbbing of engines moved in it,
> At length, a stone's throw out, between the rocks and the vapor,
> One by one moved shadows
> Out of this mystery, shadows, fishing-boats, trailing each other
> Following the cliff for guidance,
> Holding a difficult path between the peril of sea-fog
> And the foam on the shore granite.

I was never far from harbor smells—salt and kelp and creosote. Gulls cried all through my childhood, tides moved, islands and headlands floated between sea and sky.

This poet, Robinson Jeffers, was the first I ever read who expressed something true about the Pacific coast. I found his picture the size of a postage stamp inside the anthology's front cover, and he looked exactly as a poet should—carved out of dreaming stone. He knew my coast. Anyone who grew up as I did, hiking in the Cascades, swimming and sailing in the lakes, tide-pooling at the Sound, would inevitably become an environmentalist of some sort. Human presence in the West was problematic, not the automatic gift some might assume it to be. We knew what silence sounded like—actual silence, uncut by engines of any sort—and it changed us. We never quite got over it or accepted the future crowding in. We lived in a strange imaginative space, not fully named by what we read in books. Jeffers came as close as anyone to that ecology, and later perhaps figures like Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, John Haines and Robert Hass.

Jeffers was a great lyric poet of the coast who understood the position of humanity in the larger expanse of Nature. That

made sense. Then there were the long narrative poems I began to find in books, poems with a rough intensity like some of Faulkner and Lawrence. I didn't understand them. Maybe I still don't, but they came to represent a level of ambition I rarely saw in contemporary poetry, as if something essential to the American West could only be captured in the mythologizing impulse married to the pulse of verse. The first I read was *Roan Stallion,* with its mixed-race heroine named California and its vivid depiction of wildness, the freedom of riding the great horse and the imprisonment of human lives. It seemed entirely Western, but somehow also part of another cosmology, a rush of new ideas about the place of humanity in the universe, "The atom bounds-breaking, / Nucleus to sun, electrons to planets, with recognition / Not praying, self-equaling, the whole to the whole. . . ." This out-Whitmanned Whitman. The notion that a woman killing a stallion was also killing God made perfect sense, though the dramatic arc of the poem felt ever-so-slightly contrived, driven by idea as much as experience or observation.

Anyone looking at the poetry of the West—and here for the sake of argument I conflate the deserts west of the Mississippi, the mountain ranges and the Pacific coast as a vast tract of America sometimes cut off from our cultural centers—will see varieties of narrative verse, ambitious attempts to take in large subjects, large spaces. I'm thinking about Jeffers, but also about poets like Thomas McGrath, Edward Dorn and W. S. Merwin, those transplanted generations. To a lesser degree I'm thinking of three poets born on the West Coast: Dana Gioia, Robert McDowell and myself. While I cannot hope to be comprehensive in this brief space, I might add figures as varied as Mark Jarman, Lawson Inada, Linda McCarriston, Kim Addonizio and Frank Bidart, some born in the West, some transplanted. Many of us share a problematic relation to what used to be called the cultural hegemony of the East, where Helen Vendler tells us she really does not understand narrative poetry, and to certain academic schools that look down upon narrative verse as old-fashioned, insufficiently opaque or otherwise merely human—as if Modernism had finally rid us of story and we really needn't look back. Never mind Homer and his lot.

Whatever his faults as a poet, Jeffers presents an example of

ambitions we would be poorer without. His foreword to *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (1938) offers ideas that beat against the current of much recent poetry:

> Long ago, before anything included here was written, it became evident to me that poetry—if it was to survive at all—must reclaim of the power and reality that it was so hastily surrendering to prose. . . . It 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 of poetry, but only to reclaim old freedom.

By itself this isn't a Western phenomenon. Poets as unlike Jeffers as Anthony Hecht and Louis Simpson made similar arguments, and we have the postcolonial example of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* with its pan-African meditations joined to a mock-Homeric narrative. I should also mention the remarkable novel by Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate,* conveying Bay Area lives with confidence and flair. Contrary to what some critics seem to think, narrative complicates language even as it appears to simplify because it evokes social realities and relationships that are always complex, and because the structures of stories themselves are forms of ambiguity. Narratives are about more than the poet and his or her precious talent. Narratives in verse offer methods of intensification somewhat less available to the prose writer—a *different* way of living in language if not a better one.

So I am claiming Jeffers as one of the great modern proponents of narrative, and I am also claiming a special place for narrative in the West—performing in the twentieth century something of the identity-bearing function narratives by Longfellow, Whittier and others performed in the nineteenth, but also pushing more difficult ideas and a greater variety of forms. Why is it, then, that in truth I sometimes find Jeffers's longer narrative poems less satisfying than his lyrics? Every one of them contains marvelous passages, writing of rare beauty he might not have achieved without the structure and ambition of story. The

problem is sometimes technical. He is not a great writer of dialogue, for example, and his long line does not always seem the necessary choice for a given passage. But perhaps the problem of the longer poems is something other than technique, something related to the tragic vision one must bargain with in order to cross over into belief.

According to Nietzsche, tragedy arises from an essentially religious experience. The song of the suffering being that quavers between heaven and earth, that most primordial relation of deity and human, falls into absurdity when we move closer to skeptical self-consciousness. The primitive religious impulse, throbbing with violent life, decays into philosophical sophistication. Aeschylus pulses with tragedy, while Euripides often mocks it. If many people now have trouble reading some of Jeffers's narratives, perhaps it is because we live in an age of mockery more than tragedy. We live in what Nietzsche would call a fallen state, belittling, thwarted by our education, our sophistication, our irony. When Jeffers gives us the Dionysian horse of *Roan Stallion,* the incest and sexual energy and violence of his other poems, he writes out of daemonic impulses few of our contemporaries share or even understand except at a level of intellectuality.

Medea is the most compelling of Jeffers's longer works because we read it as classical—albeit Euripidean—tragedy. When Medea says, "I do according to nature what I have to do," we assent to the cosmology underlying her rationale. Nature is what it is. The gods are gods, though relatively absent in Jeffers's play. People are people, and are doomed. All are driven. All are daemonic, subject to the laws of blood and sex. The brilliant defense of Jeffers made by William Everson (Brother Antoninus) in *Robinson Jeffers: Fragments of an Older Fury* (1968) notes a "granitic aloofness" in the best of the work, as well as a sensibility alien to literary naturalism. Everson agrees with Frederic Carpenter that the narrative poems are "modern myths," and points out that we need to read them differently than we read other storytelling poems: "For if 'narrative' is the rational ordering of explicit events and if 'lyric' is the generalization of emotion obtaining between subject and object, then myths, visions, dreams, are scenarios of mood." This abstract sentence attempts to cut a path into Jeffers's longer poems, acknowledging that this singular

poet cannot be approached in familiar conceptual terms. Since Jeffers himself does little to help with definitions, the burden is on each of us to ask, with Milosz, "What have I to do with you?" A question not easily answered.

As he tells us in "Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Years," Jeffers sought a subject and perspective more durable than the fashions of his time. He believed that ancient Greek tragedies "all tell primitive horror stories, and the conventional pious statements of the chorus are more than balanced by the bad temper and wickedness, or folly, of the principal characters. What makes them noble is the poetry . . ." This is true of the Greeks, but America is a very different society, steeped in melioration even as its citizens can be driven by cutthroat ambition. Nature with a capital N might take the place of the gods, but Jeffers's characters sometimes seem pressed into primitive relation by the author's desire. Maybe this is the point at which our willing suspension of disbelief has to kick in, allowing us to appreciate the intensifying energy of the poems.

Of course this neo-primitivism is one of the major components of the High Modernism Jeffers disliked, characterizing work by Picasso, Stravinsky and Eliot. Combine it with supercharged Freudianism and you get writers like Lawrence and Jeffers. At their best, Jeffers's narratives have a compelling grandeur; at their weakest they feel like tragic contrivances. Mind you, I love a lot of this stuff. Orestes, speaking in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy,* conveys the force of Nature in a manner I recognize:

> I entered the
> life of the brown forest
> And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone,
> I felt the
> changes in the veins
> In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we
> have our own
> time, not yours; and I was the stream
> Draining the mountain wood. . . .

A figure out of the tragic realm, not quite of our time, he adds, "I was mankind also, a moving lichen / On the cheek of the

rounded stone. . . ." Jeffers wants us to feel again an animal relation to the world. He wants us, as all the best poets do, to be more than intellect, more than our timid selves clinging to cultural assurances. He wants us to be exposed to more life than we can bear.

I think of the great descriptive set pieces in a poem like *Cawdor*—that caged eagle killing a squirrel, or the marine life of the coast, or this passage when the old man finds a piece of chipped flint:

> Cawdor picked up the Indian-wrought stone. "There were
> people here before us," he said, "and others will come
> After our time. These poor flints were their knives, wherever
> you dig you find them, and now I forget
> What we came up for."

In other words, whatever his flaws as a storyteller, however unaccommodating his tragic vision may seem, Jeffers was onto something. There really is a human relation to the world that we need to work through in our poetry, whether it is understood in scientific, political or religious terms. Everson also read Jeffers in the light of the American Transcendentalist tradition, referring to "the long, somber and God-tormented poems" and how they suited "our fundamental native pantheism." The "grandeur and scale" of Jeffers's narratives make demands we are not always willing to meet, but they also present an example we should not reject. Poems that tell stories involve readers in larger communal structures, dramas beyond ourselves without which poetry is a terribly diminished art. Finding sympathy for what seems alien to us is one of poetry's major functions.

Jeffers remains a great poet, though perhaps antithetical to New Critical readings—I say this knowing that Everson and others have read him very closely. The poets he influenced are also mavericks of one sort or another, many of them still marginalized. One of these mavericks was Thomas McGrath, known to some as a communist poet who never outgrew a 1930s mindset, but to others as an important wordsmith, author of the fascinating long poem *Letter to an Imaginary Friend.* While McGrath's

early influences included such leftist poets as Auden, MacNeice and Brecht, he was in some sense a regionalist—he grew up in North Dakota, served in the Aleutians during World War II, was blacklisted in California—and came of age when Jeffers's reputation was still at its height. McGrath told an interviewer that in the 1930s, "I blundered across Jeffers. He wasn't turning up in the anthologies yet. But I blundered across him, then I read and read him." McGrath did not share Jeffers's isolationist politics, but was attracted by the long lines and richly modulated rhythms as well as the Western landscapes. There was also the affinity of one provincial poet for another. Jeffers had chosen his Monterey coast after a privileged upbringing, while McGrath grew up in what seemed an unwritten terrain. Both poets were career outsiders, utterly individual in their stance, in many ways removed from the literary establishment.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend is not a narrative poem in the way Jeffers wrote mythic stories. Rather, it is a visionary autobiography, its leftist politics and Native American theology implying a new poetic DNA. It pleads a revolution in consciousness, an improved world in ironic contrast to the political one in which we dwell. But many of the strongest passages in McGrath's poem are narrative set pieces, and his long line clearly owes something to Jeffers. I think of McGrath's early Virgil figure, a farmhand named Cal who, as a Wobbly, guides the young Tom toward political awareness. Tom's uncle hates these leftist agitators, and gives Cal a severe beating:

> Cal spoke for the men and my uncle cursed him.
> I remember that ugly sound, like some animal cry touching me
> Deep and cold, and I ran toward them
> And the fighting started.
> My uncle punched him. I heard the breaking crunch
> Of his teeth going and the blood leaped out of his mouth
> Over his neck and shirt—I heard their gruntings and strainings
> Like love at night or men working hard together,
> And heard the meaty thumpings, like beating a grain sack
> As my uncle punched his body—I remember the dust
> Jumped from his shirt.

In the wake of this violence, upsetting to everyone in McGrath's family, the boy runs off alone to the Sheyenne River. There, among the trees, "Runeless I stood in the green rain / Of the leaves." He seeks a kind of solace in Nature, which Jeffers would understand even as he knew how unforgiving Nature could be.

McGrath differs from Jeffers partly in his revolutionary politics, but also in his sense of humor. In Part II of *Letter* a long scene of Catholic confession could have come right out of James Joyce:

> "Well, boy?"
> "I think I deserve a harder penance, Father."
> "Such as?"
> "As among the Spiritual Works of Mercy, Father:
> To instruct the ignorant. To admonish sinners."
> "It takes one to know one.
> What else?"
> "As among the Corporeal Works of Mercy, Father:
> To bury the dead. To visit those in prison."
> "All in time.
> For now: three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys. Hop to it!"
> It's less than I can face. "There's more, Father there's more!"
> "Then spit it out and get on with it yez, y'little spalpeen!"
>
> But what's the more to get on to? I call upon all the words
> In the dictionary of damnation and not a damned one will come.
> I pray for the gift of tongues and suddenly I am showered
> With all the unknown words I have ever heard or read.
>
> "I am guilty of chrestomathy, Father."
> He lets out a grunt in Gaelic,
> Shifting out of the Latin to get a fresh purchase on sin.
> "And?"
> "Barratry, Father
> "And mineralogy . . .
> "Agatism and summer elements . . .
> "Skepticism about tooth fairies . . .
> "Catachresis and pseudogogy . . .
> "I have poisoned poissons in all the probable statistics . . .
> "I have had my pidgin and eaten it too, Father . . ."

McGrath was fully capable of spoiling a poem with political piety. What saves him at his best is the "sin" of language love, an understanding of poetry as play, far from the dourness of his fellow Celt Jeffers. But of course McGrath wrote in the wake of World War II and Korea, during the American misadventure in Vietnam, a time when pieties of all sorts were increasingly suspect.

To move even further from Jeffers, perhaps no one was less the tragedian than Edward Dorn in *Gunslinger,* part pop-epic, part script for performance with guitar. A series of punning riffs on myths of the West, *Gunslinger* is so arch, so auto-reflexive, that it nearly demolishes such distinctions as character and story. Slinger is part daemon, part dime-novel, a son of the sun, a fading force in a bullet-riddled, ahistorical desert. A poet figure tells the story, such as it is, and acts in constant dialogue with Slinger and his talking, dope-smoking Horse. Like some dislodged syllable of Rimbaud, the poet is named simply "I." One quickly realizes that *Gunslinger* exists for its anarchy, closer to Laurence Sterne than to Robinson Jeffers. In an introduction to a new edition, Marjorie Perloff says that *Gunslinger* "marks an important turning point in American poetry, a turn away from the monologic lyric of mid-century to the dialogic 'parapoem' of fin de siècle, with its amalgam of 'theory' and lyric, of prose narrative and sound-text, and especially of citation embedded in or superimposed upon the speech of a particular self."

She makes it sound like a panel discussion at the MLA, but the book is much more fun than that. I bring it up because it is a long poem of the American West. Though born in Illinois and with formative ties to the Black Mountain School and England, Dorn spent important years in Washington State and died in Colorado. *Gunslinger* shares with the narratives of Jeffers and McGrath a deliberate outsider status that owes something to the landscape as well as the languages of the West:

> Cool flight along our trail
> comes a rupture of feathers,
> Laterally comes the desert lark
> throat of memory of an extinct tree
> into the light of afterdark
> gone out to the dry sea in bateaux

> Cool dry,
> Shall come the results of inquiry
> out of the larks throat
> oh people of the coming stage
> out of the larks throat
> loom the hoodoos
> beyond the canyon country
> Oh temptation of survival
> oh lusterless hope
> of victory in opposites

Dorn saw the West as a place where old mythologies go to die. What survives is language, I suppose, and the way he laces Spanish idiom into some of his lines reminds me of a very different mythologizer of the West: Cormac McCarthy. While I know Jeffers influenced McGrath and Merwin and my own generation, I do not know quite why it is that critics have sometimes paired Jeffers and Dorn except for this interest in the West. Dorn has been quoted praising Jeffers's elegance as a poet, and he must have been attracted to the risky ambition of narratives set in a place still largely unsanctioned by literary criticism.

One more example. W. S. Merwin came to the West and overshot it to the Pacific isles of Hawaii. By the time he made this move he had already established himself as a prodigious talent in such cultural centers as Boston and New York, and had lived yet another life in France and Spain. His devotion to narrative poetry looks back at least to medieval Europe, a subject on which he was expert while a very young man. What distinguishes *The Folding Cliffs* (1998) from the other narratives I have mentioned here is that its presiding spirit is neither tragic nor satirical, nor is it purely political. Merwin shares the Western writer's sympathy for Native Americans (think of Jeffers's poem "Hands" and McGrath's use of Hopi religion). He understands that the story of the West is in part a story of displacement, even genocide. The poet opposes the amnesia of the dominant culture. The story he tells about the near-eradication of native culture in Hawaii is in that sense a common one for our country, a poetic addendum to Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.*

In an interview Merwin stated that he disagreed with Jeffers's nihilism, "a kind of hugging to himself of a bitterness which really, I thought, in the long run, was egocentric." What Merwin admired, though, was the ecology of Jeffers, the effort to "uncenter our minds from ourselves," as Jeffers put it in "Carmel Point." Still something of a humanist, Merwin tells his Hawaiian story with sensitivity for a variety of people, native and white. He has a novelist's eye for manners and a scientist's interest in the Nature lying beyond them. But there is also the ecologist at work in this poem. After an opening section introducing his major characters, he suddenly reverts to geological time, the fiery birth of the islands:

> The mountain rises by itself out of the turning night
> out of the floor of the sea and is the whole of an
> island
> alone in the one horizon alone in the entire day
> as a word is alone in the moment it is spoken
> meaning what it means only then and meaning it only
> once with the same syllables that have arisen
> and have formed and been uttered before again and again

Language and storytelling, human memory itself—these things arise in almost mystical relation to the landscape, as if the folding cliffs were the lobes of memory and human culture might have at its core a genuineness, an essence modern man has forgotten. Surely Jeffers would have recognized such beliefs. My point is not that they are true—since they cannot really be proven—but that they are endemic to American animism or Transcendentalism, so rife in the West.

But now the future has crowded in. I have strayed far from Jeffers to suggest glancing relations to a variety of narratives. The West now has plenty of poets, from rappers to post-structuralists, and remains, like most of America, an amnesiac culture. The grandeur of Jeffers can seem out of place to contemporary readers shy of big emotions, but it will be lodged there as an example if we keep reminding people to read him. Read him for the flawed poet he is, for the beautiful lyrics as well as the tortured narratives, examples we need but do not always agree with. Art is

not a matter of agreement, after all, but recognition. The same sensibility that can make a narrative feel forced or over the top can position us precisely in meditative space:

> Below us, and under our feet
> The heavy black stones of the cairn of the Lord of Ulster.
> A man of blood who died bloodily
> Four centuries ago: but death's nothing, and life,
> From a high death-mark on a headland
> Of this dim island of burials, is nothing either.
> How beautiful are both these nothings.

This is poetry open to contradiction and impurity, built from an unfashionable belief in lasting things—or relatively lasting things, since of course "man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the brave sun / Die blind and blacken to the heart. . . ."

Poets who tell stories admit that we are in this together, that individual talent is not enough. Our anger and grief can be shared. We have other examples before us, more than I can list here, but I doubt any of us would have attempted quite what we have done without the audacity of Robinson Jeffers.