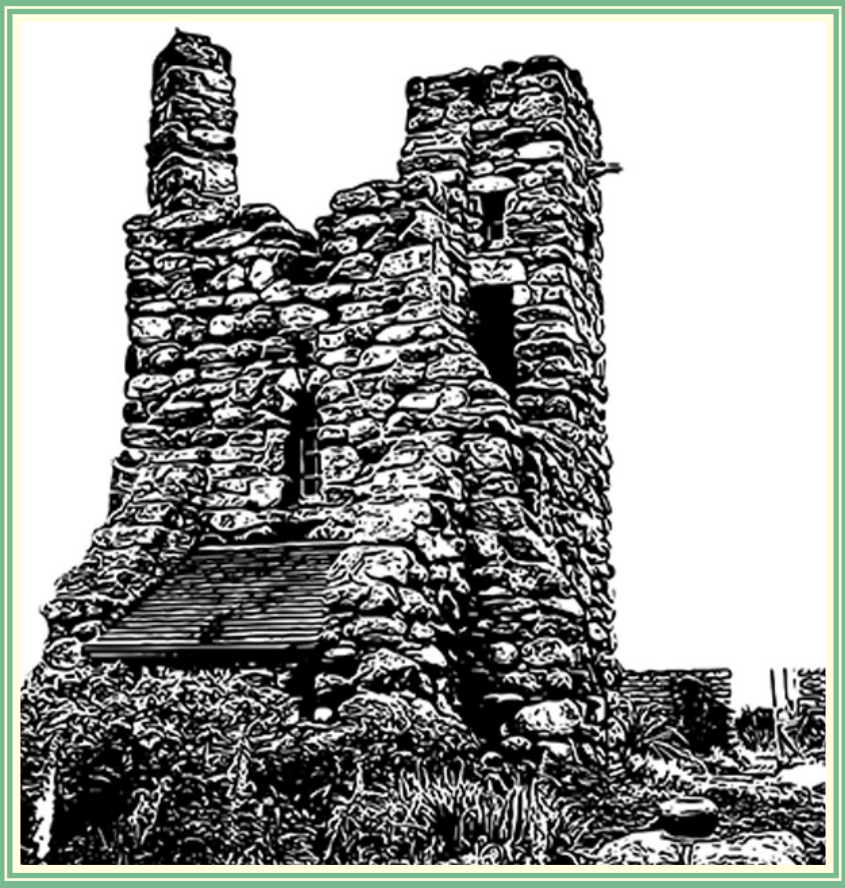
Jeffers Studies



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Tim Hunt

Editor's Note

This issue of *Jeffers Studies* mixes change and continuity. Several of the changes are immediately evident. For one, this is the first issue of the journal as an open-access publication. On-line research has become the norm, and open-access publishing makes the journal's content more visible and more widely accessible—both to researchers and general readers. Through the services of Bepress (our digital platform) provided by Milner Library of Illinois State University (now our publisher) *Jeffers Studies* is now indexed and freely available to be read on screen or downloaded and printed out nationally and internationally, and the analytics (did I just use that word?) Bepress provides shows that the articles from back issues of *Jeffers Studies* that are already archived on the site are being widely accessed.

A second change is that the journal now has a new editor. After a dozen years of leading *Jeffers Studies* with distinction, James Baird has passed the editorial baton in order to focus on other projects. If there were a *Jeffers Studies* Editor's Hall of Fame, it would need to include all three people who have led the journal: Robert Brophy (1997-2002), George Hart (2003-2011), and Jim Baird (2012-2023). Most of a journal editor's work is behind the scenes, invisible, and thankless. On behalf of everyone in the Jeffers community, I'm offering this virtual round of applause for the years of service and leadership and our thanks for the issues of *Jeffers Studies* that we have on our physical and virtual shelves because of Jim's patient, steady hand—and please, another round, for Whitney Hoth, Rob Kafka, James Karman, and Paula Karman who have over recent years put their shoulders to the wheel in a number of key roles.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the six members of the journal's newly constituted Editorial Board: Brett Colasacco, Geneva Gano, James Karman, David Morris, Katie Peterson, and Susan Shillinglaw.

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This issue of *Jeffers Studies* also introduces several new features. Over recent decades it has become less common for researchers to focus on a single author and more common to focus on sets of writers or on topics that can be analyzed by drawing on an array of works and figures. As a result, some of the most interesting and significant work on Jeffers doesn't focus solely on Jeffers or on Jeffers as an isolated figure but instead places Jeffers in broader contexts and in dialogue with other figures. The Robinson Jeffers Interview, a new *Jeffers Studies* feature, is planned as a series of conversations with scholars, theorists, and poets who can help us map these broader dialogues. In this issue, the Robinson Jeffers Interview is a conversation with Scott Slovic, a pioneering figure in the field of environmental literature.

This issue of *Jeffers Studies* also initiates two new features: Robinson Jeffers: The Critical Heritage, edited by Terry Beers and Robinson Jeffers Close Up edited by Robert Atwan. The Critical Heritage series will offer new appraisals of major critical studies and other primary materials from past decades that newer readers of Jeffers, especially students but also younger researchers, may not know. Terry's reappraisal of Arthur Coffin's 1971 study *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism* in this issue initiates the series and illustrates the purpose. Terry's re-review offers an overview of Coffin's analysis and argument coupled with an assessment of how Coffin's study might continue to matter in spite of changing critical fashions. If you would be interested in being assigned to write a future entry in the series, please let me know (jseditor@robinsonjeffersassociation.org).

Jeffers Studies has always welcomed shorter pieces that develop a close reading of a Jeffers poem. In one sense, then, initiating the series Robinson Jeffers Close Up simply underscores the journal's openness to such pieces. But it also signals an updated sense of what such notes and close readings can be. Historically, analytical close readings have been aligned with the formalism of the New Criticism. *Jeffers Studies* continues to welcome New Critical close readings, but the journal is also welcomes close readings that draw on contexts strict New Criticism would tend to exclude as "extra-literary," as well as close readings that include the personal, reflective dimension of "essays," as do William E. Cain's and George Dardess's contributions to this issue. Perhaps the simplest way to characterize this shift in approach is to note that in conventional New Criticism the analytical goal is to determine the single right and definitive reading of a poem and thus end the discussion. Underlying Robinson Jeffers Close Up is the assumption that any good poem is

manifold and that its elements, structure, and process (while fixed and set) can be engaged in more than one way and lead to a set of discussions that complement each other and create a conversation instead of competing with each other. As it happens, without having planned for it, this issue of *Jeffers Studies* illustrates this possibility. I hope you will take a moment to place Richard A. Rosengarten's reflections on "To His Father," included in the set of centennial reflections on *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, in dialogue with William Cain's reflections and similarly place Derek Mong's reflections on "Continent's End" in that same piece in dialogue with George Dardess's reflections. Perhaps their de facto conversations will lead you to offer your own Robinson Jeffers Close Up note on one of these poems or another Jeffers' poem or even a poem where another poet engages Jeffers directly or even indirectly or a poem that might inform one of Jeffers' poems (anyone for a discussion of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and Jeffers' "Point Joe"?).

The first priority of *Jeffers Studies* has been, and will continue to be, publishing peer-reviewed research, analysis, and documents that contribute to the study of Jeffers and his work. The journal's Submission Guidelines can be accessed here: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/js/policies.html, and submissions can be submitted here: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/cgi/submit.cgi?context=js. Queries and comments can be sent here: jseditor@robinsonjeffersassociation.org.

It's my sense that, in addition to this first priority, the journal can also—and should—initiate content that might broaden the critical conversation and in some cases offer agendas for that conversation. One obvious way to do this is through occasional guest-edited special issues. This issue illustrates a second strategy. This year is the centennial of the publication of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, the collection that established Jeffers as a major poet and arguably remains his single most important volume of poetry. This issue opens with two pieces that mark this occasion. The first is a set of comments by twenty poets, scholars, and critics responding to this occasion that both reinforce the importance of this collection while offering new directions for study. The second is an overview of the documents that record Jeffers' poetic production from 1917-1923 and that reflect his process of distilling this work into *Tamar and Other Poems* and then expanding the collection into *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. These documents suggest that Jeffers' development in this period was more complicated and perhaps somewhat different than we've assumed. The documents suggest a

need for further study of this key transitional period and offer material further critical analysis.

I should also note that *Jeffers Studies* remains strongly committed to reviewing not only books that focus specifically on Jeffers and his work but also books in which Jeffers is a topic among other topics and books that are of interest to readers of Jeffers. The six reviews in this issue reflect this range. Brett Colasacco's review of the new Centennial Edition of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* not only assesses the edition but offers a thoughtful analysis of "Roan Stallion." Eric San George's review of Alan Malnar's study of the role of birds of prey in Jeffers' work develops the significance of Jeffers' interweaving of precisely observed details, imagery, and symbolism in this central feature of his poetic universe. George Hart's review of Louise Economides' *Wild Anthropocene*, underscores Jeffers' significance for the field of environmental literature. And the reviews by David Rothman and James Karman document how Jeffers' work has entered into contemporary philosophy and religious thought. The final review in this issue may well be the first review in *Jeffers Studies* of a contemporary novel. In her review of Rachel Cusk's *Second Place*, Geneva Gano probes the imaginative dialogue between Cusk and her narrator with Jeffers as mediated through Mabel Dodge Luhan's *Lorenzo in Taos*.

I should note that a number of these reviews are the result of someone in the Jeffers community suggesting the title. Please, if you happen on a book that you think would of interest to readers of Jeffers, send the title along. If you would like to be a reviewer for *Jeffers Studies*, please let me know that as well.

And if you have suggestions for features for the journal, suggestions for improving the journal, or concerns that should be addressed, please share them with me. Again: jseditor@robinsonjeffersassociation.org.

In closing I hope it's not amiss to share one personal detail, which may help illustrate my sense of the journal. Fifty years ago, I published my first critical article: "The Interactive Voice of Robinson Jeffers' *Hungerfield*." I was then all of twenty-five and fresh out of graduate school. The journal was the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* (the forerunner of *Jeffers Studies*) edited by Robert Brophy. *RJN* brought me into the conversation. Bob brought me into the community. Both the conversation and the community only continue if we continue to renew it. *Jeffers Studies* is part of how we do that.

Dana Gioia, Christopher Benfey, David Mason, Terry Beers, Derek Mong, David Lehman, Terence Diggory, Robert Von Hallberg, Rachel Hadas, Jason Stacy, Daniel Helsing, Kevin Hearle, Amanda Holmes Duffy, Brenda Hillman, Ugo Gervasoni, Jesse Nathan, Richard A. Rosengarten, David Yezzi, Charles Altieri, Katie Peterson

Robinson Jeffers' *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*: Centennial Reflections

[Summer 2025 the editor invited a number of poets and scholars to share comments on the occasion of the centennial of the publication of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*.]

Dana Gioia: The Ghosts of Dead Professors

The centenary of the publication of *The Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* is a significant anniversary for American poetry, though few will celebrate it. This composite collection established Robinson Jeffers as a powerful, new voice in Modernist literature. His early readers were struck by the originality of both his style and worldview; it was a voice and vision never heard before in American verse. To his first champions, such as Babette Deutsch, Mark Van Doren, and even H.L. Mencken, Jeffers embodied the revolutionary energy of modern art.

A hundred years later, Jeffers doesn't appear in the academic canon of Modernist poetry. His work doesn't fit the standard definition of the movement. The formulation for inclusion was based

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on the "High Modernism" of poets such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, H.D., and Marianne Moore, who achieved their effects through stylistic density, imagistic association, and allusion. The official version of Modernism also still rejects the narrative mode in poetry; only the lyric could express the sensibility of the new movement. Jeffers was too expansive, philosophical, and narrative to qualify. His story didn't fit the master narrative.

Such a narrow definition of Modernist poetry would have puzzled readers in 1925. They saw Jeffers as part of a comprehensive transformation of poetic sensibility; it would not have occurred to them that this development was limited to the lyric mode. They found his work not merely new but shocking.

The past is always simplified. The present can't deal with the multiplicity of historical data. This is a special problem in education: neither students nor professors can read everything. (Nowadays they don't even manage the minimal assigned reading.) The literary canon allows us to ignore enough things to make the past manageable.

Criticism, however, exists to assess the quality of accepted opinion. The goal—impossible but nonetheless compelling—is to identify, promote, and explicate the best works. Might we hurry this process along by pointing out a few big and obvious problems with our superannuated definition of American Modernist verse? After a hundred years, might we admit that *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* still commands the attention of intelligent readers? Might we also ask if the perspective by which it was dismissed by the New Critics and their successors are still valid?

We might even broaden our obvious skepticism about the mid-century consensus. How can we accept a canon that excluded so much of the last century's best poetry? What sane formulation of modern poetry ignored Jeffers, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Langston Hughes—three major poets who articulated worldviews impossible a generation earlier? Their popularity and accessibility contributed to their low repute among New Critics who saw Modernism as an elitist vanguard better understood by intellectuals than the general public.

The academic canon also ignored radical early modern innovators, such as Stephen Crane, Carl Sandburg, and Vachel Lindsay. They are minor writers but also ones who helped shape the future of American verse. Does it still make sense to marginalize inno-

vative anti-Romantic traditionalists such as Robert Frost and E. A. Robinson? Frost's *North of Boston* may be more accessible than Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," but it is no less original. Wasn't much of the core Modernist canon created for the needs of critics rather than readers?

The purpose of poetry is not to provide fodder for critical explication. Poetry exists to make us more alert to our own existence. It enchants, awakens, commemorates. In its prophetic mode, it also instructs and warns. Poetry is speech raised to the level of song. Some of those songs are complex; others are simple but no less powerful for their directness. Some songs tell stories—perhaps their most ancient function. Poems present the secrets of existence and convey the joy of being alive. "Tell me, poet, what you do," Rilke asks. No matter how he poses the question, his idealized poet replies, "I praise."

Critics will prefer to analyze some poems more than others; it makes them appear smarter. But most of a poem's value is not found in a classroom. Poetry speaks to all of life. "Man hungers for beauty," said Oscar Wilde, "there is a void." Poetry fills that void without asking for educational credentials or peer review. To read poetry is to walk among the dead. It's not to be bullied by the ghosts of dead professors. Come, let us find Jeffers among the shades.

[Dana Gioia's poetry collections include *99 Poems: New & Selected* (Graywolf P, 2016), awarded the Poets' Prize as the best new book of the year, and *Interrogations at Noon* (Graywolf P, 2001), awarded the American Book Award. In addition to having served as California Poet Laureate, he was Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts.]

Christopher Benfey

Anyone who has made the pilgrimage to Tor House knows something of Robinson Jeffers' self-chosen isolation. From his lonely redoubt, Jeffers wrote some of the indispensable poems of the twentieth century. Like Robert Frost, whom he sometimes resembles, Jeffers was a master in both short forms and long. Like certain California painters and wines, however, he hasn't always traveled well to the East Coast. It's time for that to change. His flinty intellect,

his unsentimental care for wild things, his fears for the fate of the world, all these seem necessary now.

[Christopher Benfey is Mellon Professor of English at Mount Holyoke College. His books include *A Summer of Hummingbirds: Love, Art, and Scandal in the Intersecting Worlds of Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Martin Johnson Heade* (Penguin, 2008).]

David Mason: A Note on Jeffers

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, dimly aware that a poet named Theodore Roethke lived in Seattle, but otherwise convinced that literature was made by people east of the Rockies, or in far-off Europe. So, to find Robinson Jeffers' "Boats in a Fog" in an anthology—a poem describing a scene I often witnessed myself—was galvanizing. And then to discover narratives like "Roan Stallion," telling stories with an intensity akin to D. H. Lawrence, opened possibilities I had not dreamed were possible for a modern poet.

In libraries I was able to read some of Jeffers' individual books, and at least in my recollection *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* had the biggest impact on me. Here was Aeschylus reimagined in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," and here were other narrative and dramatic poems of real accomplishment, including "Tamar."

But I was also struck by the sonnets of "The Truce and the Peace," and by the many fine lyric or meditative poems, like "Shine, Perishing Republic," "Divinely Superfluous Beauty," "Salmon Fishing," "To the Stone-Cutters" and "Continent's End." This was a poet of my part of the world, the Pacific coast, which meant the environmentalist consciousness was innate. As my own acquaintance with Greece and the tragic sense of life deepened, I saw how far beyond regionalism Jeffers' aesthetic went. He understood timelessness.

Jeffers' brief introduction to the 1935 reissue of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* wrestles with tradition and modernity as we all do in our way, but he most becomes himself when he forgets such distinctions: "I was past my green-sickness by that time, and did not stop to think whether the verses were original or followed a tendency, or would find a reader" (*CP* 4: 386). He has reached an

aesthetic and psychological crux such as Yeats did when he wrote, "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd. I am a lonely man. I am nothing." To paraphrase a later poem by Jeffers, how beautiful is this nothing.

[David Mason's books include the poetry collection *Pacific Light* (Red Hen P, 2022) and the verse novel *Ludlow* (Red Hen P, 2007), which was awarded the Colorado Book Award for Poetry and named best book of poetry in 2007 by the *Contemporary Poetry Review* and the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.]

Terry Beers

I have spent most of my career reading and writing about California literature, especially literature that strongly evoked the natural world. But I began mainly reading and writing about the work of Robinson Jeffers. His language often astonished me. Who else could write about "lacing the suns with planets. . ."? (*CP* 1: 189) But what moved me most was Jeffers' evocation of place, and as the world turned, I began to look for that same quality in the works of other writers. And I found it. Read John Steinbeck, and Jeffers is often somehow present. Same with many other writers of California and the west. In no particular order, and off the top of my head, I think of Gerald Haslam, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Bernice Zamora, Gary Snyder, William Everson, Edward Abbey, even Kenneth Rexroth. To riff off the late great Mojo Nixon, it's not just Elvis who's everywhere. It's Jeffers, too.

And that brings me to "Roan Stallion." For me, just as Jeffers offers a path into the work of so many great writers of my state, "Roan Stallion" offers a path into other Jeffers works, especially I've found, for students, who are often new Jeffers readers and who can get knocked over by the powerful symbolism, the moving human drama, and the overarching, heart-breaking beauty surrounding that drama. "Roan Stallion," to borrow a phrase from Clark's *The City of Trembling Leaves*, leads "the mind out."

[Terry Beers, Professor Emeritus, Santa Clara University, was general editor of the California Legacy Series. *The End of*

Eden: Agrarian Spaces and the Rise of the California Social Novel (U of Nevada P, 2018), is the most recent of his six books on California literature.]

Derek Mong: On Robinson Jeffers' "Continent's End"

Robinson Jeffers' "Continent's End"—a haunting, early meditation on America's western shores—revels in balance, at least initially. The two parts of the poem's setting, its time and place, both sit squarely in the in-between. "At the equinox," Jeffers writes, "the earth was veiled in a late rain" (*CP* 1: 16-17). So, it's late September or March; day and night are equally long. Jeffers occupies his familiar littoral zone, where "the immense breadth of the continent" meets a "doubled stretch of water." And that's where he'll remain: between land and sea, surf and sky.

This all feels dangerously druidic, as if—standing athwart these primordial forces—Jeffers intends to pull the curtains back on the cosmos and poke his stoney visage beyond the stars. With his Homeric lines whipping behind him like kite strings. With his billowy shirt and cigarette still visible from the sand dunes of Carmel.

But isn't this what Jeffers' fans love about him? (I count myself among them.) His anachronistic self-stylings? His unapologetic embrace of prophecy and doom? As he watches a storm roiling on the horizon, he addresses the ocean as his "mother"—who *does* that?—and seems perfectly at home. That's one of the pleasures in reading Jeffers; he's always out of fashion. That's because, at least among the literati, he was never really in vogue.

Take, for instance, one of my favorite lines in this poem. Jeffers is chatting up the Pacific, just another member of his inhuman family. His "we" is our species writ large: "You were much younger when we crawled out of the womb and lay in the sun's eye on the tideline." I love the bombast of that plural first-person. (I'm guilty of deploying it in my own poems.) I love this casual reminder that humans are a late entry onto the earth's stage. That's another of Jeffers' gifts: he reveals our geologic insignificance—in the eyes of oceans, against the lifespan of rocks.

It's that fact, I imagine, that contributes most to his canonical undoing. More than his anti-modernism or gutsy, WWII resistance. More than the backlash that'd inevitably follow a poet whose face appeared on *Time* magazine. Jeffers decenters humans from what we've come to think as our world; that tends to freak us out. He did so before the word "Anthropocene" registered as erudite or hip. His title, "Continent's End," does more than establish a location or allude to Manifest Destiny. It reminds us that our continent *will* end, just as it once began, breaking off from Pangaea. "Continent's End" isn't just a place; it's a prediction.

It's no surprise then that this poem's initial balance simply cannot last. As Jeffers continues gazing into the ocean, he sees its origins. How its "tides are in our veins." How it filled its "beds out of the condensation of thin vapor." How its waves followed actual "tides of fire." Never mind that there's biological and geological truth to these statements. (Human blood, Rachel Carson reports, contains the same elements as sea water.) Never mind that Jeffers drops these observations with seer-like certainty and casual aplomb. The real revelation here is that the ocean's beginning resembles one of the continent's possible ends: it goes up in flames.

Just ask a Californian, who spends their summers tracking wildfires and monitoring the AQI. When Robinson Jeffers, the Golden State's unofficial poet laureate, peers into the ocean's past, he winds up seeing California's future.

> [The most recent of Derek Mong's three collections is *When the Earth Flies into the Sun* (Saturnalia, 2024). He is the co-editor of the journal *At Length* and Chairs the English Department at Wabash College.]

David Lehman

It is easy to see why Robinson Jeffers was effectively canceled, though the word in that sense wasn't current when Jeffers violated the norms. He was a Republican in the 1930s and an isolationist in World War II, and his rhetoric gave offense. A phrase like "the cripple's power-need of Roosevelt" is indecent.[1] But we are getting

1 This phrase is from "What Odd Expedients," a poem Jeffers initially included in *The Double Axe* but dropped from the collection. The poem was posthumously

better at separating the poetry from the politics of writers, and if you understand Jeffers as nature's advocate in its perpetual conflict with man, you will appreciate the raw power of his vision. Like a disciple of Schopenhauer, Jeffers believed that pessimism coincided with reality. Man was impulsive, destructive, ignoble; "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (*CP* 1: 377), he writes. America was decadent, flamboyantly vulgar. Artists are "foredefeated / Challengers of oblivion" (*CP* 1: 5). The anger that animates the poems is exciting because it is unleavened by buoyant irony or gallows humor. His vision of his countrymen is scary. They are ripe not for a Caesar but for

> Some kindly Sicilian tyrant who'll keep
> Poverty and Carthage off until the Romans arrive.
> We are easy to manage, a gregarious people,
> Full of sentiment, clever at mechanics, and we love our luxuries. (*CP* 2: 486)

[David Lehman is the founding editor and series editor of *The Best American Poetry,* editor of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* as well as a poet and writer of non-fiction. His most recent poetry collection is *The Morning Line* (U of Pittsburgh P, 2021).]

Terence Diggory

I don't expect a Robinson Jeffers Revival anytime soon. As Jeffers well understood, literary history evaluates a writer's significance in the context of Schools and Movements, and Jeffers was a determined loner. His isolation was stark rather than picturesque, like Frost's. Lacking critical acclaim or general popularity, Jeffers will nevertheless retain a place in anthologies and continue to be read by California regionalists, environmentalists, and poets who have much to learn from his craft. And perhaps those of us who are accustomed to reading Jeffers will gain from his work some courage for facing the present historical moment. "Shine, Perishing Republic"!

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published in the 1977 edition of *The Double Axe* edited by William Everson and Bill Hotchkiss. In his final revision to the poem, a typescript not available to Everson and Hotchkiss, Jeffers revised this phrase to read "the cripple's-vanity of Roosevelt" (*CP* 3: 137). [ed. note]

[Terence Diggory is Professor Emeritus at Skidmore College where he was Courtney and Steven Ross Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Chair of the Department of English. The editor of *The Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets*, his other publications include *Yeats and American Poetry: The Tradition of the Self* (Princeton UP, 1983).]

Robert Von Hallberg

It has taken me a long time to appreciate Jeffers, even though I had the advantage of studying Whitman and American poetry with Albert Gelpi, who long ago saw Jeffers' value. Of course, it was the Inhumanism that put me off. It is easy now to recognize Jeffers' wisdom concerning the destructiveness of settlement. In the early-1970s his judgment seemed harsh, provincial, abstract, as if he were looking at his contemporaries from an implausibly distant perch. It *is* surprising that living in one of the most beautiful places imaginable he felt the pertinence of force, violence, and lurid appetites. I'm thinking of "Love-Children," "Oysters," and "Memoir" among the short poems. Even very different California poets—Frank Bidart, for one, in *Golden State* (1973), and Larry Levis, in "The Oldest Living Thing in L.A." (1997)—seem to have learned from Jeffers to reckon with the severity of sunny California. One hears daily references to predatory men, predatory stares, predatory loan practices. No one but Jeffers admires predation. Independence of mind came naturally to him. It's not on offer everywhere.

[Having retired from the University of Chicago where he was Helen A. Regenstein Professor, English, Comparative Literature, Robert Von Hallberg is currently Professor of English at Claremont McKenna College. His books include *Lyric Powers* (U of Chicago P, 2008) and *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Harvard UP, 1985).]

Rachel Hadas

In my yellowing little Vintage edition ($1.45) of Robinson Jeffers' *Selected Poems*, I found the program from the October 2007 induction of Jeffers into the Poets' Corner of The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The then Poet-in-Residence at

the Cathedral, Charles Martin, contributed a tribute to Jeffers; this paragraph merits being resuscitated:

> In his later years. Jeffers' reputation faded somewhat, but recently his life and work has found, in the words of John Hollander, "his moment of major reassessment," an event brought about by a new generation of readers and writers interested in his achievements as a narrative poet and playwright, and by his concern for our all-too-human temptations toward violence and evil, and his pioneering attempt to reorient us toward a new understanding of the obligations of our presence in the natural world.

I hope that what Martin wrote almost twenty years ago is still true.

We need what is often called eco-poetry now more than ever; some of the best poets now writing in English (I'm thinking of A.E. Stallings, Karen Solie, and Alice Oswald, and there are many others) have turned their talents increasingly in this direction, as have poets from Kiev to Gaza. The classicist Edith Hall's 2025 green critique of the *Iliad*, *Epic of the Earth*, is another harbinger of the turn in our poetic awareness and practice. Jeffers with his tragic grandeur and gritty particularities has always been a compelling voice, and there is now no excuse for disregarding him. The long narrative poems, like E.A. Robinson's, are out of fashion now, but fashions can change; and the poems I've just been revisiting—"To the Stonecutters," "Hurt Hawks," "Love the Wild Swan," and others—have if anything gained in power. I want to pay tribute here to another California poet, Dana Gioia, who has tirelessly championed and anthologized Jeffers' work.

> [Rachel Hadas's collections of poetry include, most recently, *Ghost Guest* (2023) and *Pandemic Almanac* (2022), both Ragged Sky Press, and her translations include three plays by Euripides. She is Professor Emerita of English at Rutgers University-Newark where she was Board of Governors Professor.]

Jason Stacy

Edgar Lee Masters, who diagnosed so much of what ails people in *Spoon River Anthology*, said of Robinson Jeffers: "Well, here's to the powerful young man Jeffers, alive with health, and of the sanest vision, qualities so necessary to handle and to treat sick and bewil-

dered humanity." There's no higher compliment from one poet to another."

[Jason Stacy is Professor of History and Social Science Pedagogy at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. In addition to his work on Walt Whitman, he is the author of *Spoon River America: Edgar Lee Masters and the Myth of the American Small Town* (U of Illinois P, 2021).]

Daniel Helsing: More Contemporary Than His Contemporaries

I first heard of Robinson Jeffers fairly late in my studies as a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at Lund University. I did not read him until I'd finished my degree and moved to California, however—not with enough care and presence, in any case, to be genuinely absorbed by his work.

Ever since my late teens, reading Wittgenstein and Thomas Mann, I've been drawn to, in both my creative and critical writing, the question of what is possible aesthetically in our cultural moment. "Possible aesthetically" means something along the lines of: What does artistic integrity mean in our (contemporary) (Western, global, Swedish) culture? What kinds of literature in today's world can one (or I) enjoy aesthetically and take seriously philosophically? While I don't pretend to have found answers to these questions—I suspect that incessant questioning is part of the answer—I at least have a better sense of what I do enjoy and what my thoughts and opinions are.

I bring this up because Jeffers seems to have been wrestling with similar questions in the years leading up to *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. In his wonderful introduction to the second edition from 1935, he recounts a hike twenty-one years prior, in 1914, with Una and their dog, in the Del Monte Forest. On this particular day, a "bitter meditation" on the poetry of his contemporaries filled his mind and darkened his mood. Rather than beauty, passion, and intelligibility, in the style of Milton, Keats, and Shelley, the ideal of the day was austerity. Jeffers could sense the direction in which poets like Mallarmé and Pound were going: diminution, elimination. He couldn't stomach it: "These austerities were not for me; originality

by amputation was too painful for me." By the end of the hike, he had made his "final decision not to become a 'modern'" (*CP* 4: 386).

That decision, though, didn't bring him instant clarity; he still hadn't found his Inhumanist aesthetics. For the time being, he was "doomed to go on imitating dead men"—"unless," he adds, "some impossible wind should blow me emotions or ideas, or a point of view, or even mere rhythms, that had not occurred to them" (*CP* 4: 386). The rhythms that he could barely bring himself to hope for found him on the shores of the Pacific, whipping the rocks, trees, and creatures of the central California coastline.

In the Western world, more or less since the end of the nineteenth century, it is fair to say that science and technology increasingly determine what counts as real. If something can't be measured—at least in principle—it doesn't really exist. When extrapolating this metaphysically, we end up with a view of existence in which matter and energy evolve purposelessly over billions and billions of years, across incomprehensibly large cosmic vistas, to produce galaxies, planets, life, and mind. Humankind is but a "mote of dust in the morning sky," as astronomer Carl Sagan puts it in the opening sequence of *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980), standing on a grass-covered cliff by the Pacific—a sequence shot, fittingly enough, just a dozen or so miles south of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

In my view, Jeffers ranks among the greatest poets to give form to our culture's cosmic physicalism, for want of a better term—a world in which humanity is an ephemeral species in a universe governed by blind natural laws. By giving up the fruitless quest to become "modern" and "original," Jeffers became more contemporary than most of his contemporaries. He was never afraid to plumb the depths of that indifferent void in which, as he writes in "Joy," "at length quietness / Will cover [the] wistful eyes" of humankind" (*CP* 1: 117)—a void which seems to be closing in by the day in our time, by way of ever-increasing fossil fuel emissions, out-of-control artificial intelligence, or a sudden nuclear apocalypse.

Yet Jeffers is not a poet of abstract theory. To say that Pacific winds transformed his writing is barely metaphorical. Precisely this is the most illuminating aspect for me, in relation to my own creative work: California's sensuous presence, the way in which the environment shapes the form and rhythms of his poems. Regardless of one's philosophical worldview (I tend to veer closer to some kind of agnosticism than materialism), I see the decision to let a given

scene or situation decide on form and style as crucial. If literature is a kind of mirror of the world, then the rhythms of the world must give shape to the life nerve of the poem. This doesn't comprise an answer to the question of what is possible aesthetically today; but it is to say that Jeffers is one of those poets whose poetry is both beautiful and possible to take seriously.

[Daniel Helsing is a Swedish writer, critic, translator and co-editor of the journal *Populär Poesi*, which in 2024 published an issue focused on the work of Jeffers. He teaches at Lund University.]

Kevin Hearle: The Question of Jeffers' Relevance

What do I think of Robinson Jeffers? I think he is the Ur great poet of California (especially its landscapes), the greatest U.S. narrative poet of the 20th Century, the poet who rescued the long line from Whitman's sentimentality and tendency to ramble, and an indispensable resource for anyone who wants to understand the archetypal power of tragic poetry. If he doesn't matter today, that would say far more about what we have become as a nation and a society than it would about Robinson Jeffers or his poems.

I first heard of Jeffers from reading Yvor Winters. His mistaken claim that if Jeffers had had the courage of his convictions he would have done what Winter's friend Hart Crane had done—namely commit suicide by jumping off the back of a ship at sea—caught my attention, but Jeffers' poems held it. The enormous force of "Tamar" with its incest, sacrifice, and those long, sinewy lines gripped me like a Greek tragedy somehow sprung from the rocky coastline of my home state. Here was a California poetry that was strong, embedded in the place, and a challenge. Would I ever be able to write similarly powerful poems about California?

Jeffers' pessimism about civilization and Inhumanism's faith in the value of the non-human have always resonated with me, but—even as I came to love so many of his poems—I also couldn't keep myself from noticing the significant barriers between Jeffers and me. However much I recognized him as a master, someone whose poems I would come back to again and again for pleasure and for techniques to use in my own poetry, I never wanted to be

one of his disciples. For the Pittsburgh native Jeffers, California was a place of escape from civilization. For me, California has always been civilization. Not only have seven generations of my family lived here over the last 175 years, but my parents were dedicated, amateur archaeologists, and I grew up doing site surveys or screening for chipping waste and pottery sherds on weekends. Where Jeffers saw his characters intruding on raw wilderness, I can't help but see beautiful landscapes where millennia of human habitation have been obscured by the mass murder or forced removal of indigenous peoples.

The other main obstacle between Jeffers and me as poets is his almost complete lack of a sense of humor. Perhaps it is a weakness of my poetry that by temperament I lean toward dark humor over tragedy, but I can't help but feel that it would be a greater weakness for me to try to be a tragic poet by suppressing my humor.

I also need to admit that I think I have at times misread Jeffers in ways that have been detrimental to my development as a poet. After the relative success (*d'estime* rather than financial) of my first book, I tried to write poems which were more universal and drew on Jeffers' undeniable access to the power of the sacred. The results have been a mixed bag at best, and thirty years later I am still working on that second book of poems.

[Kevin Hearle's first collection, *Each Thing We Know Is Changed Because We Know It* (Ahsahta P, 1994). An independent scholar, his extensive work on John Steinbeck includes the revised edition of the Viking Critical Library *Grapes of Wrath* (1997).]

Amanda Holmes Duffy

One of the things I most love about recording *Read Me a Poem* is that listeners introduce me to poets I don't know. This is what happened when someone recommended "The Purse Seine" by Robinson Jeffers—"a grand poem that speaks to us today," the listener wrote.

When I read "The Purse-Seine" it blew me away. The authority of the voice, the lack of pretension, the clean, clear language. I read it aloud several times, kept going back to it, needed to know more.

I learned that Jeffers ascribed to a philosophy he called "Inhumanism," believing mankind was immoral, materialistic and at

odds with nature. This was why he took himself off, along with his family, and built a stone house overlooking the Pacific and Big Sur.

He and his work stood alone, like stone. He wasn't interested in "po biz"—didn't care to schmooze with the poets of the day. That's what you sense when you read him too. His utter indifference to approval gives the work enormous power.

I discovered that he'd fallen out of print. But I combed through Biblio.com and purchased a second-hand Vintage paperback of his selected poems. Reading "Roan Stallion" I realized Ted Hughes was certainly influenced by Jeffers. Seamus Heaney too. Why isn't Jeffers taught?

Certainly, he was ahead of his time. I was reminded of another poet introduced to me by a podcast listener—Kentucky poet James Still. No one's ever heard of him either. He was a great poet and prose writer. His *River of Earth* is for me better than Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*—much more immediate, much more visceral.

It's the same with Robinson Jeffers. Much more visceral than his contemporary T.S. Eliot. Better than? Perhaps not. But his voice is more immediate. His command of the language runs so deep. It shakes you to your soul.

> [Amanda Holmes Duffy is widely published short story writer and the author of the novel *I Know Where I Am When I'm Falling* (Oak Tree P, 2014). She hosts the weekly podcast, "Read Me a Poem," for *The American Scholar*.]

Brenda Hillman

I continued to teach the work of Robinson Jeffers over the years, especially in my EcoPoetics classes, not only because of his visionary quest and his deeply felt relationship to the non-human world but also because he took a hard line about human activity in relation to the planet early in the 20th century before many other poets were taking this position. He recognized that civilization was not going to get it right if humans centered on themselves alone. After visiting Tor House, I understood why he took this stance—he lived in true relation to a landscape that did not need him as an observer, but to which he contributed great beauty. Even if he had a sour view of humans at times, I so admire his stance toward the non-human and his powerful, turbulent poetry.

[Brenda Hillman, a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, has published ten collections, most recently *In a Few Minutes Before Later* (Wesleyan UP, 2024). She holds the Olivia Filippi Chair in Poetry at Saint Mary's College of California.]

Ugo Gervasoni: Some Thoughts on Two Features of Jeffers' Poetry

It is, very likely, a common reaction for many readers of Robinson Jeffers' poetry, even when they first glance through any book by the Stone Mason of Tor House, to be struck by two of its characteristic features:

1. the abundance of impressive images, which forcefully capture the attention and seem to stay engraved in the mind;
2. the philosophical relevance of many of his lines and stanzas, whose starting point is often the contemplation of Nature.

This double aspect is present from the beginning of Jeffers' creative work, and it seems therefore worthwhile to briefly discuss it with reference to *Roan Stallion, Tamar & Other Poems*.

This concise contribution will start by dedicating some remarks to the second of the two points mentioned above.

Many Jeffers poems may provoke in readers with affinity a meditative response similar to the one felt after reading some dense poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge,—the major Romantic poet who gave new life to philosophical poetry and who created, for example, the unforgettable character of Idoloclastes Satyrane in "A Timeless Epitaph"—"The Mocker, or Breaker, of Idols and Illusions," a powerful *alter ego* of himself who honored Tradition and hated "The hollow puppets of an hollow Age, / Ever idolatrous, and changing ever / Its worthless Idols!" (*Sibylline Leaves*, 1817). It is hardly surprising if readers familiar with Jeffers will now find themselves thinking of the initial words of "Shine, Perishing Republic," "While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire, …" (*CP* 1: 15). Coleridge and Jeffers, in fact, invite their readers to consider the difference between passive acceptance of stereotypes, which makes people as worthless and

as vulgar as puppets, and life based on mature and independent thoughts, these being the offspring of grown-up brains. It is noteworthy that the result, in both cases, is not didactic poetry, which tends to be pedantic and boring; it is philosophical poetry, *i.e.* lines addressed to, and befitting of, an adult mind. Moreover: the meditative quality of these lines is achieved by making meter, rhythm and rhyme adopt the cadences of colloquial speech.

In "Vices," from *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, Jeffers makes clear that his nature is characterized by coldness "and the tenor of a stone tranquility" in contrast with "spirited people" who

> make a thousand jewels in verse and prose, and
> the restlessness of talent
> Runs over and floods the stage or spreads its fever on canvas.
> They are skilled in music too, the demon is never satisfied, they take to puppets, they invent
> New arts, they take to drugs … and we all applaud our vices
> (*CP* 1: 112)

After concentrating upon these lines, readers may find themselves thinking about life, about the values that make it noble, and about the radical importance of the best intellectual choices available to them: the words seem to hint (indirectly, yet powerfully) at the possibility of self-improvement. The second part of the line, "and we all applaud our vices" will keep echoing in the chambers of a few studious minds, suggesting that no man is an island, that there is an invisible and inalienable bond among men, that vices and virtues define and dictate the general behavior of all humanity, that men are indeed brothers, as Charles Baudelaire sang at the end of the first poem of *Les Fleurs du Mal*: "—Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,— mon frère!"[2]

"Practical People," the poem which comes soon after "Vices," contrasts the cognitive blindness of men and women totally absorbed in their present, hectic tasks—the only ones which, in "our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civili-

2 The theme of human brotherhood will be developed , in a darker mood, in the poem "Original Sin," included in the collection *The Double Axe* (1948):

> But we are what we are, and we might remember
> Not to hate any person, for all are vicious;
> And not be astonished at any evil, all are deserved;
> And not fear death; it is the only way to be cleansed. (*CP* 3: 204)

zation"[3] are considered worth pursuing, because they yield tangible results—with the eternal rhythms of Nature, which relentlessly repeat themselves and seem to lead nowhere: it is practical people who alienate themselves from this world of beauty and splendor, and drown in the murky waters of their pitiful ignorance. So-called practical people are, in fact, impractical:

> And all these tidal gatherings, growth and decay,
> Shining and darkening, are forever
> Renewed; and the whole cycle impenitently
> Revolves, and all the past is future:—
> Make it a difficult world … for practical people. (*CP* 1: 112)

Thus, Jeffers' philosophical poetry, as well as Coleridge's or any other earnest poet's, under the appearance of denouncing evil and decrying what is negative, actually always accomplishes good, because it contributes to the good intentionally.

With regard to impressive images—point No. 1 above—, the following lines from Part VI of "Tamar" offer a good example of Jeffers' visionary power. Beautiful, morbid Tamar is in her bed, slowly and painfully recovering after the night when she "Danced with slow steps and streaming hair, / Dark and slender Against the pallid sea-gleam, slender and maidenly / Dancing and weeping …" (*CP* 1: 44):

> The afternoon
> Was feverish for so temperate a sea-coast
> And terribly full of light, the sea like a hard mirror
> Reverberated the straight and shining serpents
> That fell from heaven and Tamar dreamed in a doze
> She was hung naked by that tight cloth bandage
> Half way between sea and sky, beaten on by both,
> Burning with light; wakening she found she had tumbled
> The bed-clothes to the floor and torn her night-gown
> To rags, and was alone in the room, and blinded
> By the great glare of sun in the western windows. (*CP* 1: 60)

The scene is vividly recreated, it pulses with life and repressed desires, the poor girl yearns for freedom, yet she cannot avoid sinking into misery and confusion. The hot air, the pitiless sun and the shining sea indifferently rage on her exposed flesh: their

3 W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, Edited by Daniel Albright, Everyman, 1990, p. 619.

inhuman grandeur seems to suggest a vague promise of help, but Tamar will not be able to escape from her doom.

That slim, naked body floating in midair haunted my imagination; Tamar became as powerful as La Belle Dame sans Merci, and had me, like Keats's knight-at-arms, "in thrall". A possible way out was to try and give that dream-image shape and color.

[Ugo Gervasoni is an Italian writer, artist, and translator. His most recent Jeffers publication is *Stallone Roano di Robinson Jeffers*, his translation of "Roan Stallion."]

Jesse Nathan

The steely long lines haunt me. The first great poet of European origin to live in the place now known as California. He made a sharp song of the West Coast. An Archilochus of the American tradition, that early and piercing voice whose poetry is partly a quality of the vinegar he's serving. I'm probably a poet of praise, and sometimes I praise dispraise. Robinson Jeffers' short poem "Let Them Alone" comes often to mind. A poet, writes Jeffers, should be left alone to write: "no prizes, no ceremony, / They kill the man." What makes "Hemingway play the fool and Faulkner forget his art" is a failure to resist the noise. Sometimes that noise is the invitation of allies: "He can shake off his enemies but not his friends" (*CP* 3: 427). But all these things—particularly playing for status or reward—are a distraction and a waste of spirit, he argued, and a corruption of the gift. Making poetry is not a career any more than breathing is.

Fame eats vitality and time. I've never met a poet who doesn't feel under-appreciated, but I think of Jeffers when I feel vain.

And while I often don't care for his versions of masculinity, I share his disdain for what Gwendolyn Brooks called "the ridiculousness of man." I have a hope for the species that Jeffers would probably laugh at. Hope for what? he might say. Or maybe: What's wrong with you? He saw evidence of what humankind would do to itself and the planet long before the extermination camps, the splitting of the atom, or the shock of discovering what too much CO2 does to the atmosphere. Looking out at the Earth, he wrote: "What I see is the enormous beauty of things." And about artmaking: "what I attempt / Is nothing to that" (*CP* 1: 392). Jeffers loved nature for its immense indifference to humankind. The eye of the hawk, the harshness of granite, the certainty of waves.

Not me. Nature is profoundly beautiful, and I appreciate how it over and over humbles human pride, but I loathe the terms of this universe, the brutality and unconcern, the inexorability of its grinding everything into something else, entropy and endless change. I love human culture because at its finest it resists those terms. And is a defiance of death no less appealing because it can't possibly succeed. A figure of spirit, and even love. There may well be something wrong with me.

[Jesse Nathan's debut collection *Eggtooth* (Unbound Edition P, 2023) won the New Writers Award in Poetry, the Housatonic Book Prize. He is a Lecturer in the English Department at UC Berkeley.]

Richard A. Rosengarten

My critical muse is chiefly prose, and my education in twentieth-century poetry had been limited to the usual anthological worthies: selections from Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, nods to Stevens, some Merrill, a little Ginsberg and Plath for spice and (in high school, of all places) Ferlinghetti. Robinson Jeffers was unknown to me until an unnervingly urbane doctoral advisee, Brett Colasacco, declared in his deceptively understated manner that he planned to write his dissertation on Jeffers. I needed to catch up, fast, so I turned to Tim Hunt's *Selected Poetry* and was immediately transfixed by the opening poem from *Tamar*, "To His Father":

> Christ was your lord and captain all your life,
> He fails the world but you he did not fail … (*CP* 4: 288)

Even my prose-formed mind's eye was brought up short. I badly wanted a caesura after "fails the world" and Jeffers' prosody refuses it; and so off I went, hurtling into verses punctuating betrayal and unambiguous rejection redolent of the tenor of the Psalmist yet resolutely resistant to the same. This was something at once familiar and entirely different—a complex yet unambiguous rejection of the father's authority achieved via invocation of the (displaced) Christian authority that did once but does no longer mark the father's personhood and the son's rejection. This is no "buffered self" but an unnostalgic acknowledgement that the father's identity cannot and will not be the son's. Make no mistake: the father's will is known; and his will will not be done.

But the poem does not allow the reader to be done with Christianity (as Jeffers will not really allow himself to be). Turning from prosody to hymnody, "the faith of our fathers" will not, contra the song, be true to death because it cannot be. "Christ was …"—the past tense references immediately that the father is deceased, but also that the work of Christ is no longer. Jeffers construes Christ not as intercessor but as interrupter, the one who stands—inexorably and everlastingly, dogmatically fitting as it were—between son and father.

All this bracingly acknowledged, the son of the poem nonetheless offers his own form of filial piety, paying heed (however brief and diffident) to the work of Christ in making his father stalwart "through all forms of grief and strife," a man "full-armed" against "outward malice" or "the worse-fanged snake." Yet even in this tribute the referenced opening notice—"He fails the world"—lingers. What is it, the reader is made to wonder, that

> … coils in one's own brain against your calm,
> That great rich jewel well guarded for his sake
> With coronal age and death like quieting balm. (*CP* 4: 288)

The crowning achievement of endurance—that effort at which the rocks invariably outlast the humans—is nonetheless given note regarding the father who has, after all, endured. If the poet's father is not The Father, he has after all witnessed something to the son who is not The Son. Jeffers' rejection is at once complete and diffident, decided and nuanced, barren and resourceful. Folks who turn

to poetry to understand the "crisis of authority" in religion have their litany: Arnold's "Dover Beach" to announce the way, perhaps Eliot's "Prufrock," definitely Stevens' "Sunday Morning" and "Blessed Rage for Order" and, more recently, Larkin's "Church-Going." All important statements—all to be sure admirable, but all also abstractions when juxtaposed to the flesh and blood of Jeffers' account.

[Richard A. Rosengarten's publications include *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence: Divine Design and the Incursions of Evil* (Palgrave, 2000). He is Associate Professor of Religion, Literature, and Visual Culture in The University of Chicago Divinity School.]

David Yezzi

The centenary of *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* gives us occasion to recall the singularity of Robinson Jeffers' vision. From his perch on the edge of the continent, overlooking the severe expanse of the Pacific, he struck a singular note in American poetry. Though he shares with Whitman a genius for the long line, Jeffers is in some sense the anti-Whitman: where the former found a universe within himself, Jeffers identifies the self as a transitory speck in the vastness of time. Jeffers' cosmology operates in terms of the geologic, reckoned not in years or eras but in eons. His is a vision at once mystical and pragmatic; preferring a hawk to a man and a rock to a hawk, he aligns himself with eternity.

[David Yezzi's most recent poetry collection is *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems* (Measure P, 2022). He has served as Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion* and teaches in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.]

Charles Altieri: Statement on Jeffers Now

I had given up reading and teaching Jeffers several years ago, for no good reason except that he did not fit my projects. But now thanks to this occasion, I began re-reading him. I now think on the level of content at least he is a perfect spokesperson for our social reality. I make this claim for two reasons. First, I cannot stop thinking differently about humanity since the re-election of Donald Trump

in 2024. I even put in an afterword for a new book of mine saying that I apologize for my claims for how the liberal arts might affect social values. I think the liberal arts can change people's values, but by directing them towards certain communities that remain at odds with mainstream society. The best we can hope for is individuals flourishing in these groups and these groups finding better ways to influence the social order as presently constituted. So, I now cannot not think Jeffers may be right in his assessment of the current state of humanity as the basic problem for the welfare of the planet. It does not hurt that his expression of that view often finds brilliant figures, as in "November Surf," or the powerful direct speech of "The Answer."

More important, Jeffers' nature poems provide rich positive experiences of how a humbled humanity can engage the physical world and find deep satisfaction in how instances of this world unfold. This is "Birds" from *Roan Stallion* (1925):

> The fierce musical cries of a couple of sparrowhawks hunting on the headland,
> Hovering and darting, their heads northwestward,
> Prick like silver arrows shot through a curtain the noise of the ocean
> Trampling its granite; their red backs gleam
> Under my window around the stone corners; nothing gracefuller, nothing
> Nimbler in the wind. Westward the wave-gleaners,
> The old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together, the northwest wind wakening
> Their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance.
> Fresh as the air, salt as the foam, play birds in the bright wind, fly falcons
> Forgetting the oak and the pinewood, come gulls
> From the Carmel sands and the sands at the river-mouth, from Lobos and out of the limitless
> Power of the mass of the sea, for a poem
> Needs multitude, multitudes of thoughts, all fierce, all flesh-eaters, musically clamorous
> Bright hawks that hover and dart headlong, and ungainly
> Gray hungers fledged with desire of transgression, salt slimed beaks, from the sharp
> Rock-shores of the world and the secret waters. (*CP* 1: 108)

Jeffers exercises marvelous control over how the segments of his scene fit together. This becomes not just a poem about nature but the articulation of how the mind can cooperate in putting natural

scenes together by providing roles for all the elements involved. (Indeed "fly" and "come" are probably imperatives the poem issues to nature.) First the poem involves hearing the cries of the sparrow hawks, so there is a mode of agency involved in the activity of gathering that in turn produces an overall Heideggerian sense of "dwelling"—a sense that involves satisfying the will to have a home in the world. Then the eyes get involved in the gulls' interplay with the waves, only to have what is seen issue in awareness of another noise, the waves, providing a counter-measure that mixes the eye and the ear.

After the speaker locates himself as an aspect of the scene, the action moves westward, bringing more bird-life into play. Now the poem can become the primary active agent, exercising a version of Modernist self-reference. But it is crucial that the poem only mentions its own interests in order to sharpen states of awareness bred on this sense of need. Both sound and sight become intensified, to the point that the poem can speculate on a dimension of inner life carried by the visible hungers of the now completely active bird life. In getting to animal hunger, the poem stresses its concern not only with intensifying attention to particulars but also to intricate relations among those particulars.

I do not like "secret waters" as a way of concluding by introducing a sense of mystery. For me the mystery is in how so much of nature dynamically manifests itself in response to the hungers of the poem. "Secret" does add another dimension to the scene, but it seems somewhat cheap to conclude with something not visually active. In saying this I am painfully aware that this remark itself is somewhat cheap in stressing one problem in a poem that otherwise suggest a major shift in how we can understand the sublime. Here the sublime is not something we experience because of an infinity symbolized by the details. Rather the sublime exists in the self-consciousness of what one can call up as intricate and dynamic structures of relationship.

Making this snotty observation seems worth it because it points out two major problems that have affected Jeffers' standing as a poet who has something to say to contemporary audiences. One is occasionally sloppy or exaggerated language, a problem mainly affecting his long poems. The second is that his effort at the end to add an aura of mystery can be seen to derive from Jeffers' sense that the poem can capture the feeling he wants only by presenting

something more than these powerful details and relationships. It needs a sense of the whole as integral and as pointing to powers that cannot be quite represented in description. For mainstream Modernists this supplement to the experience was made possible by attention to how the manner of the writing might produce a distinctive form appealing to an audience's self-conscious identification with the passions of the writing. Poems like Pound's "April" or Williams "Spring and All" can celebrate a much more quiet dwelling in nature because of how the writing stages the event—in one case by dazzling intricacy of sound, and in the other brilliant manipulation of syntax.

My ultimate goal here is not to criticize Jeffers but to emphasize how the rest of "Birds" exemplifies a very different attitude toward form in poetry that may also be more appropriate to our cultural moment than the celebration of writerly intricacy in matters of making present an intricate experience. If we pose the question of how Jeffers' best poetry addresses contemporary issues, we can say that it is high time matters of form do not depend on signs of authorial infusion of significance on otherwise relatively bland conditions. Why not celebrate poetry that has the content itself bear the burden of form by staging intricate relations of what is there to be seen? "Birds" models such an attitude because the poem literally asks nature to provide "multitudes of thoughts, all fierce" and "musically clamorous." Would that contemporary poets take this advice.

[Charles Altieri, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley, and was the Rachel Stageberg Anderson Professor. His numerous noteworthy books include *Wallace Stevens and the Demands of Modernity: Toward a Phenomenology of Value* (Cornell UP, 2013) and *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge UP, 1990).]

Katie Peterson

Robinson Jeffers' form of poetic energy was born in the classics and raised by wild nature. Skeptics of the work in 2025 might decry the nativity (the classics and associated forms of storytelling reaching into the past) as retrograde and call out the education

(highly dramatic descriptions of his chosen landscape of California) as performative. The present world oozes retrograde, and performance these days—nostalgia for American patriarchal times (reconstructed imaginations of the 1830's and 1950's)—joins up with swaggering masculinities and nationalisms and Christianity. And there is the daily performance of social media. Jeffers speaks to me now because he has no nostalgia, and because his work isn't performative—it's actual drama.

Jeffers identifies the ancient classical material present in everyday life. He made talking back to imagined ancestors, whether they were writers, or artists, or fishermen, one of the most living subjects in his poems. He believed that through poetry such a communication was possible. Classical "learnedness" and "sources" and allegorical "knowledge" are almost always revealed to be shapes of communication between the present and the past, between us and those we might imagine to have once lived, as in the last lines from "Hands," a poem in which a cave painting may be a "sealed message" (*CP* 2: 4), but also can be made to speak by the poet. Jeffers reminds us that we can seek relation to our oldest ancestors through poetry, not to bypass the contemporary, but to live in it and know it. Right now, the project of imagining that other people exist really does matter, and feels unfinished, or—to be optimistic—like we're at the start of it again.

Education by wild nature doesn't have to be performative to be a performance. Building a tower in front of your neighbors still requires you to build a tower. Performance remains part of how we encounter the natural world—and an argument for how we should encounter it. When Jeffers writes in "Hurt Hawks," "I gave him the lead gift in the twilight" (*CP* 1: 378), I hear a moment of opera, a line that deserves a score, if not of music, at least of appropriate human breath. There is respect in the distance of performance, and honor too. Perhaps our false closeness with nature needs its own calling-out in this moment.

Finally, I'd say that Jeffers takes on the problem of coming towards complicated truths in simple terms. Complicated truths, like the extent to which humankind can consider itself part of nature, a question that lays bare the nature of human consciousness in time and space. As a poet, this refreshes my understanding of two things I think I believe about poetry:

(1) the thinking at the base of it actually does matter, and it matters not just how you say what you say but what it is you are trying to say;

(2) the work of style is to express the difficulty of saying things within the limitations of language, but the work of poetry is to find a memorable way to say difficult and necessary things.

[Katie Peterson's six collections of poetry, including *Fog and Smoke* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024) and *Life in a Field* (Omnidawn, 2021). She is Professor of English at the UC Davis.]

Tim Hunt

Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems: A Textual Genealogy

In *A Bibliography of the Works of Robinson Jeffers* (1933), S.S. Alberts notes that Robinson Jeffers organized several unpublished collections between the publication of *Californians in* 1916 and writing the narrative "Tamar." Alberts also notes an early, preliminary table of contents for *Tamar and Other Poems* that includes poems Jeffers ended up not using in the collection while lacking others he eventually did use. We have, that is, known for nearly a century that Jeffers compiled *Tamar and Other Poems* as published by Peter Boyle in April 1924 partly from earlier, discarded collections and that he considered several alternate organizations for it. This history, what might be termed the collection's genealogy, has received relatively little attention.[1] There are probably two reasons for this. One is our tendency to focus on poems rather than books of poems. That Jeffers included "Shine, Perishing Republic" in what seems the initial construction of *Tamar and Other Poems*, then pulled it from the collection, then subsequently grouped it with the *Roan Stallion* material when he expanded the collection into *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* in 1925 is seemingly irrelevant to appreciating the poem (the poem is the poem is the poem regardless of its context—or maybe not[2]). Few of the poems Jeffers didn't use in *Tamar* as actually published seemed to have survived, and it was assumed that Jeffers had discarded them Alberts lists the titles of the poems to have been included in these unpublished constructions, and while the preliminary tables of contents he documented offer some sense of chronology (demonstrating, for instance, that Jeffers wrote "Fauna" before "The Coast-Range Christ"), they tell us nothing about what "The Murmansk Landing," "Metempsychosis," "Peacock Ranch," and the other seemingly lost poems might have been and how—or even if—they might add to our understanding of Jeffers'

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development (conceptually and aesthetically) during World War I and in its aftermath.

We now know, though, that Jeffers did not discard these unpublished poems. Melba Berry Bennett at some point acquired the manuscripts, sealed them in two packets, and donated the material to Occidental College, stipulating that the packets remain sealed until 1987, the Jeffers Centennial. These recovered poems are now available in Volume Four of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (2000) making it possible to study the collections Jeffers assembled between publishing *Californians* and finalizing *Tamar and Other Poems* for publication in late 1923. These poems, for one thing, document the series of experiments in form that led to the long, cadenced verse line of the mature poems (revealing, for instance, that Jeffers initially explored long lines as a measure for his lyrics but not his narratives). Most importantly, these discarded poems and unpublished collections deepen—and potentially alter—our understanding of the impact of the so-called Great War on Jeffers and how his views of the war shifted over time. Without the recovery of this material we would not know, for example, that Jeffers initially celebrated the Russian Revolution (evidenced in "The Daughter of God in Russia") as the emergence of a new order that would redeem the destruction of the old order being enacted in the carnage of the trenches, nor would we know how the collapse of this hope as the war dragged on and was then followed by the compromises of the Versailles Peace contributed to a sense of depression in the spring of 1919 evident in such poems as "The Pit in the Pinewood" and "Sea-Passions," nor would we know how the redemptive violence of renewal in the narrative "Tamar" both relates back to and fundamentally transforms "The Daughter of God in Russia."

If our focus is studying Jeffers through his fully realized, best, most characteristic, and thematically most central poems ("Continent's End," "Apology for Bad Dreams," "Be Angry at the Sun," "Hurt Hawks," "Oh, Lovely Rock," "Vulture," and so on), the recovered poems from 1917 through 1919 and on into the early part of 1920 may seem of little interest. But the process of transition these poems document can expand our understanding of how Jeffers became a distinctive poetic voice, and this can complicate, clarify, and enrich our understanding of the "philosophical attitude" he eventually came to term Inhumanism as he first explicitly named and articulated it in the 1948 Preface to *The Double Axe and Other*

Poems (*CP* 4: 428-429). And this in turn can provide a basis for assessing the implications of the choices Jeffers made as he shaped *Tamar and Other Poems*, experimenting with which poems to include and how to sequence them, which in turn can help us understand the subsequent expansion of the collection into *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* as both reinforcing yet altering the implications of the *Tamar* material.

We tend to assume that poets write to express their thoughts. This casts the poem as an encoding of what the poet has come to know or believe prior to and apart from the writing of the poem. But the writing of poems can also be a process of discovering through composing. For Jeffers—at least in the crucial period of transition from 1917-1920—writing, I'd suggest, involved confronting fundamental questions and exploring/discovering through the effort to develop poems. And the subsequent process of selecting and sequencing poems into a collection was a further creative, reflective, deliberative process of discovering through the insights and perspectives opened through the writing of the poems. If so, the chronologically contextualized process of the writing of the poems and the subsequent process of shaping the poems into a collection can add to our understanding of both the poems themselves and the collections constructed from them.

The material that follows is offered as an overview of the evidence for exploring the extent of Jeffers' poetic production during the crucial period of transition (both conceptual and thematic) in the years between *Californians* and the publication of *Tamar and Other Poems* and its subsequent recastings in the two editions of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. This evidence can, I'd suggest,

- contribute to our understanding of the impact of World War I on Jeffers' thought and being,
- help us understand his transformation from the poet of *Californians* to the poet of *Tamar* by providing a basis for exploring the development of his craft and thought,
- enhance our understanding of *Tamar and Other Poems* and its subsequent recasting as the expanded collection *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* as first published by Boni and Liveright in 1925, then expanded in 1935 when Random House reissued the collection in its Modern Library series.

Perhaps most simply the material that follows is offered as a way of suggesting that the discarded poems Jeffers wrote from 1917-1921, the

various collections he considered and set aside in these years, and the alternative constructions of *Tamar and Other Poems* leading up to the collection as published might matter for our study of Jeffers and his work.

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In assessing the transcribed tables of contents and charts that follow below, one should keep in mind that Jeffers, during this period, often changed the titles of poems, experimented with groupings of shorter poems, and revised poems as his style evolved and his perspective on such matters as World War I shifted. For example, the units of what appears in *Tamar and Other Poems* as "Mal Paso Bridge" were originally separate poems. More significantly, the sequence of eleven sonnets included in *Tamar* as "The Truce and the Peace" derive from "God's Peace in November," a sequence of twenty-seven sonnets initially completed November 1918, then retitled "God's Peace" in late 1919 when Jeffers deleted some of the sonnets, adjusted a number of phrases, and reordered the units. Jeffers constructed the version published in *Tamar and Other Poems* sometime spring 1920 when he further revised the sonnets and shortened and rearranged the sequence. Each version of the sequence reflects a distinctly different response to the destructive violence of World War I. To understand how Jeffers was reacting to World War I as it was occurring, one should examine the original sequence, "God's Peace in November." To understand how his view of the war's implications shifted as the Versailles Peace was being negotiated, one should read the intermediate "God's Peace" version. To understand how his view of World War I continued to evolve and how this contextualized his treatment of nature in his work from late 1920 onward (as evidenced in such poems as "Natural Music," "Shine, Perishing Republic," and implicitly, though less directly, "Continent's End") one should explore the sequence as published in *Tamar*. Moreover, the revisions to the individual sonnets demonstrate Jeffers' evolving sense of (and command of) meter and rhyme as formal elements. The initial and intermediate versions of this sonnet sequence are included in the entry for "The Truce and the Peace" in Volume Five of *The Collected Poetry* (*CP* 5: 273-286).

In these transcriptions, the poems are listed by the title used in the actual document. When that title is not the poem's final title, the final title appears to the right in square brackets. Where dates are included in a column to the right of the list of poems, these are

the dates of the original composition of the pieces. When a date is followed by an alternate date in square brackets, the alternate date indicates the date of a revision that further elaborates or alters Jeffers' original conception for the poem.

These transcriptions present only the primary form of these preliminary tables of contents. For transcriptions of the alternate and intermediate workings related to these documents, please see Appendix A to Volume Five of *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (*CP* 5: 1055-1062) which includes information on the archival sources and other details. The poems listed in these tables of contents that Jeffers did not publish in *Tamar* or subsequent collections are included in Volume Four of *The Collected*. For poems (such as "Suicide's Stone," "The Truce and the Peace," and "Salmon Fishing") that Jeffers did include in *Tamar* but where the *Tamar* version significantly alters or evolves the original conception, the textual entries for these poems in Volume Five of *The Collected* presents the original drafts and any intermediate workings. The texts for the several unused introductions Jeffers drafted in this period (noted below) are included in Volume Four of *The Collected* (*CP* 4: 371-381). Finally, for a survey of the evidence for the dating of these poems, see the section Chronology in Volume Five of *The Collected* (also available online as a searchable PDF: https://tahunt.com/jeffers-poetry-chronology-and-contexts/).

I. God's Peace in November, A Woman Down the Coast, and Other, Poems (1918)

Jeffers apparently constructed this collection in late 1918, soon after composing "God's Peace in November." When he retitled "A Woman Down the Coast" as "Storm as Deliverer," he retitled the collection *God's Peace in November, The Dance Toward Sunrise, and Other Poems*. "The Dance Toward Sunrise" is plausibly an early title for the poem that survives as "The Dance of the Banner." Even though Jeffers had already composed "Fauna" in 1917 and included it in the published *Tamar*, he did not include it in this collection. This omission and his decision to reduce "Lamp of the World's Night" to its final eight lines suggests that he structured this unpublished collection to register his understanding of World War I at its conclusion rather than as a record of his responses to the war

during the war. Similarly, his decision to omit "The Daughter of God in Russia" from 1918 (*CP* 4: 464-481) suggests that he had, as the war was ending, turned decisively away from his momentary hope that the war might, by having helped make the Russian Revolution possible, initiate a new world political order and that this might give meaning to the apocalyptic slaughter.

GOD'S PEACE IN NOVEMBER, A WOMAN DOWN THE COAST, AND OTHER POEMS

God's Peace in November	[The Truce and the Peace]
A Woman Down the Coast	[Storm as Deliverer]
The Dance Toward Sunrise	[probably The Dance of the Banner]
Other Poems	
Beautiful Charm of God	[Open Country]
To his Father	
Old Ballad Snatches	
Adjustment	
Compensation	
The Dead Enemy	
Lances	[part 5 of Mal Paso Bridge]
A Chorus of the Living	[last 8 lines of Lamp of the World's Night]
A Chorus of the Dead	[To Death *from* The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers]

2. **Brides of the South Wind (1920 and 1921)**

In late summer or early fall 1920 Jeffers organized a collection that would have included three new narrative poems from 1919, "Peacock Ranch," "Sea-Passions," and "The Coast-Range Christ." Jeffers may or may not have titled this collection, but it is usually referred to as *Brides of the South Wind* since he (when he updated this set in a second table of contents that follows below) designated the section of narrative poems by this title. In this first of the two tables of contents for this project, the inclusion of page numbers (the right column in the transcription that follows) for each poem indicates that Jeffers typed this collection for submission to a publisher. The evidence for whether he actually did so is inconclusive. The

inclusion of the recently composed "Divinely Superfluous Beauty," "The Excesses of God" and "The Maid's Thought" (here titled "The Maid's Song") show Jeffers shifting from his reflections on the war and the political implications of the ensuing peace to celebrate natural beauty. Perhaps even more than these three poems, "Metempsychosis" (subsequently revised as "The Hills Beyond the River") reflects a decisive shift in Jeffers' understanding of nature and the being of the self within its more comprehensive being.

Notes for a Preface		1
To the Girls in my Stories	[Brides of the South Wind, part I]	5
Peacock Ranch		6
Dawn	[part 8 of Mal Paso Bridge]	24
Metempsychosis	[The Hills Beyond the River]	25
Divinely Superfluous Beauty		26
The Excesses of God		27
The Maid's Song	[The Maid's Thought]	28
Gipsy Marriage		29
Storm as Deliverer		30
Lances	[part 5 of Mal Paso Bridge]	55
Two Garden-Marbles		56
To the Stone-Cutters		58
Suicide's Stone		59
Danse Macabre	[To Death *from* The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers]	60
Fauna		62
Mal Paso Bridge	[part 1 of Mal Paso Bridge]	80
This is the Year	[part 2 of Mal Paso Bridge]	81
Iron Is the World's Want	[part 4 of Mal Paso Bridge]	82
Dark Pearl	[part 7 of Mal Paso Bridge]	83
Dream	[part 8 of Mal Paso Bridge]	84
To His Father		85
Sea-Passions		86
The Coast-Range Christ		94
Forest Sorrow	[The Pit in the Pinewood]	120
Stars		122
Lamp of the West		124
The House of Peace	[The Truce and the Peace]	131
The Beginning of Decadence		138

Confession on Caucasus		141
Beautiful Charm of God	[Open Country]	145

Further workings on this initial *Brides of the South Wind* table of contents along with other lists and notes show that Jeffers continued to revise and rethink this collection over a period of six or more months. (One of these notes include what seems the start of a poem—"Stones in a net of mortar have not built that house, all the despair of the new truce / Cannot destroy it"—that might be read as a supplement to "The Truce and the Peace," the final lines of "The Beginning of Decadence," and "To the House.") These workings culminate in a second *Brides of the South Wind* table of contents from late spring 1921 organized as three titled sections. In particular, it is noteworthy that Jeffers opens this construction with the new poem, "Natural Music," in which the war's violence is subsumed within nature rather than being treated as separate from nature. Again, the page numbers (the right column in what follows) show that Jeffers prepared this with the idea of submitting it to a publisher.

SONGS WITHOUT RHYME		
Natural Music		1
The Dance of Death	[To Death *from* The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers]	2
The Dead Men's Songs to Victory	[To Death *from* The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers]	4
Salmon-Fishing	[Salmon Fishing]	6
The Maid's Song	[The Maid's Thought]	7
Divinely Superfluous Beauty		8
The Excessive God	[The Excesses of God]	9
Mal Paso Bridge		10
Age in Prospect		14
BRIDES OF THE SOUTH WIND		
Brides of the South Wind		15
Peacock Ranch		16
Storm as Deliverer		34

3. **Continent's End? (June 1922)**

A Preface that Jeffers prepared in June 1922 (the opening segment seems not to have survived) shows that he constructed at least one more collection before his initial attempt to shape *Tamar and Other Poems*. An opportunity to have his work read by one or more New York publishers is perhaps why Jeffers compiled a collection while he was in the middle of drafting "Tamar" rather than waiting for that crucial narrative to be finished. In *The Stone Mason of Tor House*, Melba Bennett reports that Jimmy Hopper, a Carmel-based short story writer who was a friend of Jeffers, took "a packet of Robin's poems" to New York in 1922, hoping to "interest a publisher in them" (SM 103). A discarded title page suggests, but by no means proves, that *Continent's End* was the title of this collection. No table of contents survives, and the collection's contents are necessarily conjectural. Plausibly Jeffers culled at least some of the political poems from the war years and presumably added at least some of the shorter poems written after the second *Brides of the South Wind* table of contents (such as "Continent's End"). What is clear is that he included at least some of the transitional narratives from 1917 and

1919 (such as "Fauna" and "The Coast-Range Christ" and perhaps as well "Peacock Ranch" and maybe "Sea-Passions"). Toward the end of the Preface Jeffers remarks, "I am at length discovering rhymeless narrative measures of my own; but the poems are not finished, and not included in this series" (*CP* 4: 376). "Tamar" is clearly one of "the poems" in his own "rhymeless narrative measures, and Jeffers, here, may also be alluding to the initial attempt at the *Point Alma Venus* project that would later evolve into *The Women at Point Sur.*[3] This comment suggests two things: first, that Jeffers saw "this series" of narratives, even though not yet in his "own" newly discovered "measure," as a central feature of this collection; and second, that he expected that his next collection would feature "Tamar."

This Preface offers one additional insight into Jeffers' developing understanding of his work. He concludes it by quoting the central lines of "Natural Music":

> So I believe if we were strong enough to listen without
> Divisions of desire and anger . . .
> These voices also would be found
> Clear as a child's . . .

Elsewhere in this brief poem Jeffers figures the recently concluded world war as "the storm of the sick nations," which places both the war and nations as elements within nature's being rather than outside or in opposition to nature. In "Natural Music," that is, nature is not a refuge from human violence, and embracing nature is a way to confront human violence and cope with it rather than simply escape from it. Nature does not erase human violence but relocates it—a shift in Jeffers' understanding of nature, emerging initially in the short poems he was writing at the close of 1920.

4. Tamar and Other Poems (early 1923)

What is plausibly the initial table of contents for *Tamar and Other Poems* survives because Jeffers later wrote p.18 of the manuscript of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* on the back of it. This table of contents is typed with page numbers entered for the poems, which indicates he prepared the set to submit to a publisher. It omits nearly all of the poems from *God's Peace in November*, including the poems (such as "Fauna," "To His Father," and "The Truce and the Peace") that he had included in *Brides of the South Wind* and would include in *Tamar*

and Other Poems as published. This radical culling suggests that completing the narrative "Tamar," at least initially, altered his sense of his earlier work. It should be noted that this table of contents includes "Shine, Perishing Republic," which Jeffers subsequently deleted from the collection, then grouped with the *Roan Stallion* poems when Boni & Liveright published *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* in 1925.

In the transcription that follows, the page numbers have been omitted and replaced by the dates of composition (these appear in the right column). The dates of composition show that Jeffers ordered the six poems that follow "Tamar" chronologically as if they record his responses to World War I leading up to and including the Versailles Peace, then places "Shine, Perishing Republic" to function as a pivot to the final series of poems.

Two supplementary lists follow this table of contents. The first lists the poems Jeffers later added to *Tamar and Other Poems* as published in 1924 and those added to the 1935 Modern Library reissue of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* (poems, that is, that he could have included in this early 1923 version of the collection but chose not to). The second lists the poems composed after this early 1923 table of contents and subsequently added to the collection as originally published in April 1924. "

Tamar	spring 1922-early 1923
The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers	1917
Mal Paso Bridge	mostly spring 1918
The Dance of the Banner	1918
The Murmansk Landing	summer 1918
The Beginning of Decadence	early spring 1920
Shine, Perishing Republic	spring 1921-early 1922
The Cycle	pring 1921-early 1922
Natural Music	December 1920
Divinely Superfluous Beauty	mid 1920
Salmon Fishing	December 1920 (rev. 1923?)
Not Our Good Luck	spring 1921-early 1922
Suicide's Stone	spring or summer 1919 (rev. 1920?)
To the Stonecutters	mid 1920
Continent's End	March 1922

Poems Jeffers later included in *Tamar* or the 1935 Modern Library *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* but omitted from this version of the collection:

Fauna	1917
Adjustment	1918
Compensation	1918
Promise of Peace	1918
To His Father	1918?
The Truce and the Peace	Oct-Nov 1918 (rev. Nov 1919; rev. 1921)
The Coast-Range Christ	late 1919/early 1920
Age in Prospect	1920?
The Maid's Thought	mid-1920
To the House	mid-1920

Poems Jeffers wrote after this version of the collection and included in Tamar as published:

To the Rock That Will Be a Cornerstone of the House	summer-fall 1921
Wise Men in Their Bad Hours	summer or fall 1921
Point Joe	spring (March?) 1923
Gale in April	April 1923
Point Pinos and Point Lobos	fall 1923

5. Tamar and Other Poems (August 1923)

In August 1923 Jeffers composed a Preface to the version of *Tamar and Other Poems* that probably immediately preceded the collection as published. In it, he proposes that poetry is not a "refuge" from "reality" but instead "an incitement to contemplation" and that poetry should "deal[] with permanent things," noting "Point Joe" as an illustration of this principle (*CP* 4: 380). The mention of "Point Joe" is the only specific indication of which of the shorter poems this iteration of the collection would have included, but the final paragraph shows that it would have included more narratives than the collection's published version:

> The two earliest of the longer poems in this volume were written six years ago; the manner and versification of the story about Myrtle Cartwright ["Storm as Deliverer"], and the Theocritan echoes of *Fauna*, do not much please me now; but the latter is retained for a geographical sort of richness that closes it, and the other because it is part of a series and seems useful to the purpose of the series: to make apparent the essential beauty in conditions and events of life that from the ordinary point of view appear merely painful, or wicked, or comical. (*CP* 4: 381)

The "series" Jeffers mentions here would, at minimum, have been "Storm as Deliverer," "The Coast-Range Christ," and "Tamar." It probably also included "Peacock Ranch" and plausibly "Sea-Passions" since their plots "from the ordinary point of view" would seem "painful" or "wicked." In the preceding construction of *Tamar* (as documented in the earliest surviving table of contents), two sets of shorter poems—one reflecting World War I and the Versailles Peace and the other foregrounding nature—contextualize "Tamar." In this August 1923 construction, "Tamar" would, instead, have been presented as the culmination of a purposeful series of narratives that "make apparent the essential beauty…of life" and probably as well a set of shorter poems from 1917-1923 similar to the set in *Tamar and Other Poems* as published.

6. Tamar and Other Poems (April 1924)

The contextual evidence indicates that Jeffers assembled the final version of *Tamar and Other Poems* (as published by Peter Boyle in April 1924) late in 1923 or very early 1924. This final version is probably a slightly pared down version of August 1923 version. Jeffers' placement of "Suicide's Stone" suggests that he sequenced the poems purposefully and carefully. In the original 1919 version of "Suicide's Stone," the speaker is one of the living who is "hungering" for death, yet insisting on the "covenant of courage" and refusing to be "mongrel proved" (*CP* 5: 292). As revised in 1920 or perhaps later, the speaker is a suicide "addressing" the living from the perspective of "we dead," tempting the living with death's peace and rationalizing having "denounced the covenant of courage." In the 1919 version, the speaker's rejection of suicide is implicitly questioned. In the poem as published in *Tamar*, the speaker's decision to

commit suicide is implicitly questioned and rejected, which Jeffers has reinforced by placing the "Suicide's Stone" between two slightly later poems—"To the Stone-Cutters" and "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours"—that further underscore the pattern of accepting life's conditions for the full term of one's life.

How Jeffers, as well, placed poems with an eye toward thematic implications and patterns is evident in how little regard he paid to chronology. In the first construction of the *Tamar* collection (noted above), the narrative "Tamar" leads directly a series of poems documenting World War I—as if the war is in some way the impetus for the narrative and the narrative in some way a response to the war. In *Tamar* as published, the narrative "Tamar" is followed immediately by "Gale in April," a poem evoking nature's energy and violence. In the first construction of the collection "Tamar" is a naturalized evocation of the "storm of the sick nations." In the published collection, "Tamar" is implicitly more an expression of the storm of nature as it plays out in a human context. As "Natural Music" suggests, Jeffers had come to think of these two storms as analogues of each other and perhaps as well aspects of the "tides of fire" that he invokes in "Continent's End." In any case, Jeffers' decision to distribute the World War I poems across the collection rather than group them or sequence them chronologically allows these two storms to function dialectically within the collection. (In this presentation of the table of contents for *Tamar and Other Poems* as Jeffers published the collection, the right column is the date of composition for the poem in the left column).

Tamar and Other Poems (Peter Boyle, 2024)

Tamar	spring 1922-early 1923
Gale in April	April 1923
Mal Paso Bridge	mostly spring 1918?
The Coast-Range Christ	late 1919/early 1920
Divinely Superfluous Beauty	mid-1920
The Maid's Thought	mid-1920
Fauna	1917
The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers	1917
To His Father	1918?

The Truce and the Peace	Oct-Nov 1918 (rev. Nov 1919; rev. 1921)
Natural Music	December 1920
Point Joe	spring (March?) 1923
Point Pinos and Point Lobos	fall 1923
Not Our Good Luck	spring 1921-early 1922
The Cycle	spring 1921-early 1922
Salmon-Fishing [Salmon Fishing]	December 1920 (rev. 1923?)
To the House	mid-1920
To the Rock That Will Be a Cornerstone of the House	summer-fall 1921
To the Stone-Cutters	mid-1920
Suicide's Stone	spring or summer 1919 (rev. 1920?)
Wise Men in Their Bad Hours	summer or fall 1921
Continent's End	March 1922

7. Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems (November 1925)

Because *Tamar and Other Poems* was privately printed, it had little distribution. It did, however, attract the interest of several influential reviewers, whose enthusiasm for the collection led Boni & Liveright to offer to republish it. Jeffers and Boni & Liveright decided to expand the collection with two new long poems ("Roan Stallion" and "The Tower Beyond Tragedy") along with the short poems Jeffers had been writing since finalizing *Tamar and Other Poems* (including "Night" and "Boats in a Fog"). It is unclear whether it was Jeffers or the publisher who decided to open this expanded collection with the new material. Either way, this decision casts the *Tamar* material as an extension or elaboration of the *Roan Stallion* material rather than a complex distillation of his work from 1917 through 1923 as he moved from recording his reactions to the war to imagining a retreat to nature as a way cope with the war (as perhaps evidenced most clearly in "The Beginning of Decadence") to reimagining nature as a comprehensive being in which societies and their conflicts were elements of nature (as in "Natural Music" and less directly but more comprehensively in "Continent's End") (In this listing of the *Roan Stallion* poems, the right column is the date of composition for the poem in the left column).

Roan Stallion	spring 1925
The Tower Beyond Tragedy	fall-early winter 1924
Night	fall 1924
Birds	mid 1924
Fog	mid 1924
Boats in a Fog	fall 1924
Granite and Cypress	early 1924
Vices	mid 1924
Phenomena	fall 1924
People and a Heron	mid 1924
Haunted Country	mid 1924
Autumn Evening	Sept 1924
Shine, Perishing Republic	spring 1921-early 1922
The Treasure	Oct. 1923
Joy	Sept 1924
Practical People	mid 1924
Woodrow Wilson	Feb 1924
Science	mid 1924
The Torch-Bearers' Race	late 1923

8. Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems (1935)

In 1935 Random House, which had become Jeffers' publisher after Liveright collapsed into bankruptcy at the beginning of the Great Depression, issued *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* as a title in its Modern Library series, adding an Introduction Jeffers wrote for this new edition in which he recalls his decision in 1914 not to follow the lead of Ezra Pound into Modernist experimentation and adding as well a group of fifteen uncollected poems originally published in 1927 in Louis Untermeyer's anthology *American Poetry, 1927: A Miscellany*. In this final form of the collection, what had been *Tamar and Other Poems* is preceded by the *Roan Stallion* material from 1924 and 1925 and followed by the *Miscellany* set featuring such key poems from later 1925 and 1926 as "Apology for Bad Dreams" and "Credo." (In this listing of the *American Miscellany* set), the right column is the date of composition for the poem in the left column).

Apology for Bad Dreams	late 1925
Adjustment	1918
Compensation	1918
Promise of Peace	1918
Age in Prospect	1920?
Ante Mortem	late 1926
Post Mortem	fall 1925
The Beach	summer 1924 or 1925
Summer Holiday	summer 1925
Love-Children	late spring or summer 1926
Noon	summer 1925
Clouds at Evening	fall 1925
October Evening	October 1925
Pelicans	fall 1925
Credo	late 1926

9. A Chronology of the Poems Included in the Various Configurations of Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems

This final list presents in chronological order all of the poems Jeffers actually included in *Tamar and Other Poems* and in the Boni and Liveright and Modern Library editions of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* along with all the poems he considered for the collection (as documented above) but did not include (the titles of these poems are scored through). "Shine, Perishing Republic" appears twice, once scored through and once not, to indicate Jeffers having dropped it from *Tamar and Other Poems* while having subsequently included it in *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. The inclusion of "Sea-Passions" is based on the surmise that it was included in the August 1923 construction of *Tamar and Other Poems* as part of the series of narratives Jeffers mention in the August 1923 Preface.

The Songs of the Dead Men to the Three Dancers	1917
Fauna	1917
Storm as Deliverer	1917
To His Father	1918?
Mal Paso Bridge	mostly spring 1918?
The Murmansk Landing	Summer 1918

The Dance of the Banner	1918
The Truce and the Peace	Oct-Nov 1918 (rev. Nov 1919; rev. 1921)
Peacock Ranch	April 1919
Sea-Passions	spring or summer 1919
Suicide's Stone	spring or summer 1919 (rev. 1920?)
The Coast-Range Christ	late 1919/early 1920
The Beginning of Decadence	early spring 1920
Divinely Superfluous Beauty	mid-1920
The Maid's Thought	mid-1920
To the House	mid-1920
To the Stone-Cutters	mid-1920
Natural Music	December 1920
Salmon Fishing	December 1920 (rev. 1923?)
Shine, Perishing Republic	spring 1921-early 1922
Shine, Perishing Republic	spring 1921-early 1922
Not Our Good Luck	spring 1921-early 1922
The Cycle	spring 1921-early 1922
Wise Men in Their Bad Hours	summer or fall 1921
To the Rock That Will Be a Cornerstone of the House	summer-fall 1921
Continent's End	March 1922
Tamar	spring 1922-early 1923
Point Joe	spring (March?) 1923
Gale in April	April 1923
Point Pinos and Point Lobos	fall 1923

Notes

1 A notable exception is William Everson's edition of *Brides of the South Wind* (Cayucos Books, 1974), his attempt to reconstruct this transitional period by combining the final versions of the early poems Jeffers did eventually include in *Tamar and Other Poems* with various fragments that he assumed were from some of the missing poems. The limited evidence then available resulted in Everson misidentifying some of the fragments and misdating others.

2 For a discussion of "Shine, Perishing Republic's" shifting role in *Tamar and Other Poems* and *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, see, Hunt, Tim (2022) "Why Did Jeffers Omit "Shine, Perishing Republic"

from Tamar and Other Poems and How Might It Matter," *Jeffers Studies*: Vol. 22, Article 1. Available at: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/js/vol22/iss1/1.

3 See Hunt, Tim (2018) "'Tho this is my last tale': When Did Jeffers Write the First Version of Point Alma Venus," *Jeffers Studies*: Vol. 20, Article 4. Available at: https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/js/vol20/iss1/4.

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The Robinson Jeffers Interview: A Conversation with Scott Slovic

Interviewed by Tim Hunt

Introduction

Scott Slovic has been a key figure in the development of Environmental Literature as a field of study. Founding President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in the mid-1990s, he served as editor-in-chief of ASLE's journal, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, the leading journal in the field, from 1995 to 2020. His thirty-two monographs, edited, and coedited books include *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, *Going Away to Think*, *The Routledge Handbook to Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*, *Nature and Literary Studies*, and *Imagining Ecocatastrophe*. *Going Away to Think* has been translated into Chinese, French, Arabic, and Turkish, and is forthcoming in Portuguese. Slovic is currently a Distinguished Professor of Environmental Humanities Emeritus at the University of Idaho and a Senior Scientist at the Oregon Research Institute, where his projects include empirical studies of climate change communication in addition to his ongoing work in the environmental humanities. Educated at Stanford and Brown, he taught at Texas State University, the University of Nevada, Reno, and the University of Idaho before retiring from teaching at the end of 2023. He lives in Eugene, Oregon.

In the interview that follows, Professor Slovic mentions the 2006 hike that Rob Kafka led into the Ventana Wilderness in search of the specific rock that served as the occasion for Jeffers' "Oh Lovely Rock," and he has kindly shared several photographs from that expedition. For a consideration of Jeffers' poem, the first of these is perhaps most relevant, as it may well be an image of the dolomite Jeffers responds to in the poem:

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The second is a group shot of the hikers in front of the rock (left to right: Scott Slovic, Rob Kafka, John Courtney, Lindsay Jeffers, and Gene Kafka):

The third is a photo of Rob Kafka reading "Oh Lovely Rock."

Those interested in Professor Slovic's comments about the rich resonance of "Oh Lovely Rock" for the reading and teaching of environmental literature will want to read "Oh Lovely Slab: Robinson Jeffers, Stone Work, and the Locus of the Real" (chapter 15 in *Going Away to Think*) as well as John Felstiner's "'not man / Apart': Ocean, Rock, Hawk, and Robinson Jeffers" in his collection of essays, *Can Poetry Save the Earth?: A Field Guide to Nature Poems*, which also considers "Oh Lovely Rock."

[This interview was recorded September 1, 2025 using Zoom. The transcript that follows has been edited to account for the difference between how the ear experiences the real-time interactivity of speaking and how the eye processes writing.]

The Interview

Tim Hunt: In our exchange setting up this conversation you noted that Robinson Jeffers' Inhumanism might connect in some way or ways to current discussions about Posthumanism as that

perspective is being explored in the context of Environmental Literature and Eco Theory. Might we start by exploring that?

Scott Slovic: One of the facets of Jeffers' work that many people discover when first getting to know his poetry is the unusual way that he writes about the non-human aspects of the natural world—and does so with a considerable tenderness and sympathy for the non-human. This often involves either an implied or explicit criticism of humanity. He isn't necessarily criticizing human individuals. More than this, he's criticizing humanity as a species. But even so, his tendency to be skeptical about humans is often described as anti-humanist or even misanthropic. This was one of the first things that I noticed when I began reading him (probably in high school) and encountered some of his most often anthologized poems like "Hurt Hawks." But I also noticed his inclination to feel somehow more attached to the non-human world than to fellow humans.

In some ways Jeffers anticipated the movement in Cultural Studies in the 1980s and 1990s, labeled Posthumanism, which is not so much an anti-human point of view as an idea that human beings exist in relationship to other phenomena, both intelligent machines and non-human species, that bear some kind of resemblance to human beings. In both Jeffers' poetry and Posthumanism, humans are not a fixed and isolated species but an evolving ("becoming") species that exists in complicated relationships with other phenomena. I think the Inhumanist point of view that I have tended to associate with Jeffers has a more critical edge to it than Posthumanism, which primarily emphasizes the fact that humans do not exist in isolation from other types of organisms. In fact, I would say people like Donna Haraway have continued to develop and refine notions of Posthumanism to suggest that not only are we part of a continuum, a complex multi-dimensional set of relationships with other beings, but we evolve and change and develop as individuals and as a species together with other beings. In fact, phrases like *becoming with* have become catchphrases for the Posthumanist community of scholars. So we are not static. Human existence is not static. We are changing even if it's not a physical change. An intellectual evolution—what Paul Ehrlich and Robert Ornstein called "a conscious evolution" in their 1989 book *New World, New Mind: Moving Towards Conscious Evolution*—may be occurring as we continue to deepen our understanding of our

relationship with other beings. So I think there's some interaction between the concepts of Inhumanism and Posthumanism. At first glance they may seem to be similar to each other, but in the end, Posthumanism is different because it doesn't have the implied critique of humanity that Inhumanism does. And maybe you can help me refine my understanding of Inhumanism by suggesting whether or not that critique of the human is actually inherent in the idea of Inhumanism, or is that a misleading projection?

TH: It's a complicated projection. The question, I think, is whether Jeffers is using Inhumanism to denounce humankind or using it more as a strategy for problematizing our understanding of humankind. One thing that's tricky about Inhumanism is that Jeffers doesn't coin the term until almost 1948 in the wake of World War II. And when he does, he characterizes it not as a philosophy but as a "philosophical attitude." It's almost as if the crisis of the war intensifies a need to shock, and instead of labeling his perspective as *Transhumanism*, which would not be construed as misanthropic, he labels it as *Inhumanism*. The question is whether in his mind that's the best term to evoke the perspective or whether that's the best term for the rhetorical impact that he wants to have. And that leads me back to your reading "Hurt Hawks" in high school and wondering how that might enter into what we're talking about here.

SS: When I read "Hurt Hawks" I didn't have much context for it. I hadn't yet read many of the other writers whom we would now call nature writers or environmental writers and whose attitudes to the more-than-human world suggest that human affinities are not just for fellow humans but also for the rest of the natural world. And perhaps what I then perceived as being an anti-human perspective in Jeffers (a line like "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk") may have been unnerving and even shocking to me as a young reader. But over time I came to read many writers who had similar attitudes and who meant it quite literally. They felt disdain and disgust for the terrible activities of our own species and imagined being moved to violence against other humans to protect non-human beings. But what you describe as transhumanism sounds like something that could conceivably be related to Posthumanism if it has something to do with human nature having the flexibility to change over time. We may improve ourselves, we may transition as a species in order to somehow overcome our foibles and disadvantages. But in reading some of Jeffers' poetry, I have

this sense of concern that we're living during a time when human nature and human civilization are in great jeopardy. Of course, he was writing in the immediate wake of World War I and on through the Great Depression and World War II. Really cataclysmic things were happening in the world, and particularly in the United States, that would've given him reason to have doubts about the future of our species. So maybe it would've been overly optimistic for him to think that we were transitioning toward something better.

TH: Perhaps he didn't feel that we could, collectively, transition to something better, even though he would have liked that. And so his focus, the challenge, becomes how to stay sane in spite of that. And that's actually part of how he originally talks about Inhumanism. In his Preface to *The Double Axe* he calls it a strategy for "maintaining sanity" that involves stepping back from one frame in order to be aware of a broader frame.

SS: It makes a lot of sense to me that this concept would be a strategy for maintaining sanity. To be overly focused on human things, on individual human life, on human social relations, is a recipe for distress and frustration. A lot of the people who are inclined in the direction of environmental writing and environmental humanities scholarship have concerns about an unnaturally human-centered worldview and believe it's necessary, and healthy, to understand how our own species exists in a much broader context.

In my introductory lectures about ecocriticism I often ask students to think about a series of concentric circles. There's a circle focused on language or the text, and it's within a slightly larger circle of human relationships and the human context, which includes the mind of the author in relationship to the text and various sociological ideas that help to contextualize literary works. But then there's also a larger circle, a more-than-human context. Adding this larger circle to our thinking was the innovative, perhaps even revolutionary, move that ecocriticism began exploring as it developed into a scholarly movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Remember how Cheryll Glotfelty defined ecocriticism in her introduction to the 1996 *Ecocriticism Reader* as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." And now people are continuing to expand that circle and look at not only a planetary context but also at an astrobiological context. There are some new works of ecocriticism, such as Michael Gormley's 2021 book *The*

End of the Anthropocene: Ecocriticism, the Universal Ecosystem, and the Astropocene, that look at outer space narratives, science fiction, and other types of narrative as a new frontier for ecocriticism. We are constantly trying to expand the context in order to zero in on a true understanding of human experience and counter the misperception that we, as humans, exist in some sort of privileged isolation from the universe, suspended above or apart from it.

TH: As environmental studies, ecocriticism, and ecological theory expand those frames and circles, what happens to time? Does the sense of time change as well?

SS: I think there's more of a future-oriented perspective. Obviously we're not spending a lot of time on other planets or floating in space these days, although we have satellite technology that's doing that. Human technological creations do exist in that additional realm, off the planet, so we do feel as if we have a presence in these other parts of the universe. I do think there's this futuristic orientation in expanding the contextual circles for literary criticism.

But to stay with your question about temporality, let's think of how this relates to environmental thinking more broadly. In looking at the relationship between human cultural expression in the more-than-human context, we often find ourselves remembering that we are animals, akin to many other species. We're not altogether different from other living species. In a sense, this is a retrospective perspective or an atavistic perspective, recognizing our fundamentally animalistic qualities. We can sometimes deceive ourselves into thinking we are different than other living beings, but we are mortal. We are prone to illness and violence that may lead to our destruction.

In fact, another element in fairly recent ecocriticism is this focus on human non-exceptionalism as an antidote to the hubris of thinking that humans are entirely different from non-human beings and as a corrective to the belief that we have the ability to outlive all our poor decisions about how we relate to each other and how we treat the natural environment. This non-exceptionalist or anti-exceptionalist strain in ecocriticism, including such works as Sarah E. McFarland's 2021 book *Ecocollapse Fiction and Cultures of Human Extinction*, links back to your question about time. Non-exceptionalism is a way of thinking that recognizes that we cannot stand apart from temporality, from mortality. We are individually mortal and as an entire species are entirely susceptible to extinction, just as

other species are. So I would say that the non-exceptionalist thread of ecocriticism is attempting to remind us of time. We are bound by time. We are term limited, so to speak—not only as individuals but as a species. We should not be so proud that we think we can behave in a careless way, as we tend to do, and get away with it.

TH: Right there you're getting at something that may be central to Jeffers' relevance for explorations of environmental literature and ecocriticism. For Jeffers the natural world, Nature, is divine. In part, his sense of this perhaps derives from his early interest in Emerson and Wordsworth but with a key change. In the 19th century vision of nature of Emerson and Wordsworth, nature is an expression of divinity. And achieving an awareness of the divinity nature embodies or expresses is to become aware of, even enter into, timelessness. For Jeffers, the violence and destruction of World War I seems to have contributed to an altered sense of nature, perhaps a kind of tragic Transcendentalism, in which the connection to nature brings a heightened awareness of further dimensions of being in time rather than a transcendental timelessness. "Rearmament," from the mid 1930s as Europe is starting to move toward what he realizes will be a second World War, illustrates this. The middle of the poem enacts a series of progressive shifts in temporal scale. If the poem were enacting the move from human temporality to timelessness in or through nature, it should move from the painful dilemma of being human and enmeshed in history to biological time and onward through geological and astronomical scales of time. Instead, the poem reverses this sequence. It begins with an almost escape into a temporal scale so beyond the human that it seems eternal, then step by step brings the poem back within the realm of mortality, decay, pain, and death. The sequence expands our being in time while also complicating our relationship to temporality and challenging himself and us, as the readers, to accept that we are all tragic "atoms" in existence, while also affirming that broader grandeur revealed through the expanding scales of time that the poem evokes. There's a dichotomy between one's *being* in time and one's *consciousness* of time.

Earlier, you mentioned "Hurt Hawks," and this dichotomy may also be an element in it. The speaker and the hawk relate to time in fundamentally different ways. The hawk is fully within the present and aligned with it. It doesn't feel pity for itself. The speaker's consciousness of time includes memory and an awareness of the

future, and so he feels "pity" (and Jeffers uses that word in the poem) for the hawk. His pity is an enhanced awareness of the nature of existence (consciousness) but also a temptation to evade the reality of pain and death. Conversely, the hawk, fully and necessarily within its being in the present, does not feel pity for itself. The speaker and the hawk have different modes of consciousness and different participations in time. The speaker's declaration that he'd "sooner kill a man than a hawk" is less a declaration that hawks are better than people than it is a confession that his awareness of time, a feature of his humanness, sets him both outside the natural order and within it. Sympathy and pity are heads and tails of the same coin. Nature is the ultimate reality and our relationship to it is necessarily bifurcated.

SS: That's a fascinating distinction between actually feeling this sense of alignment with the consciousness of the hawk versus feeling sympathy, *human* sympathy, for another being, and thus retaining his humanity. He's not becoming a hawk, he knows he's different than the hawk, but he can still empathize with the hawk. It seems to me that that's often what environmental writers are seeking to understand: How to develop the proper cognitive relationship with the other, while still recognizing the fact that the human thinker, the human writer, is different than the non-human and balancing those two states of mind, empathy and appreciation of otherness. With Jeffers this involves the human relationship to time. I think some of the poems that you suggested that we think about a little bit in this conversation, such as the "The Purse-Seine," are also directly relevant to this topic.

As I look at "The Purse-Seine," I feel as if it's a commentary on human complacency and obliviousness as things are spiraling downward and individuals or communities or even civilizations are about to be caught up in the seine, the net. People are unaware that the net is pursing and they're being enclosed in it. I read it as a critique of complacency and obliviousness. This is one of the concerns that many environmental writers have attempted to engage in their work in order to help us overcome our insensitivity to the negative impacts of our lifestyles and our cultural patterns and make us realize that these impacts are occurring and we should wake up and be more mindful. We should have a sense of how we are foreclosing our future as a civilization if we do not take more care.

Thinking this way is actually a very human-centered point of view. But it's also my perspective that a lot of environmental art and literature and scholarship is, in fact, on a fundamental level, anthropocentric. Various colleagues like Harold Fromm, who coedited *The Ecocriticism Reader* with Cheryll Glotfelty, have occasionally argued that our most sophisticated environmental thinkers are anthropocentric. As he said about Aldo Leopold, we are fundamentally human, prone to "anthropocentric biocentrism." It's hard for us to get outside of ourselves, get outside of our minds. But striving to do so serves our purpose of longevity and sustainability. We need to have some sympathy for the more than human and to care about and understand the more than human, but perhaps we need to understand as well that we do this for human-centered reasons. It makes us feel good. It's practical for us to protect the environment and take care of other species, but not to fool ourselves into thinking we're truly being biocentric or geocentric and escaping the confines of our own minds and physical lives. We are always encased in our humanness, but that doesn't necessarily stop us from being keenly interested in and empathetic toward the non-human. That's what I think you described in your commentary on "Hurt Hawks."

TH: With "The Purse-Seine" there's a lesson we can summarize and take from it, but does having that lesson replace the value of reading the poem?

SS: I don't think so. It's a different experience to encounter the poem directly and live it through the poet's imagination and the poem's language than it is to get the Cliff Notes version or an AI summary.

TH: So the poem implies an argument that we debate as ideas, but the affective experience of this argument also matters. The poem asks us to think and to feel, perhaps even to think through feeling or to feel through thinking, and this perhaps relates to your point that environmental literature at times asks us to be both outside the human perspective and inside the human perspective. In "The Purse-Seine" the speaker is both experiencing the implications of the pursing net and yet also imaginatively standing aside or above looking at it from an almost stellar perspective. He's both experiencing and observing, enmeshed within and transcending, and the tension between the two is perhaps part of the affective power of this particular poem.

SS: That's actually a good metaphor for the experience of reading a work of literature and reading literary criticism. When you read the primary literature, if you're deeply attentive to it, you become enmeshed in the experience of the text itself or the experience that is represented in the text. But it's also valuable to read studies of the text that can facilitate our engagement with the primary text. I believe the best literary scholarship or textual scholarship doesn't ever seek to replace the text itself but attempts to deepen our engagement with the original text. But reading certain kinds of scholarship and criticism can also be a literary experience. I have friends, colleagues, and mentors who write so beautifully about literature that there's a literary quality to their prose. Their writing presents a human experience of what it's like to engage a literary or artistic text. The analysis becomes a deeply moving cultural experience. I was trained by people who wrote in that way, people like my undergraduate advisor, Albert Gelpi. And my supervisor in graduate school, a Dickinson scholar, Barton Levi St. Armand, was a very literary writer who really aspired to write poetically, with vigor and deep engagement. John Elder, one of the founding voices of contemporary American ecocriticism, is also this kind of scholarly writer. I just finished rereading his beautiful article "The Poetry of Experience," which eloquently challenges the idea of reading poetry purely as an intellectual activity and argues that we understand poetry—perhaps all art—more deeply when we bring it into our lives in the world, when we "cultivate, in our physical experience, and appreciation of the soil from which the art has sprung." Whenever I encounter the work of certain literary scholars, I feel as if I'm reading a kind of literature, and it inspires me to dive deeply into the text that they're analyzing and into other types of materials that I may want to explore in my work.

TH: How might "Oh, Lovely Rock" fit in here? It's from the same era in Jeffers' career as "The Purse-Seine," but the environmental argument is perhaps less explicit. Yet it's informed by an intense awareness of the natural, non-human world.

SS: That's a poem that I've been particularly interested in for quite a few years. About twenty years ago I was writing about Jeffers' unusual thinking about rock—about the biology of rock, if you will, its living energy. The vitality of rock has fascinated me for a long time. In 2006, I was part of this expedition led by Rob Kafka to visit the rugged mountains behind the Big Sur, the Ventana

Wilderness, to try to come directly into contact with the poem's original geological inspiration. I doubt we'll ever know if the rock we eventually found was the very rock that Jeffers and his sons and their friend were camped near during that night in 1936, but the rock in the poem is described as being childlike, like his sons, and this relates to your point about time and whether feeling connected to the natural world somehow reinvigorates our own vital energy through that psychological or even physical sense of connectedness to nature. In the poem Jeffers looks at the face of the rock with the light from the campfire reflecting off of it and thinks about the rock's youthful quality. It's childlike. It's powerfully energetic. It has what the Chinese might call Qi, a kind of atomic life energy, even though it's stone.

But when we actually found the rock, found *a* rock let's say, and photographed it and posed for pictures with it, and measured it, and did a lot of pseudoscientific things with it, the rock looked old. It was covered with moss. Our expedition was seventy some years after Jeffers himself was in that area looking at a rock wall, and the rock we found did not look childlike. It was bearded, so to speak. It had "lived" a human lifespan almost exactly since Jeffers had been there himself. So I found myself thinking about human mortality and the difference between the stone's span of existence and the ephemerality of a human life. It was very moving for all of us who were on that trip, very evocative, as I wrote about in the Jeffers chapter in my book *Going Away to Think*. I don't know that there's a simple answer to why it is that we find it meaningful to somehow measure ourselves against something non-human like stone, except that it is poignant to think about the meaning of our existence in relationship to the more than human as we recognize its otherness and come to grips somehow with what it means for us to have a relatively brief existence on the planet and to experience this in a more direct and observable way than if we're merely musing about it in abstraction or in our studies or in our daydreams. To stand literally beside the lovely rock that Jeffers has written about in such an emotional way in "Oh, Lovely Rock" helps us know how to stand beside a phenomenon that is not us—not only that one rock in that one place, but all of the phenomena that we encounter in our daily lives: the weeds we're picking in the garden, the hummingbirds that dart here and there as we're sitting in the chair at evening. The phenomena that we experience daily in our lives are all potentially

meaningful to us if we know how to take a deep breath and look at them, perceive them, think about them.

So when I read a poem like "Oh, Lovely Rock," it helps change how I exist in relation to phenomena that exist alongside me in the world. In a broader sense, it's one of the things that draws me to environmental literature. It always instructs me. It guides me, inspires me to try to think about my own life in its context and in the innumerable relationships that I have in my daily experience. This helps me not to take these relationships for granted—to slow down and notice things and become aware of how we're constructed psychologically and perceptually. We're always going to miss the bulk of sensations that are available to us in our lives, but we can start to take the time to notice more and more if we're moved by certain kinds of literature that demonstrate how to perform that action. I think that is what's happening in "Oh, Lovely Rock." Rather than going to sleep with the kids, Jeffers stays awake, looks at the stone wall, thinks about it, and is probably taking either written or mental notes for a poem that he might eventually write. He's registering the experience. Likewise, I am constantly challenging myself to emulate the literature that I find so moving and trying to register the world I'm experiencing.

TH: When you're doing that, it strikes me that you're doing something similar to Jeffers. You're observing and simultaneously relating to what you're observing—and doing so in multiple frameworks which heightens both your relationship to what you're observing and your relationship to yourself. In Jeffers how we are situated in time and space and physicality is always multiple. Instead of narrowing to a singular perception, Jeffers begins with a perception or claim, then explores and expands it as the poem develops. This, I think, is partly why his poems can be relatively simple and direct on the surface (in contrast, say, to Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*) yet still have depth, resonance, and complexity. With Pound, solving the poem's surface opens the poem. With Jeffers, the surface is like a stream in the Sierras. Looking at the surface, the water is so clear it seems perhaps two inches deep, but stick your hand in and it's over your head. This may be one of the reasons Jeffers doesn't compute for certain modes of academic literary criticism, even as his work resonates for non-academic readers as well as informed, thoughtful readers like yourself and Albert Gelpi, who you mentioned earlier, and others. It's a different poetic. With

Pound the world beyond the poem is drawn into it, and the poem becomes a self-contained, self-sufficient object. With Jeffers, the poem is a mediation that leads out to the world beyond the poem. The poem is a lens or it's a prism. It's a perceptual and reflective process rather than a linguistic object.

SS: That resonates with what I would call the environmental analytical perspective: to understand that the text is never only the text. This goes back to that diagram I mentioned earlier and the layers of context. Any act of human expression, what we would call a text, exists within layers and layers of context. And one of those contexts, if not the ultimate layer, is the broader context of the physical world. Any text, even Pound's, can be (and needs to be) read in that broader physical, environmental context. I often play a kind of Q & A game when I'm giving lectures to new audiences. I ask them to challenge me by mentioning a literary text that they don't think can be read ecocritically. No one has ever found such a text. Any text, I think, has its environmental context and its environmental resonances and implications. Years ago, for instance, when I was giving a talk in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a student opened her textbook and pointed to Wilfred Owens' "Dulce et Decorum Est." This poem has nothing to do directly with nature. There's no explicit mention of nature. It's a World War I poem about a poison gas attack. But it's also all about mortality and physical suffering. In a sense, it's an anti-exceptionalist poem. Humans exist in the poem as animals. They live and die. The poem is also about loyalty, especially loyalty to the flag. Is it sweet and decorous to die for one's country, for one's flag? Or should we be thinking differently about our allegiances and maybe understand that we all belong, ultimately, to the earth. Do we owe more to the planet than we do to the countries that we wave flags for? So that's just an example, but certainly Pound can be studied environmentally—I realize, of course, that Pound moved in different directions as his poetry matured, but I recall reading "In a Station of the Metro" when I was a young student and thinking that it was an extraordinary evocation of a particular moment in a particular place, which shows a deeply "environmental" sensibility. I would say any poet who's a human being and exists on the planet is producing work that can be understood in the context of the physical environment.

TH: If you were teaching a course in environmental literature and introducing Jeffers, what poems would you use? What's your canon for introducing people to Jeffers?

SS: My touchstone, so to speak, is always "Oh Lovely Rock." I like the fact that it's so accessibly narrative. You can go into the woods and find yourself besides something in nature. It doesn't have to be a rock wall. I used to think that "Oh, Lovely Rock" referred to the kind of rock you can pick up and hold in your hand. Only later did I realize, well, it's actually a cliff wall there in the wilderness. But any kind of phenomenon that you encounter in the world can inspire contemplation. To me, that's so fundamental in our human experiences and in the possibilities that all of us have, whether we live in one part of the world or another, in cities or in rural areas, to encounter something vastly different than ourselves and allow it to inspire wonderment about it and about ourselves and our relationship to that phenomenon. So, I find "Oh, Lovely Rock" to be powerfully teachable in that way. Even before we discuss the poetic nuances of Jeffers' language, how the text develops from the more concrete narrative language toward its philosophical discussion of living rock, for example, I would simply engage students in a discussion of the poem's "story," which is wonderfully commonplace and accessible.

In the later years of my teaching career, I taught a lot of environmental writing. One of my favorite exercises early in the class, working mostly with people who didn't think of themselves as writers, was simply to ask them to go outside and find a stone that they could hold in their hands. And then I would give everyone a chance to sit with that stone for about half an hour, looking at it carefully, and eventually writing about it for maybe 20 minutes or so. I asked the students to describe the rocks in great detail after looking at them in ways that they had not previously been able to do because no one had prompted them to study anything so closely. The students would often, at first, think this is such a waste of time. "Why would I ever want to just pick up a nondescript stone, a stone that's not special or valuable in any way," I imagined them thinking to themselves. But they'd find this experience mind bending. Invariably, they would come away from this experience of slowing down, finding language to describe something other than themselves—something small and manageable, not a huge rock wall, but something they could hold in their hands—having experienced

a new view of the world. And this experience, I think, could be related to a text like, "Oh, Lovely Rock." I probably wouldn't have students read the poem before that experience. I would have them experience the primary relationship to a stone first, then deepen that experience and refine it by reading a poem like "Oh, Lovely Rock" to see the depth that can be achieved in contemplating something like a random rock wall or other natural objects.

Also, "Hurt Hawks" is a really powerful poem. It suggests that the human intervention in the existence of other lives can be a deeply meaningful thing rather than something to take for granted. It helps us realize that when we see an injured animal we shouldn't just let it go or push it out of mind. It helps us experience our responsibility toward that animal, even though the animal may not care. As you said earlier, the hawk has a very different in-the-moment and non-self-pitying way of thinking about its existence. Or so we assume. But why is it that we may be driven to act in one way or another with regard to another animal, injured or not? Relationships to other species are really important for us to contemplate, a fundamental aspect of our relationship to the natural world.

I also think the poems you mentioned before our conversation, like the "The Purse-Seine" and "Shine, Perishing Republic," demonstrate Jeffers' ability to observe things in the world and then metaphorize them into a much broader meaning for our civilization. This demonstrates the need to look at the world and then, by expanding our situation symbolically, appreciate our historical context and then better understand the present moment through that expanded perspective. This is an important thing for students to appreciate. It's especially important right now when world events are so turbulent and worrisome, and potentially catastrophic, in our country and beyond. I think reading the quasi-apocalyptic poems that Jeffers was writing during turbulent eras of his own century can be very meaningful. It hadn't occurred to me that I should be turning to Jeffers to try to appreciate the state of mind that I'm in as I live through this moment—and the state of mind that so many people I know are in at this time. I didn't realize that his words could be quite so relevant.

This also relates to what we experienced during the COVID pandemic a few years ago when I found myself thinking a lot about ideas like the psychology of urgency and the psychology of complacency. How do we achieve an appropriate level of urgency at a time

when things seem to be very dangerous all around us? The human mind seems to subside so naturally into complacency and normalcy. I found myself noticing this during the COVID Pandemic—the way people were so vigilant initially with masks and social distancing and washing our groceries and all these things that we did at the beginning of the pandemic. Our initial sense of vulnerability. And then in a surprisingly brief period of time, we started to take all that for granted and stopped maintaining our sense of caution. And I found myself wondering, well, what is the role of literature in inspiring us to be appropriately vigilant, self-aware, mindful? It seems to me that certain types of literature have the potential to teach us something about appropriate mindfulness, not paranoid obsession, but mindfulness or awareness of the importance of recognizing that we always live with a certain degree of vulnerability. We need to be mindful with regard to our daily behavior and our larger lifestyle and the social policies that we support through our public officials. There's a reason for being careful about all of this. Pandemic literature, which often shows how people aren't aware that disaster is nearby and then all of a sudden there's a full-blown pandemic and a desperate situation that is either survivable or not survivable, can be quite a valuable thing to read, even when there's not a pandemic raging around us. Likewise, I think poems such as "Shine, Perishing Republic" and "The Purse-Seine" offer that kind of benefit. They help us see that there are reasons to be attentive to the world. Our apparently thriving society may very well be on the verge of dramatic change that we just can't perceive because we're in the net and not up on the hill looking down at the city or down at the net being retrieved from the sea. These poems offer a kind of self-awareness that is, I think, absolutely necessary for a functioning society not to become overly complacent.

TH: And this self-awareness has both an intellectual and experiential component. We feel, as well as understand, the poem's argument because it dramatizes the speaker experiencing what he is observing and thinking. And this mode of poetry may be more aligned with our need for the self-awareness you're describing than other modes of poetry. It's not to say that other modes of poetry can't be inflected this way, but rather that certain modes of poetry are more directly, perhaps even more productively, aligned this way.

SS: Yes, and that's one of the reasons I feel such affection for Jeffers' work. The narrative element in particular appeals to me. It

has that experiential dimension that is relatively accessible, and maybe that's the type of literature I gravitate toward in general, because it resonates with my experience. I tend to see it as teaching me something. I welcome the lessons, I can learn from them, but I also feel as if I'm reliving the experience that the speaker of such a poem is articulating.

TH: "Sign-Post," another often anthologized Jeffers poem, starts out "Civilized, crying how to be human again; this will tell you how," and gets very preachy. The manuscript, though, opens with a deleted verse paragraph where Jeffers is chastising himself for having become overly absorbed in the political chaos of the mid-1930s. In this original draft, he's the "Civilized" figure "crying," and he's haranguing himself, not the reader. The deleted material opens the possibility that he was writing the poem less to present a specific message and instead more as a way to confront, probe, and come to terms with something. Instead of the poem starting from an answer, the poem starts from the need to find or recover or accept an answer. In these didactic poems of Jeffers, if we look closely, there's usually a dramatic tension and meditative process. And if this is so, perhaps it has something do with why we can engage the poems conceptually—as argument, even pronouncement—while also being drawn into them as imaginative experiences.

SS: I actually don't mind literary preaching. I have a soft spot for didacticism in literature. The whole phenomenon of didacticism and literature is really fascinating because I do think we need guidance as a society. Despite the number of churchgoers in American society, people are not really enacting the practice of deep thinking as part of their spiritual practice. I think we need wisdom speakers. We need people to demonstrate what it means to derive meaning from experience. Much of what we've been saying about Jeffers has to do with this effort to have poignant experiences and then to try not merely to replicate them or reproduce them in poetic language but to develop new ideas through the pathway of the experience and the practice of finding the language for that experience. That's part of what I'm hoping will happen when my students hold a stone. They're not just holding it and looking at it. They're finding language to somehow describe and develop their relationship with that object. And I think that that act of using the language and going through the crucible of both the cognitive and affective processes that you've mentioned and establishing this connection with the

world is what happens in some of the best literary art. When we're trained as readers and give ourselves the time to slow down and truly meditate on a literary text rather than just glancing at it and quickly lifting a message from it, we can establish a connection with the world through the text. Our engagement with literature becomes much more meaningful through the process of the taking time to establish a connection with the world or with the text or to try to describe that in a conversation as we're doing right now.

TH: What have I failed to give you a chance to talk about?

SS: I spoke about disaster and about Posthumanism. And I spoke a little bit about vulnerability and precarity, one of the overarching themes of contemporary ecocriticism. We didn't really touch on human rights, environmental justice, and things like that. But I was going to ask you whether you think any of Jeffers' work feels as if it's relevant to these themes which are so commonplace in contemporary criticism—human rights, social justice.

TH: Yes. But not always foregrounded. For Jeffers, I think, a central dilemma is resolving how consciousness problematizes our relationship to the world. It enables our awareness of the world, but it can disrupt our participation in the world if we fail to see our being as contained within its being. But he's also aware of human injustice and its impact. In "Memoir," a poem that's received little attention, he mentions concentration camps in Europe and genocide and the terrible things that human societies do. He acknowledges political violence and injustice. In "Memoir" he poses the question of how we should respond to this reality. Ignoring it isn't an option. That, in the imagery of the poem, leads to singing "happy songs" and only "fools," he writes, can sing those songs. To register the world's pain and violence and respond is to sing "tragic songs," and these are the only real songs. He doesn't propose a strategy for ameliorating social injustice, but social injustice is part of the landscape—the emotional, psychological, experiential landscape—that has to be engaged. How to cope with social and political violence—with war—figures prominently in *Be Angry at the Sun* (1941) and *The Double Axe* (1948), which collect the poems Jeffers was writing in the lead up to World War II and then during the war. The poems in these two collections document the specific context for Jeffers introducing the term Inhumanism.

SS: It makes sense to me that Jeffers is indicating his awareness of these events of injustice and human crisis while tending to take

a somewhat arm's length, philosophical view of them. It seems to me, and I mean this in a good sense, that he's looking at the deeper meaning and the broader historical span in which these events occur.

TH: To tweak that slightly: perhaps the poems might be seen as attempts to achieve that more distanced view, but are instigated by, driven by, his dismay at the human situation. This, I think, is the case with some of the poems he chose not to publish from 1917 to about mid 1919. In one, "The Daughter of God in Russia," Jeffers imagines God's Daughter, Liberty, supplanting the Son of God. Instead of Peace as salvation, she offers salvation through destructive renewal. In the poem Jeffers imagines Liberty manifesting herself through the Russian Revolution and redeeming history by giving meaning to the violence of World War I. The character Tamar can be seen as an avatar of Liberty and Tamar's story seen a naturalized recasting of "The Daughter of God in Russia" without the Revolution as its occasion. "Tamar," published in 1924, can be read, and often is, as a response to Jazz Age hedonism. But it was written in 1922 at the same time that Eliot was writing "The Waste Land" and it can also be read as a poem confronting the war and searching for a peace beyond it—a counterpoint or complement to Eliot's poem.

A final question if I might: There's a tendency for people to think they value Jeffers' poems for the ideas they articulate. Yet perhaps they also value the poems for the experiences they offer as we engage them—a difference, if you will, between what the poems say and what they do, which is perhaps the difference between Inhumanism as a concept and Inhumanism as an experience. Is this perhaps one of the lessons we learn from considering Jeffers in the context of environmental literature? Or perhaps an element in how Jeffers might matter for the study of environmental literature?

SS: Thanks for this final prompt. I was actually trying to say something related to this in some of my earlier remarks. I believe Jeffers can be read and appreciated on many levels. The poems of his that I especially like—works that I've written about and sometimes taught, including the poems I've mentioned during this conversation—have both recognizable experiential/narrative qualities and powerful conceptual depth. The experience of reading Jeffers' work from an ecocritical perspective challenges me to engage in a process of self-reflection, self-*evaluation* even—what would I think about if I were having a similar experience, watching a campfire

reflect on an ordinary cliff wall in the wilderness, if I encountered an injured animal, if I saw fishing boats at sea pulling in their nets? How many of my other daily experiences could I respond to in a Jeffersian way, telling the stories in detailed, tangible ways, understanding the symbolic resonances of such encounters with the world, and weighing the human-nonhuman relationships at the heart of such experiences?

In much of Jeffers' writing I find a compelling roadmap to a deeply reflective way of living in the world—patterns of thought that I seek to emulate in my own life. I believe other ecocritics are likely to find his work similarly inspiring and provocative, if they take the time to reread it.

Terry Beers

Arthur B. Coffin's *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism*

Arthur B. Coffin's 1971 book *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism* offers an extended argument that Jeffers' verse and his ideas of Inhumanism—that is, his particular take on the idea that humanity is part of and not separate from the natural world—can be productively understood to have developed in three stages across his career with each stage, according to Coffin, reflecting in some way the influence of the work of Friederich Nietzsche.

Coffin's argument seems at least partly aimed at refuting an earlier one offered by Radcliffe Squires in his 1956 book, *The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers*, wherein Squires says that "the differences between Jeffers and Nietzsche are more significant than the likenesses" (46). Coffin, like Squires, deplores the lack of critical respect for Jeffers' work at the twilight of the New Criticism, but he disagrees with Squire's premise, writing that in "seeking to rehabilitate Jeffers' literary reputation by exploring his intellectual background, Squires is forced to shape his evidence to fit an a priori image of the poet" (6). But this assertion feels like a bit of projection. Squires writes that his approach to Jeffers is in service to constructing a "cosmography from both his poetry and intellectual background" (ix), and that insofar as he's building his cosmography, he's also not advancing a theory of influence but rather offering "studies in literary geography" (ix). Squire's approach, then, would actually seem less constricted than Coffin's insistence on the primacy of Nietzsche and perhaps more congenial to current scholars steeped in unearthing intertextual networks among texts and who might, thus, be suspicious of comparatively narrow influence studies like Coffin's.

Frederick I. Carpenter, reviewing Coffin's book, writes that ". . . interpreting Jeffers in terms of Nietzsche leads the reader

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into the house through the back door." He feels this approach is misplaced because it values Nietzsche over Emerson, who "inspired both Nietzsche and Jeffers, and whose formative influence on Jeffers has been explored by Brother Antoninus." Still, in building his argument, Coffin offers some compelling readings of Jeffers' work along the way, as he prosecutes his argument for the importance of Nietzsche's work to Jeffers poetry and the intellectual orientation of Inhumanism. Moreover, Coffin eventually shows how Jeffers transcends Nietzsche's influence to perfect his philosophical point of view. In a way, he and Squires wind up in similar places.

Coffin's book falls into three main sections. The first essentially sets up his argument for the primacy of Nietzsche's influence on Jeffers. The second divides Jeffers' work into three periods and seeks to demonstrate how Nietzsche's influence is embedded in Jeffers developing oeuvre, and the final section looks beyond Nietzsche to incorporate aspects of an intellectual tradition that helped to round out the idea of Inhumanism.

After a chronological list of Jeffers' work (which ends with the 1963 volume *The Beginning and the End and Other Poems*) and a brief introduction, comes the first main section, which includes a chapter called "The Poet and the Poetry," featuring a biographical sketch, a review of criticism, and a section on Jeffers' poetics, where Coffin emphasizes Jeffers' thoughts about "the capacity of poetry to engender passionate response." Here, Coffin links Jeffers' ideas to Milton, quoting some notes penned by Jeffers: "Poetry, by Milton's definition, must be 'impassioned;' poetical speech has little value and no likelihood unless it is born of passionate feeling" (23-24). Ending the chapter, Coffin writes that "Jeffers believed that poetry should synthesize and focus the experience of man" (33). It is in this chapter that Coffin first skeptically confronts Squires view that Schopenhauer, rather than Nietzsche, is the stronger influence on Jeffers. Accordingly, the next chapter in this section, "Jeffers and Schopenhauer," builds that skepticism into a full-blown argument.

The structure of this chapter feels a bit labored. Coffin offers a refutation of Squires, grounded in his overarching purpose to show that Schopenhauer could not have been an influence to the extent that Squires thinks. Coffin follows a three-part structure, based on three aspects of Schopenhauer's thought: "(1) the will, its character and function, (2) Nature, and (3) death. Such a scheme is destined to leave things unsaid and certain of Schopenhauer's ideas uncon-

sidered, but my method is dictated by the relevance of the material to the central subject matter" (37). By comparing Jeffers' attitudes to will, nature, and death as expressed in his poetry, Coffin finds some facile similarities but also distinct differences strong enough to reject the thesis of Schopenhauer's overarching influence. Coffin cites Jeffers materialistic views—for example his wonderment in "The Beginning and the End" that life ultimately grew from a "chemical reaction" (58)—a view, which Coffin says separates Jeffers from Schopenhauer, whom Coffin considers ultimately less materialistic.

Embedded in the argument, though, are some very fine readings of some of Jeffers' narratives poems, including "Give Your Heart to the Hawks." His reading of "Thurso's Landing" is especially good. Although Coffin doesn't offer as much as readers might like on Jeffers' artistry within this chapter, he does emphasize that,

> It is abundantly evident in Jeffers' poetry that he seeks identity with a Nature that represents reality, peace, and permanence. When, in *Rock and Hawk*, Jeffers seeks to unite the symbols of "bright power" (the hawk) and "dark peace" (the rock)—"Fierce consciousness joined with final / Disinterestedness"—he reveals vividly the quest that directs so many of his poems. But the stone will endure; that is why, Jeffers says in *Tor House*, he made his house of stone to permit one to "look for this place after a handful of lifetimes. (45)

I think Coffin is right to emphasize that Jeffers puts the natural realm outside of human consciousness. It's out there, not a romantic projection. Contemporary scholars might wish for a more nuanced discussion about that idea, not so much to challenge Jeffers' "not man apart" ethic but to add complexity to Coffin's discussion, given that "nature" has become a contested term in an era where the idea of Anthropocene is better understood, and we see human beings as a keystone species. Of course, those ideas wouldn't have been in Coffin's critical tool box at the time he was writing. I also wish he would have delved a little more deeply into *how* Jeffers' poetry can move a reader, which would be consistent with the previous chapter's exploration of the artistic connections between Milton and Jeffers, and thus better emphasize the emotional dimensions that accompany how human beings confront the reality that we are all embedded into a greater whole.

I should mention that Coffin's language throughout, perhaps because he is so sure of his thesis, can be direct and bracing, as if he is a lawyer prosecuting a case. There is little equivocation, which may feel odd to readers who inhabit an academic world on the other side of the post-structuralist turn.

The second part of Coffin's book offers the core of his argument in three chapters, an important virtue shared by all of them being clarity of purpose. The first, "Jeffers and Nietzsche the Beginning," primarily introduces the idea of using as an interpretive frame the idea of the "Will to Power," which Coffin describes as "the struggle toward personal transcendence and the perfection of oneself" (65). Coffin offers readings of major narrative poems, including "Tamar," "Roan Stallion," and "Cawdor." He ends the chapter with a consideration of shorter poems, including "Apology for Bad Dreams." Coffin argues that the focus in much of this work is on individuals' self-mastery. This "period of trial and examination" (123) next led Jeffers to consider "in the larger context of society, the examination which he began in the twenties with the individual" (122).

In "Jeffers and Nietzsche, the Middle Period," Coffin argues that "Thurso's Landing" marks the beginning of Jeffers' second phase of development wherein "Jeffers is still preoccupied with the Will to Power as it is manifest in Overcoming oneself. . ." (132) but with important differences, namely applying his ideas to a broader segment of society. In his analysis, this poem serves as a frame for thinking about the less symbolic but more realistic narratives of this period, especially, "Give Your Heart to the Hawks," the story of the Frasers and the legal peril faced by Lance Fraser, who has killed his brother whom he had caught with his wife. The question of burying the news of the murder or reporting it creates the central dilemma of responsibility to self and family against the responsibility to the social order. According to Coffin, this is a Nietzschean dilemma, a "stronger emphasis on society and its concern for the Frasers and that of the Frasers for society [that] is intended by Jeffers to be a descent from the isolation of any stone or ivory tower" (135). Coffin's analysis feels more compelling in these cases, perhaps because his frame works better with the more realistic narratives of this period than in earlier narratives more dependent on symbol.

In "Jeffers and Nietzsche, the Final Period," Coffin examines how Jeffers finds that the Will to Power frame, somewhat modified in the second period to authorize "firm independence and the intel-

lectual fulfillment of the individual," is further challenged by the press of current events (162-63), including the Second World War. Coffin's analysis of the poetry in this period includes especially fine discussions of "The Double Axe" and "Hungerfield," which tellingly swerve from the comparative realism of the narratives of the second Nietzschean period to include the supernatural: the reanimated corpse of Hoult Gore in "The Double Axe" and the specter of Death in "Hungerfield." In the former, Hoult Gore dies in combat but, as Coffin explains, he "returns to his father's farm to denounce the parent's American Legion engendered 'insane talk / About courage and honor'" (174). If the Second World War powerfully pressed Jeffers to respond to current world crises, the death of Jeffers' wife Una in 1950 was perhaps an even more powerful stimulus, a personal crisis that led Jeffers to create a narrative centered on Hawl Hungerfield's fight with Death to save his ailing mother, with the narrative framed by lyrical elegies for Una. Coffin's analysis is compelling, but I wish he'd spent more time on it. In this final section, the sometimes brittle three part Nietzschean structure is more flexible and thus richer and more convincing, especially as Coffin expands the frame for analysis to include Lucretius, arguing that Jeffers' Inhumanism, at least in "The Double Axe," is essentially a Lucretian doctrine.

Three final chapters—"The Idea of Culture Ages," "The Greek Tragedians," and "The Order of Nature"—build out Jeffers' ideas partly through discussions of the work of Oswald Spengler and Havelock Ellis, expanding the Nietzschean frame even more than he had done in the last chapter discussed. In his final chapter, Coffin gives additional consideration to Lucretius, arguing that "Inhumanism depended on Nietzscheanism to clear away certain preconceptions, but it drew inspiration from Lucretius' great poem *De Rerum Natura*" (242). The chapter ends with a useful summary statement: "That Nietzscheanism was a useful—though sometimes limited—tool for Jeffers is now obvious. That his Lucretian-derived Inhumanism and its insistence upon transhuman magnificence flourished from the inception is equally clear" (257).

Thus Coffin seems to end in a similar place as Squires, with a cosmography of sorts, albeit with a different center of gravity, ultimately demonstrating how Jeffers articulates a habit of thought called Inhumanism, which is not a system but an attitude toward the place of humanity within the world, and one that ultimately finds an

expression—perhaps through disappointment in the civic and social world and grief over the death of Unt—of humanity's worth that is finally more accepting of human life but still relentless in facing the terrors and beauties of sentience within the larger cosmos.

Coffin's approach leads back to a distinction once offered by Mercedes Cunningham Monjian. Is Jeffers a philosopher poet or poet philosopher? Obviously both, but given his interests, Coffin leans into the first, which makes sense given his interest in what he sees as the Nietzschean influence on Inhumanism. But there are places in his book where he seems to refuse the choice, as when he says of "Roan Stallion," that the poem "is one of Jeffers' most memorable poems; it is moving poetry. . ." (86). I do wish, however, that Coffin would have done more with the lyric poems, which often foreground through symbol and imagery nature's impact on the observing subject. And it's interesting to puzzle on what he might have done with primary sources available long after the publication of *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism*, such as *The Point Alma Venus Manuscripts* and *The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers.*

Overall, this is a closely argued critical study that rewards readers interested in Jeffers' world view and the shape of its development.

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William E. Cain

A Maker of Poems: Robinson Jeffers' "To His Father"

There's an early poem by Robinson Jeffers that has a strong hold on me, the sonnet "To His Father." He included it in an unpublished collection, *God's Peace in November* (1917-1918), and later in *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924), and again in *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* (1925). I'm interested in the perspective of the speaker, organization of the language, and dual presence in this portrait of esteem and ambivalence:

> To His Father
>
> Christ was your lord and captain all your life,
> He fails the world but you he did not fail,
> He led you through all forms of grief and strife
> Intact, a man full-armed, he let prevail
> Nor outward malice nor the worse-fanged snake
> That coils in one's own brain against your calm,
> That great rich jewel well guarded for his sake
> With coronal age and death like quieting balm.
> I Father having followed other guides
> And oftener to my hurt no leader at all,
> Through years nailed up like dripping panther hides
> For trophies on a savage temple wall
> Hardly anticipate that reverend stage
> Of life, the snow-wreathed honor of extreme age. (CP 4: 288)

Jeffers' father, Dr. William Hamilton Jeffers (1838-1914), was a Presbyterian minister and Biblical scholar. This devout and austere intellectual made sure his son received an excellent education in the United States and abroad. But he was stern and demanding, and he died when Jeffers was in his mid-twenties.

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Early on, Jeffers had in mind a different title, not "To *His* Father" but "To *My* Father." "My" intimates that the speaker is taking the reader into his confidence, a private message he allows the reader to overhear, whereas "His" makes the poem more distanced, less immediately personal.

"Christ" as the first word is a bold choice. John Milton, Henry Vaughan, and other poets use this holy name in their titles or first lines. But I can't recall another poem that opens with it. "Lord" is familiar, "captain" less so, echoing Hebrews 2:10: "For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings."

The first line makes clear, twice, the direct address: "your." The tone is intriguing. It could be straightforward praise. But it might imply a rebuke or accusation, that the father has erred, gone down a wrong path: this is what you believed; I do not.

Probably we pause at the end of this first line, for it's a complete sentence. But Jeffers uses not a period, but a comma, so that somehow, we should stop but also keep going, into line two, where there's an accusation, or a judgment. It's a shocking one—that Christ "fails the world," a failure, present tense, that's happening now. I sense here the frightful specter of World War I, its catastrophic, God-annihilating death and destruction. Jeffers pays tribute to his father, "you he did not fail." The word "not" is stressed. It's a mystery: why would Christ, who fails the world, single out this father for better treatment?

Christ was the father's lord and captain, and his guide, leading him through "grief and strife," through sorrow for losses and amid bitter and difficult struggle and disagreement, "all forms," none omitted.

The run-on third line lands us on "Intact"; the rhythm puts weight on the second syllable, but I hear the two syllables as a single unit of inviolate wholeness. "Intact," from Latin *intactus*, *in-* "not" + *tactus* (past participle of *tangere*, "touch"). The speaker's father was a Christian knight, a warrior. This is an image from Ephesians 6:13-16, with its injunction to don the "armor of God," "the breastplate of righteousness," "the shield of faith," an edict common in hymns, sermons, and poems from the Middle Ages onward.

The repetition of "he" in the first four lines builds up the authority of Christ as he exercised protective watch. In a way,

he wasn't equipping the father to do something but, rather, he kept others from doing something to him—not allowing them to "prevail." This line takes a moment to figure out because there's a comma after "full-armed," where there should be a colon or a period.

I wasn't sure at first how the syntax functioned. I read the line out loud a couple times, and then I sensed the movement, the flow, the continuity in what Christ did for this father that he didn't do for the others whom he failed. Perhaps this failure wasn't accidental, wasn't a sign of inadequacy in Christ, but instead was (and is) deliberate, a matter of choice.

There are external dangers—"outward malice." But what's worse, in a sinister, demonic metaphor, is the sharp-toothed serpent that coils, curling into the next line, winding in rings and circles, in the father's "brain."

"Fanged": "fang" is the tooth of a venomous snake, by which poison is injected. It comes from Old English *fang*, "something caught or seized," and Old Norse *fang*, "a grip" or "hold." This prepares for "coils," which is better than the verb "lurks," which Jeffers had used in an earlier version. That word doesn't fit with the image of the snake and lacks the entwining motion of "coils."

We assume it's the father's brain, but "one's own" implies it is or could be in the speaker's and reader's, a reality we share, a malign danger. This threat, it is said, is to the "calm," the composure, serenity. Jeffers then shifts to "your," returning to the father, though "your" conceivably could follow as well from "one's own." "Calm" is a good condition to maintain, but, as we move from the snake, it feels precarious.

The next line provides assurance, the "calm" transforming into a "jewel," heightened as both "great" and "rich." Jeffers is alluding to the "one pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:45-46), the incomparable worth of the Kingdom of God.

The subsequent lines are intriguing. Are we to credit Christ for sustaining the father's peace of mind? And in doing so until age comes, with a coronet ("coronal"), a crown, a circlet or wreath worn on the head, a symbol of honor or achievement? This term also refers to the top of the head, and to the gleam of a halo. There's death, which brings mental ease, "quieting balm," like a fragrant ointment that heals or soothes the skin. The comforting "balm" is

made resonant and enriched through the rhyme with "calm," and it summons up the embalming of the deceased.

The turn in this sonnet comes in line nine with the first-person singular. Jeffers writes "I Father," the second word capitalized to highlight the father's identity and scale. The phrase might have been instead: "I, father,"—lower-case, two commas. But Jeffers wants the "I" and "Father" compacted, as if they were one. He moves to the speaker's admission that he "followed other guides," separating himself from the father's counsel. We don't know why. An act of resistance, of rebellion? If this loyalty was to multiple guides, his disconnection from his father must have lasted for some time.

The situation was worse than that: the speaker says he looked often, and with painful consequences, to "no leader at all." Possibly he was less mature, willful, determined to go his own way.

In these two lines, Jeffers' language is stark and plain, which makes unnerving the intensification that comes next. Again, the passage of time: "through years." Then, the visceral verb "nailed," with the spectacle of crucifixion, in this poem launched with Christ's name, giving it wounding eloquence.

"Nailed up": the action is already done and still being done. There's more, unexpected, harrowing, the bloody hides of panthers—more than one, it seems. Jeffers doesn't state explicitly that these are bloody. His word is "dripping"; he knows we'll picture the red drops falling from and streaking the tawny-colored skins. These are new wounds, freshly made.

Jeffers gave sacred and spiritual significance to birds and animals, and it's possible that he is drawing upon the medieval bestiary, a literary and artistic genre that compiles descriptions of many sorts of creatures, real and mythical, along with their symbolic and allegorical meanings. These texts were popular in Europe during the Middle Ages (roughly 500–1500 CE) and often were lavishly illustrated.

In bestiaries, the panther frequently is depicted as a Christ figure—a gentle animal whose only enemy is the dragon, symbolizing the Devil. However, Jeffers here seems both to invoke this association and to counterpoint it: the hides are in a "savage temple," a pagan setting, where they have been mounted as "trophies," memorials of victory. "Savage" is deployed not in reference to a people but to the "wall" of a heathen house of worship.

This is a thrilling, and terrifying, moment in the poem, the unforgettable image of the dripping hides resonating with Christian and non-Christian—perhaps anti-Christian—implications. There's violence in the feelings that Jeffers is evoking as this son confronts his father, but it's controlled, contained by the vivid precision of the language.

Jeffers is bringing his sonnet to an end, and we catch the clinching rhyme of "stage/age," with echoes of Jaques's account in *As You Like It* of "the seven ages of man," which begins "All the world's a stage," proceeds through the phases of life, and closes with a grim assertion of emptiness: "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

I can't tell how active this allusion is or might be. But I'm drawn to it, in part because the couplet is complicated, and elusive, and a tie-in with the Shakespeare passage would supply context and guidance.

We linger over the indefiniteness of "hardly anticipate"; then the eulogizing image, carried from one line to the next, of "that reverend stage / Of life," the stress falling on "life"; the purity and coldness of the snow, modifying the abstraction "honor"; and the disquieting placement of the adjective "extreme," signifying that the aged figure has gone too far, lived too long, has lost self-command.

I hear a tonal doubleness in "reverend." It derives from Latin *reverendus*, "to be revered' or "worthy of respect." The term bestows value on a person who occupies a religious office and displays spiritual leadership, but, at the same time, it has a touch of mockery, for it's a status the speaker declares he himself can "hardly anticipate." Jeffers seems to be saying he can't look forward to the honor that has been conferred on his father, who lived to a revered old age. But the father isn't referred to in these final lines, and his presence has been overwhelmed by the image of the "dripping panther hides." The speaker, himself, can't expect honor, and the tensions in the phrasing intimate he may not want it, or, if he does want it, doesn't deserve it.

There's grave unease in the mood as "To His Father" concludes. I discern bitterness, and I'm inclined to add contempt and loathing. That may be too strong. But I do register the speaker's taut compound of admiration and antipathy for his father, the attachment and abrasion in their relationship as he recalls and characterizes it.

The structure of the sonnet and the rhymes: Jeffers makes this poem tight. But the emotions he expresses are deep and searing, about a relationship he's delineating in a world traumatized by war.

From early in Jeffers' career, "To His Father" is a zone of force, internally dynamic in the positioning of each word and image. It's not a poem we find in anthologies, but it's a potent demonstration of what Jeffers set himself to do from the start. He was, and even more became, a poet of fervent beliefs and principles, big ideas and forthright arguments, and he projects his meanings outward to us. But, as this sonnet attests, Jeffers is devoted above all to the making of poems. He's passionate and disciplined, a writer of high intentionality.

Note

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George Dardess

Laying Continent's End

Building by hand a stone retaining wall at the back of our summer cottage—that was my dad's vacation project one year. Maybe 15 or 16 years old at the time, I grumblingly agreed to help. For starters, the embankment behind the cottage had to be dug out at an angle with a pickaxe, smoothed with a shovel, the loose dirt hauled off in a wheelbarrow, and fortified, finally, with flat stones collected from around the property and brought to the site, first to be sorted for size, thickness, smoothness, and then carefully inserted in the canted bank, following and reinforcing its contours.

I'd put on enough muscle to be able to handle most of the preliminaries, but according to my dad, I wasn't ready to place the stones themselves. My dad was very particular. You had to fit them at a slight tilt into the bank behind, just so, constantly adjusting their position not only in relation to each other but also in relation to the elevation and back-leaning cant of the bank. Heavier, thicker stones on the bottom, OK?—No, not thick enough, and fit them in lower down than that. Can't you see? No!?!—oh, heck, I'll do it myself. Here, let me show you.…

I appreciated my dad's workmanship, but getting the right stones laid in the right order required a patient discrimination that had not emerged as prominently as my biceps had. I returned to the wheelbarrow, a little hurt but resolved to match him someday in care for the procedure of building.

I hadn't thought for years of helping my dad with that wall until I began browsing in Jeffers' biography and saw how important building with stone was to him—and then saw how often in *Tamar and Other Poems* (and elsewhere) stone appears in his poetry as, paradoxically, his most potent symbol of both permanence and change (or of permanence and change blended in eternal transformation). Though not just stone itself in its permutations through slow time,

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but also stone's almost human consciousness: its fellowship and personal support (as in "To the Rock That Will be a Cornerstone of the House"), its solid links to the human past ("To the Stone-Cutters"), and to the human future ("To the House").

But I also sensed how stone, or rather, the building with it, the careful laying of it in courses, played a key role in the way Jeffers imagined writing poetry. He didn't have to mention the word stone itself in order to suggest stone's influence on the way he laid out his lines: meticulously, as my dad did, one by one, shifting them, weighing them, balancing them, slowly feeling for the right proportion and not stopping until he felt the line or course ready. Jeffers showed his love of stone-laying in the way the lines themselves are shaped.

We can see that love in action best, I think, by comparing his jottings of early attempts at laying down lines with finished versions of these lines. In the early and magnificent "Continent's End," for example, we can compare the poem's final version with early jottings Jeffers made, of all places, on the back of a February 19, 1922 bank statement (*CP* 5: 326-327). It's illuminating to see what Jeffers had to do to reweigh, reshape, and replace words in order to produce his final text.

We'll look at an example of Jeffers' jottings later. Let's first go to the end, the finished project, so as to appreciate all the better what those jotted lines turned into under the master's hand:

Continent's End

At the equinox when the earth was veiled in a late rain,
wreathed with wet poppies, waiting spring,
The ocean swelled for a far storm and beat its boundary, the
ground-swell shook the beds of granite.

I gazing at the boundaries of granite and spray, the established
sea-marks, felt behind me
Mountain and plain, the immense breadth of the continent,
before me the mass and doubled stretch of water.

I said: You yoke the Aleutian seal-rocks with the lava and coral
sowings that flower the south,
Over your flood the life that sought the sunrise faces ours that
has followed the evening star.

The long migrations meet across you and it is nothing to you,
you have forgotten us, mother.
You were much younger when we crawled out of the womb
and lay in the sun's eye on the tideline.

It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since then and
you have grown bitter; life retains
Your mobile soft unquiet strength; and envies hardness, the
insolent quietness of stone.

The tides are in our veins, we still mirror the stars, life is your
child, but there is in me
Older and harder than life and more impartial, the eye that
watched before there was an ocean.

That watched you fill your beds out of the condensation of
thin vapor and watched you change them,
That saw you soft and violent wear your boundaries down,
eat rock, shift places with the continents.

Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's
ancient rhythm I never learned it of you.
Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our
tones flow from the older fountain. (CP 1: 16-17)

Let's talk first about voice and point of view, because both undergo enormous expansion throughout the poem.

In stanza one, the voice is disembodied, the mark of an observing presence as yet unformed, as yet unidentifiable, but rooted in a particular place, along a California coastline like the one Jeffers lived by, and at a particular time in the spring, at the equinox. Why there and then? Probably because the equinox is a time of shifting celestial balance, where what was dark can return to the light, where life previously obscured can be released at last. The dynamic between passive and active, cautiously opening and relentlessly advancing, plays out between the shore and the surf. The shore is "veiled," "wreathed," and "waiting," as if in expectation of its uncovering, while the "ocean swelled," "beat," and "the ground-swell shook" as it prepared to erupt upon the shore. In the first line, alliteration adds to the effect of muted watery agitation: the sequencing of *w* sounds in "wreathed with wet poppies, waiting spring" emphasizes a flowing, almost dactylic rhythm. In the second line, the sound pattern features explosive sounds: the marching *b*'s

of "beat its boundary," echoed by the repeated *g*'s and *b* in "the ground-swell shook its bed of granite." A burgeoning world of imminent tidal impact is brought to life in just two lines.

Stanza two at first seems to confirm the reasonable suspicion that this will be a poem in the Romantic vein, a Shelleyan ode to the glory of untrammeled nature. For lo! A speaker materializes out of the ghostly presence in stanza one, a speaker who becomes an I. But this speaker isn't merely gazing, that is, looking intently, consciously, with admiration and surprise out to sea. For at the same time the speaker is sensing behind him (or her?), "Mountains and plain, the immense breadth of the continent." So if the speaker previously could be seen as a sensitive Romantic soul out for a stroll in a cinematic landscape, he now shows himself to be something more, much more: This speaker is aware of forces both seen and unseen, those embodied in the seascape he is gazing at but also those of an entire continent pressing at his back—an area so vast he couldn't possibly gaze at it even if he were to turn around. His particularity as a lone observer, situated at a certain place at a certain time, becomes unsustainable. He seems to have swelled, like the waves, to become as capacious as the continent itself.

But if in stanza two the speaker swells immeasurably in size, beyond all gender and personal attributes, in stanza three and throughout the rest of the poem the speaker swells beyond mere human reckoning altogether. The speaker does this by opening his mouth in direct address, no longer speaking in the third person to us, his mortal audience, but to the ocean itself—or rather herself—as "you," for the ocean in the fourth stanza is named as mother. We, the human listeners, now shrink in importance and relevance. We have become privileged spectators and auditors of this confrontation between would-be Titans—between a mother identified by her child as the watery source of all life on earth and that same child also claiming birth out of the hardness of a cooling planet. But even further, this same child now speaks on behalf of an *us* that includes all children of the mother. And even further still: a child that has also not forgotten its even earlier origin in the fire of ancient stars. It is the mother, the child asserts, who has forgotten that earlier, starry origin, so that the poem becomes, at its conclusion, a rebuke and a self-justification, the child's declaration of independence from the maternal embrace of the sea. And in the last stanza, the poem becomes something even more still: the

child's gesture of reconciliation with the mother, a gesture made as the child evokes their common indebtedness to "the tides of fire," to "the older fountain," the vast creative energy that has enabled them both to become world shapers, world sculptors, world builders, world masters of measure and rhythm—in a word, to become poets, in its literal meaning of makers.

Amazingly, this entire expansion of voice and point of view—an expansion that brings us from a moment on a California beach to the boundary of the universe, and allows us to hear one great, superhuman voice address another—all of this expansion is conducted within the confines of a poem of just eight stanzas. How could Jeffers have produced such a feat of rhythmic compression? Answer: Not by accident! He does it by shaping the poem's structure to echo the breaking of waves upon a shore—a shore vast beyond our imagining. For by poem's end we're persuaded that the child earth, and the mother ocean, aren't the only ones who have learned their song's measure from the older fountain. Jeffers himself has learned it there too.

As for what I've called compression, I think that's best seen in the way Jeffers shaped and realigned words to fit other words within a line. The difference between one of his jottings and its final version as stanza five of "Continent's End" demonstrates this process. Here's the final version:

> It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since then and
> you have grown bitter; life retains
> Your mobile, soft, unquiet strength; and envies hardness, the
> insolent quietness of stone.

Here's the corresponding jotting from the February 1922 bank statement:

> The mobile soft unquiet strength of water, the hard insolent endurance of rock; our origin from the sea, our aspiration to the mountains (CP 5: 327)

Just from this one comparison of a finished line with a jotting (other comparisons give a similar result), we see that in the jotting Jeffers has not yet clearly envisioned the dramatic tension he would later shape his language around—the tension between child and ocean. Water and rock are contrasted in the jotting, but not yet put in a dramatic relationship. The tension between them remains slack. But in writing the final version, Jeffers has tightened that

relationship, even made it antagonistic, by setting off "we" against "you" and "proud" against "bitter." But, for me, the masterstroke, a sure sign of poetic craft, is Jeffers' binding child and mother by using forms of the word quiet as an attribute of both: "Your mobile, soft, unquiet strength" as against "the insolent quietness of stone." The effect of using parallel forms of quiet—respectively, as "unquiet" and "quietness"—helps explain why the mother becomes bitter. She cannot match the rhetorical force of the negative form of the adjective "unquiet" against the forceful use of the adjective now made positive and placed in climactic position at the end of the line as "the insolent quietness of stone."

But it's not just by playing with forms of quiet that Jeffers ratchets up the adversarial relationship between sea and shore. The word "insolent" needed adjustment as well. In the 1922 bank statement, Jeffers puts "insolent" before "endurance," in the phrase, "the hard, insolent endurance of rock." But in this final draft of "Continent's End" he's found an even better home for the word. Now it modifies not "endurance" but "quietness." What difference does this make? Well, for one thing, "insolent endurance" is easily pictured, even anthropomorphic: it suggests an adversary's brazenly stubborn, defiant resolution. But "insolent quietness"? The combination unsettles an easy personification of the speaker's attitude towards the shore. This is not a recognizably human scorn, but a grievance coldly provoked by an almost unconceivable grudge. So the question is: What justifies such a violent juxtaposition of adjective and modifier? What titanic grievance is fueling the speaker's crescendo of animus against the very source of his being, against the life force thundering towards him with the incoming tide? Is such a being even recognizable in human terms?

I can't see how those questions can be approached without moving finally to the real masterstroke of word-laying in this poem: rhythm. Attaching the right adjective to the right noun is one thing. Getting phrases to flow in ways that suggest the expanding dimensions of a poem is another. I would argue that Jeffers has been angling for this result all along, starting out in the trappings of a Romantic poet letting the tidal rhythm of his long lines evoke a very human sea, with its wet poppies and beds of granite. And then, step by step, wave by wave, enlarging the scene until, by stanza four, we are no longer standing on earth but somewhere in the cosmos, privy to a grievance that recalls divine wrangles between Hera and

Zeus in *The Iliad*, Jupiter and Juno in *The Aeneid*. But this time the godly grievance isn't over favored humans (or semi-humans). It's over poetry itself: specifically over the true source of the speaker's own poetic measure. It doesn't derive, as mother ocean thinks, from her own tidal heartbeat but from a force far greater than her own, which she has, in her arrogance, forgotten—a force that binds them both. Her progeny, her offspring, and the stone itself have emerged at last to remind her of their common origin in the clinching last stanza:

> Mother, though my song's measure is like your surf-beat's
> ancient rhythm I never learned it of you.
> Before there was any water there were tides of fire, both our
> tones flow from the older fountain.

Can such poetry be scanned? Yes, like a wave as we watch it advancing to the shore: rhythmically the same yet always slightly different, line after line throughout the poem. Here, in the first long line above, the wave erupts with a strong, emphatic trochee, "Mother," then glides to spondees, in "my song's measure," in a kind of shallow cresting, followed by heavier iambs, "is like your surf-beat's ancient rhythm," then punctuated as if with a comma by a caesura that creates a pause slightly before the hard crashing iambic thunder of "I never learned it of you," a hard, stony rebuke that the shore delivers at the line's end. And all to defend poetic precedence!

And then, as if with the damage done and the message delivered, the speaker can allow the final line, or wave, to be the calmest of all. Smoothly iambic throughout, the caesura mid-line neatly and symmetrically divides and balances what is really an appeasing effort of reconciliation on the part of the shore towards the ocean. As far as the shore is concerned, it seems, the strife is over. Scores have been settled. Presumably, mother ocean agrees. How would we know otherwise since the speaker, the shore, commands the poetic stage? But this cosmic world is one where poetry is the source and meaning of life, and its higher source is absolute. Accordingly, both ocean and shore bow equally and in rhythmic unison to the stars, to the tides of fire from which flow indistinguishably water and rock.

But the genius of the poem isn't solely in imagining cosmic reconciliation. Its genius is in including us, mere humans, bits of stone and water, in the poem's heavenly rhythms, by virtue of Jeffers' careful laying-out of human words, one attached to the other

in just the right order, to enable a voice to emerge expanding in size and power yet still within our range of hearing, in stanzas that always retain their reassuring links to the tidal rhythms that pulse in our veins.

One final question: the title, "Continent's End." It wasn't the first title that occurred to Jeffers. On the back of the bank statement Jeffers had scribbled "The Ocean—the Sea" or perhaps "The Origins of the Sea" (*CP* 5: 326). The distance between these tentative titles and the one Jeffers settled on is extreme, but their differences do suggest the direction Jeffers was going in. "The Ocean—the Sea" tells us little except for his initial focus of interest. "The Origins of the Sea" reveals Jeffers' desire to look beyond the immediate reality of the sea to the forces producing that reality. We know where this desire took him: to the tides of fire birthing all reality. But why, then, entitle your poem about reaching the goal of this striving, "Continent's End"?

The first, most obvious answer must be because the continent's end—the California coast—was where Jeffers chose to live: literally a liminal space where the pressure of the tide meets the pressure of the land. But Jeffers wasn't interested in scenery, however magnificent. He wanted to share in that liminal pressure, because as a created being he was already a product of it. So he began by choosing, shaping, and laying stone from that land to build a house, transforming supposedly dead matter into a living structure. Such a place, its parts shaped and tensed and directed by human hands and human imagination, could become the center of the world that it mirrored. A site from which Jeffers could sense the links among all the energies of creation and destruction he saw at work around him locally and in the stars above. Words were no different from stones. A pile of stones can become a wall, a home, a tower. Words in the right combinations can do the seeming impossible: suggest the sounds of the sea, or speak for the tide and shore themselves, or even for the starry vault beyond them both. All mediums of communication are connected. The tide cannot form without land to resist it. Neither can exist without star fire spitting matter into space to start the conversation going. And creatures, all of them to some degree conscious, take their part in the resulting chorus, imitating and challenging each other in their need to discover their purpose, their completion, within and from their interactions with each other.

Laying one stone and then another, like laying one word and then another, creates a perpetual tension between the unquiet and the quiet: producing from that tension a poem—a making—that projects a reality beyond both sea and shore onto the stars themselves, where, as Jeffers reminds us so beautifully, all matter and all life began in the tides of fire.

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Robinson Jeffers. *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems: Centennial Edition*, 1925-2025. Edited by Tim Hunt, Tor House Press, 2025. 233 pp.

Reviewed by Brett Colasacco

Tim Hunt's keynote address at the tenth annual Robinson Association conference, published as "The Work of the Edition" in issue 6.4 of *Jeffers Studies* (fall 2002), introduced a heuristic distinction between Jeffers' approach to poetry and that of his Modernist contemporaries. "For Pound and the modernists," Hunt argued, "the page became, at root, a space to inscribe writing, a place to show. For Jeffers the page became, instead, a space to enact speech and remained a place where one might enact a drama of telling" (37).

According to Hunt, Modernism's pervasive influence on American literature and literary criticism was partly responsible for Jeffers' continued unfashionability. It had caused at least one twenty-first-century critic, Brad Leithauser, to completely overlook (or underhear?) the essence of Jeffers' artistry:

> [H]is assumptions about poetry and the kind of poetry he has learned to read and value lead him to *look* for Jeffers' craft rather than to *hear* for it. The momentum of the long lines, the effect of pace and rhythmic modulation, and how these create dramatic and conceptual nuance require that we hear the poems through the voice Jeffers has carefully crafted and controlled and that we attend carefully to the way Jeffers positions the act of speaking (in the lyrics) and narrating (in the long poems). (44)

This argument suggests that the visual-spatial arrangement of Jeffers' words on the page—in contrast to those of Pound, Eliot, et al.—is largely irrelevant to the right way of reading and interpreting his work. Only by closing our eyes (figuratively) and focusing our mind's ear on the sound of Jeffers' "long lines" can we understand and aesthetically appreciate what the poet is up to. How the lines appear before us is, by implication, immaterial.

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Tor House Press has published a beautiful centennial edition of Jeffers' most celebrated collection, *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, with a brief foreword by Tor House Foundation president Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts and a substantial afterword by editor Hunt himself. Among its many virtues, this publication presents an intriguing counterpoint to Hunt's earlier argument. At a minimum, it complicates the dichotomy between a visual hermeneutic born of Modernist poetics and an aural-rhetorical hermeneutic appropriate to Jeffers.

As Ruchowitz-Roberts observes, Jeffers' "poetic line… in many cases could not be printed as a single line of type but had to be printed as two and sometimes three lines of type depending on the width of the page" (i). The centennial *Roan Stallion*'s chief attraction is that it "retains the integrity of the poetic lines as he wrote them": The pages are printed and bound horizontally, in the manner of a photo album or coffee table book (i). A few fine, limited-run publications have done this before—most famously William Everson's monumental, and monumentally expensive, 1975 *Granite and Cypress*—but the centennial *Roan Stallion* represents "the first full volume of Jeffers' poetry" to be released in such a layout (i).

The result is, in a word, revelatory.

Clearly, I am not alone in thinking so. Albert Gelpi, in his endorsement of the new edition, says that just as the "wide format" of Everson's *Granite and Cypress* "was a revelation because it released Jeffers' free verse line to run with full sweep and force without line-breaks," the centennial *Roan Stallion* "gives us the poems at last in their full form." Katie Peterson comments on the "landscape format" of the edition: "I did not know it was possible to make this verse seem wilder and bolder." For Robert Hass, too, this edition recovers the "shock" and "energy" of the original volume—which he sees as exemplifying an alternative version *of* "modernist aesthetics" as opposed to an alternative *to* modernism. And Dana Gioia writes that the centennial *Roan Stallion* "makes it possible to see (as well as hear) the strange, tragic music that made Jeffers famous," recalling the "startling clarity" he, Gioia, experienced upon first encountering *Granite and Cypress*.[1]

The question I have been asking myself is… *why?* Why should seeing Jeffers' lines laid out in their full, unbroken length come as

[1] These endorsements are quoted from the publisher's promotional half sheet to reviewers for this edition of the collection. [ed. note]

a shock and a revelation? Why does it matter, if the poet's art is fundamentally an aural-rhetorical one, and not visual-spatial?

One possibility is that we, like Leithauser, have been so conditioned to read poetry with our eyes, and not with our ears, that we are actually incapable of separating the lines' appearance on the page from our inner-aural experience of their "momentum." Try as we may to float freely on the waves and tides of what Jeffers termed his "rolling stresses," we cannot help but perceive and receive each line break, however accidental, as an interruption, a forced pause in the poem's natural flow.

Hunt, in his afterward, notes how the new edition's "presentation better conveys the pace, rhythms, and inflections of the long lines in Jeffers' poems" (218). It "accords with Jeffers' claim that his lines were not free verse or prose arbitrarily chopped into lines but verse organized by a patterned, consistent number of beats per line" (218). It also "more clearly communicates" the poet's "attention to the expressive possibilities of pace and inflection" and "verse paragraphing" in the narratives; internal rhymes, pulses, and conceptual relationships between and among elements within a phrase that might otherwise be missed; and Jeffers' technique of alternating long lines with shorter ones, especially in his lyrics, as well as his intermingling of long-lined and shorter-lined passages in the narratives and the subtle yet meaningful mix of verse and prose dialogue in the Aeschylean-Euripidean drama "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" (218).

All of which is absolutely true. At the same time, I would argue, there are two different ways of conceiving of, and articulating, the value of this presentation. On the one hand, Hunt convincingly ascribes a sort of *negative* value to the centennial *Roan Stallion*'s rendering of the Jeffersian text. By eliminating the disturbance of line breaks unintended by the author, the edition's formatting removes a major obstacle to our listening to Jeffers' verbal music. The horizontal layout, by this logic, is a means of moving beyond our too-easily-distracted sense of sight so that our sense of hearing can do the real work these poems require.

On the other hand, Hunt gestures toward another, more *positive* conception of how this layout augments our experience of Jeffers' poetry. The visual-spatial presentation does more than merely better convey or clarify what is happening at the aural-rhetorical level. In some cases—as in the variation of long- and short-lined

passages in the narratives—the visual experience reveals emphases and thematic connections that it would be virtually impossible for the reader to discern via a purely aural engagement with the language.

Take the first of the two title poems, "Roan Stallion," which Jeffers placed at the head of the 1925 collection, usurping the position "Tamar" had held in its privately printed predecessor volume, *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924). "Tamar" is marked by frequent shifts between long- and short-lined passages, both within and across the narrative's seven numbered sections. Those shifts are far from arbitrary or haphazard. Nevertheless, the later "Roan Stallion" displays a more skillfully controlled use of the length-variation technique.

Scansion of Jeffers' lines is often somewhat subjective. But unlike "Tamar," "Roan Stallion" definitely has a dominant visual pattern. The poem begins with a sequence of very long lines unfurling, uninterrupted, for three and a half pages. Each of these lines has roughly ten beats or stresses (some arguably as few as nine, others as many as eleven or twelve). The poem ends similarly. From beginning to end, the preponderance of these page-width-approaching lines builds the impression of an all-but-impregnable wall of text. Indeed, Jeffers interrupts the pattern and breaches the wall on only four occasions. That alone signals these moments' importance—and their interrelatedness.

The first set of interruptions happens when the protagonist, California, is returning home on Christmas Eve from Monterey, where she has bought presents for her daughter Christine—and at her abusive, alcoholic husband Johnny's insistence, bottles of whisky for him. She and the mare Dora find themselves in a terrible storm, in the dark of night. Dora refuses to cross the ford. California gets off the mare's back, and as she tries to make it move, Jeffers gives us two short lines (of six stresses each): "Then California thought of a prayer: 'Dear little Jesus, / Dear baby Jesus born to-night, your head was shining…" (4). For the rest of California's prayer and what immediately follows, the default long poetic lines resume. Yet eight lines later, we get another, standalone short line, after California has seen a vision of the Christ child and what she interprets as the "light of heaven," which "Frightened poor Dora. She backed; swung up the water…" (4).

The second breach in Jeffers' wall of long lines is a singleton. It arrives in the middle of a sentence split across four lines. California

is contemplating the poem's titular roan stallion, which Johnny won gambling:

> She hated (she thought) the proud-necked stallion.
> He'd lean the big twin masses of his breast on the rail, his red-brown eyes flash the white crescents,
> She admired him then, she hated him for his uselessness, serving nothing
> But Johnny's vanity…. (5)

Here the poet abstracts and accentuates the content of the one shortened line—"She admired him then, she hated him for his uselessness, serving nothing"—by bracketing the specifics surrounding it. The effect is to suggest a philosophical statement about the sense of beauty itself, one that undoubtedly derives from Kant's Third Critique: the notion that aesthetic pleasure is tied to disinterestedness, that it depends, in other words, upon the aesthetic object's lack of any practical utility. Jeffers generously expects the reader to be able to suspend this thought until almost the end of the poem.

The third, extended series of interruptions occurs at the climax of the narrative. It is night again. California approaches where the roan is roaming; earlier in the day it mated with Jim Carrier's mare there. As California draws near, the long lines narrow into a sequence of mostly shorter ones, like those that related California's prayer to the baby Jesus and Dora's terror:

> … she heard him
> Blow the shining air out of his nostrils, she saw him in the white lake of moonlight
> Move like a lion along the timbers of the fence, shaking the night-fall
> Of the great mane; his fragrance came to her; she leaned on the fence;
> He drew away from it, the hooves making soft thunder in the trodden soil.
> Wild love had trodden it, his wrestling with the stranger, the shame of the day
> Had stamped it into mire and powder when the heavy fetlocks
> Strained the soft flanks. "Oh if I could bear you!
> If I had the strength. O great God that came down to Mary, gently you came. But I will ride him
> Up into the hill, if he throws me, if he tramples me, is it not

my desire
To endure death?" (7)

Previously Jeffers established an equation between California and Dora, as the former imagined the storm-engorged river as a metaphorical stallion seeking to mate with the latter. Here California is identified, and identifies herself, with Jim Carrier's mare. She imagines mating with the roan, awed by its natural beauty and power, though she knows that a cross-species sexual union is impossible: "No way, no help, a gulf in nature" (8). She decides to ride the horse to the top of the hill. As she rides, we are treated to a sequence of interspersed long and shorter lines, a passage of transparent beauty and thick, naturalistic description:

She murmured, "Come,
We will run on the hill. O beautiful, O beautiful," and led him
To the gate and flung the bars on the ground. He threw his
head downward
To snuff at the bars; and while he stood, she catching mane
and withers with all sudden contracture
And strength of her lithe body, leaped, clung hard, and was
mounted. He had been ridden before; he did not
Fight the weight but ran like a stone falling;
Broke down the slope into the moon-glass of the stream, and
flattened to his neck
She felt the branches of a buck-eye tree fly over her, saw the
wall of the oak-scrub
End her world: but he turned there, the matted branches
Scraped her right knee, the great slant shoulders
Laboring the hill-slope, up, up, the clear hill. Desire had died
in her
At the first rush, the falling like death, but now it revived…. (8)

Next, the poet gives us six almost identically long lines in a row, followed by a single short one. California, having dismounted the stallion and tethered it to an oakwood bush on the hilltop, stands "Shaking. Enormous films of moonlight…" (8).

This seems an odd line for the poet to have set apart. One could even consider it an unsatisfyingly crafted one, insofar as it pairs a modifier, "Shaking," which is divorced from its noun on the previous line, with a noun phrase, "Enormous films of moonlight," divorced from its verb on the succeeding line. But the line's shortness is a signal, a visual cue. It points us back to the first short line that stood on its own—"Frightened poor Dora. She backed;

swung up the water"—which reinforces the identification between California and Dora and, by extension, Jim Carrier's mare. This, in turn, clues us into the link between the short-lined passages that foreran each of these standalone lines: California's prayer to the anthropomorphic God-child, on the one hand, and her ride on the stallion's back, on the other.

Her prayer to Jesus precipitated a vision accompanied by the "light of heaven," which California perceived as terrifying "poor Dora." In fact, it is unclear whether that vision was objectively real at all. California had acknowledged that Dora could see in the darkness already, without the aid of any heavenly rays; only California's human eyes could not see. Likewise, the mare was already, quite literally, scared stiff by the turbulent water. What matters, however, is California's *belief* that she experienced a theophany that night—an irruption of the personified divine into the plane of the profane—and that Dora experienced it too and was frightened by it.

California's experience with the stallion is much more drawn out, and tentative at first. In the last line of the initial, predominantly shorter-lined grouping, she utters a sort of hybrid sexual-religious prayer, from "Oh if I could bear you!" to "is it not my desire / To endure death?" (The Wagnerian love-death theme connects this scene even more closely to the waking dream of the metaphorical water-stallion from the ford.) Notice that the sequence of shortened lines is penetrated by a single long one: "If I had the strength. O great God that came down to Mary, gently you came. But I will ride him." Form mirrors content, as California references the virgin birth of Jesus and envisions herself as a parallel vessel of the divine.

The mutual penetration of long and short lines during the horseback ride fulfills what California's second prayer foreshadows: the coming together of her human consciousness with the inhuman reality of the animal beneath her and the precisely described details of the sensuous world around them both. It is a sensual union, but not a sexual one. The meeting, without ever totally integrating, of two distinct worlds is visually depicted by Jeffers' interweaving of different line lengths. And just as the anthropomorphic theophany terrified the horse Dora (in California's imagination, at least), this inhuman revelation leaves the human California quivering in the moonlight. Her desire is extinguished, then rekindled, purified.

There are, of course, passages of remarkable physical description earlier in the narrative, though they serve as background to the action. Here they are foregrounded, the protagonist and the reader alike put into contact with wild, inhuman nature in a radically different, more direct way.

When California attempts to pray a third time to God—who has by now merged with the image of the stallion for her—the prayer is formulated in the poem's ordinary long lines, not emphatic shorter ones. That prayer is ineffectual. Yet in the next two verse paragraphs, we get another sequence that, like the horseback ride, pregnantly combines multiple poetic line lengths. As the stallion grazes indifferently over California's prone body, Jeffers shows *and* tells us what is going on inside her brain:

> The small dark head under his nostrils: a small round stone,
> that smelt human, black hair growing from it:
> The skull shut the light in: it was not possible for any eyes
> To know what throbbed and shone under the sutures of the
> skull, or a shell full of lightning
> Had scared the roan strength, and he'd have broken tether,
> screaming, and run for the valley.
> The atom bounds-breaking,
> Nucleus to sun, electrons to planets, with recognition
> Not praying, self-equaling, the whole to the whole, the microcosm
> Not entering nor accepting entrance, more equally, more
> utterly, more incredibly conjugate
> With the other extreme and greatness; passionately perceptive
> of identity…. (9)

That the poet explicitly characterizes this activity as *not* prayer is highly significant. Without perhaps herself realizing it, California has transcended the need for prayer, which is nothing if not an effort at verbal, human communication directed toward an anthropomorphized deity.

The extraordinary, long-lined vision that ensues—blending religiously, sexually, and cosmologically charged imagery and entirely restricted to California's consciousness (inaccessible, that is, to the stallion chewing aloofly above her)—brings the narrative climax to closure. That vision is a consequence, an aftereffect, of California's having turned outward, escaping, albeit imperfectly and only temporarily, the psychological confines of her domestic, socially constructed, anthropocentric world. The shower of sparks after the

iron has been struck—or, to paraphrase the poem's most quoted passage, *the mould broken away from, the crust broken through, the coal broken into fire*. California's human, all-too-human consciousness has been *fooled*, as Jeffers puts it, *out of its limits*. It is almost more than the mind can bear; as we will soon see, it *is* more than her mind can bear.

We encounter just two more line-length interruptions in "Roan Stallion," near the conclusion of the narrative. The first happens immediately after California has fled her husband's drunken sexual advances; he "Followed in silence. She ran down to the new corral, she saw the stallion…" (10). The last one, a very short line by the overall standard of this poem, occurs after California witnesses the stallion trampling the husband in the corral. She screams. Christine manages to bring her the heavy rifle from the house. California rests the gun "On the top rail, without doubting, without hesitance…"—and shoots the dog (11). She lies, claiming her willed act was a miss and blaming that miss on the moon's insufficient light. The stallion, meanwhile, finishes what it started. Johnny lay dead, his body brutally mutilated. At last, "moved by some obscure human fidelity," California fires three shots and kills the roan (11).

The closing two and a half pages of "Roan Stallion," like the opening three and a half, manifest as an imposing wall of long-lined text—broken up, in this case, exclusively by those two shortened lines. Certainly, Jeffers' compression of these lines has a kind of dramatic and rhetorical effect, the one communicating California's turning away from her bad husband and toward the inhuman reality embodied by the stallion, the other conveying the cool, calm clarity of California's mind as she passively commits mariticide. But it does more than that. It demands that we draw a connection between these lines and the other emphatically shortened ones that stood apart earlier in the poem. Two of those—"Frightened poor Dora. She backed; swung up the water" and "Shaking. Enormous films of moonlight"—had fear and trembling as their subject. The horse Dora was frightened (or so California believed) by the "light of heaven." The human California shook, in the moonlight, after her transformative ride on the stallion's back. In each case, creature and/or character is confronted with a theophany, with the awesome and terror-inducing presence of the divine. Now, Jeffers wants us, his readers, to tremble at the awe-full implication of California's ephemeral inhumanist transfiguration. That California invokes

the moonlight to explain her in/action at that decisive moment deepens the resonance further still.

In allowing her (awful) husband to die—something that is evidently within her power to prevent—California transgresses human, social conventions of morality and specifically Judeo-Christian ethics ("Thou shalt not kill"). From a more sympathetic and flexible moral-ethical perspective, hers could be regarded as a justifiable, even a righteous act: Johnny is a wantonly cruel individual. He is singularly responsible for his wife's pain and suffering. California has taken advantage of the situation and ridden herself of her tormentor.

Except that nowhere in the narrative does Jeffers articulate a practical philosophy, a theory of action. What he *does* allude to is a theory of aesthetics, in the one other emphatically shortened line that arrested our attention earlier: "She admired him then, she hated him for his uselessness, serving nothing." Recall that this line, strikingly clipped, echoes a component of the Kantian definition of beauty—the most famous definition in modern philosophical aesthetics—whereby aesthetic pleasure, the sense of beauty, is intrinsically tied to disinterestedness, to the subject's state of detachment from the object under consideration. Here that notion finally comes to the fore. We are reminded of it and alerted to its relevance by correspondences in line length that may sound dimly through the "pace, rhythms, and inflections" of the poem but that shine brilliantly on its material surface; they and their significance are principally open to *visual*, not *aural*, discovery. Through these correspondences, the highly educated and philosophically literate Jeffers encourages his ideal reader to interpret and to justify Johnny's death—along with, lest we forget, that of the dog, the very first creature mentioned in the poem—not morally or ethically, but *aesthetically*. The experience our protagonist has undergone (and that we, as readers, are supposed to have undergone with her) produces a detachment from self, society, and species on the basis of which death might be accepted as a sacrifice for the sake of aesthetic pleasure, an offering at the altar of inhuman beauty. "[D]eath," we are told, in the final line of "Night," also in *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*, "is no evil," and the bare fact of the husband's humanity is no more redemptive than is the dog's caninity.

California's passive but nonetheless willful mariticide is simultaneously an act of transgression and one of felt transcendence.

Jeffers' purposeful varying of poetic line length underscores for us both the beauty and the deadly seriousness of the vision of life that results from that transcendence. It is a vision California herself is unable to sustain.

* * *

I was tasked with writing a review, not an essay. It has not been my intention to provide an exhaustive analysis of "Roan Stallion." The narrative invites, and over the past hundred years has received, a range of sometimes complementary, sometimes divergent interpretations. In this respect, it is a wonderfully rich work of art. What I have endeavored to demonstrate is that some aspects of that richness can only be fully appreciated via visual engagement.

Such is the nature of Jeffers' "rolling stresses" that one cannot always simply *hear* where one line ends and another begins. One must *see* where Jeffers deliberately shortens and lengthens his lines in order to grasp conceptual and thematic threads woven throughout the poem. This is exceedingly difficult when the long lines are themselves randomly divided. Seeing those lines spread before us in their full, intended grandeur lets ear and eye work together, thus enhancing our aesthetic experience and understanding of the text.

Any single mode or method of engaging with a text has inherent strengths and weaknesses. A strictly visual mode, as Tim Hunt rightly argued in 2002, neglects the dramatic and rhetorical nuance that an aural experience of Jeffers' narratives yields. At the same time, the visual mode facilitates an apprehension and comprehension of higher-level relationships between and among elements within the poems. Our aural-rhetorical experience of a text is necessarily temporally bound. The ear can only ever hear one syllable at a time, and while our faculties of memory and expectation are constantly in play—enabling us to make meaning out of the current of words, phrases, and larger poetic units—that play is inevitably limited in scope. Engaging with the text visually permits the free play of the eye, and of the mind, upon the printed page. Modernist poetics, with its avant-garde word-painting and wealth of intertextual allusions, is particularly suited to this type of reading and interpretation. But Jeffers' work merits and amply rewards such visual-spatial engagement as well.

Narrative literature as we know it has its roots in oral/aural traditions of storytelling and in the revolution of language

inscribed as material culture. The best works of modern narrative, whether poetry or prose, appeal to our sense of hearing in addition to our sense of sight: They delight us through their "dramas of telling" while admitting seemingly endless aesthetic and interpretive possibilities through rereading and careful, critical study. By revealing the degree to which Jeffers' work succeeds on both levels, this centennial edition of *Roan Stallion* may prove to be one of the most important events in Jeffers' posthumous publication history. One sincerely hopes that Tor House Press, or some other publisher, will produce similar editions of the poet's subsequent volumes in the future.

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Alan Malnar. *Voices of the Headland: Robinson Jeffers and the Bird of Prey*. Peter Lang, 2017. 170 pp.

Reviewed by Eric San George

Given the frequency with which birds of prey soar, strike, and even suffer in Robinson Jeffers' poems, perhaps it is surprising that it has taken so long for a monograph on such compelling imagery to appear. *Voices of the Headland: Robinson Jeffers and the Bird of Prey* studies the recurring image of raptors, analyzing the visceral presence of hawks, falcons, eagles, and other birds of prey in his work. Although many scholars have recognized the various functions of Jeffers' hawks in both his specific poems and collective poetry, Malnar's commendable close reading of these images fills a gap in Jeffers scholarship by concentrating entirely upon his raptor symbolism, positing that these bird images are crucial to understanding Jeffers' philosophy of Inhumanism as articlulated in the 1948 Preface to *The Double Axe*: "a shifting of emphasis from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and the recognition of the transhuman magnificence" (*CP* 4: 428). Moreover, Malnar makes the case that this vital, distinctive imagery stems from Jeffers' affinity to the headlands on which he lived, ranged, and observed countless raptors for over 40 years. The first book to engage extensively with Jeffers' hawk imagery, *Voices of the Headland* contributes to Jeffers studies through its detailed examination of what Malnar terms, in the title of the second chapter, "words of prey": the relationship between Jeffers' ornithological knowledge of raptors and his poetics.

Throughout his lyric and narrative poetry, Jeffers sought to dispel the illusions of anthropocentrism, neutralizing human significance amidst the course of the abiding cosmos. According to Malnar, Jeffers employs birds of prey as controlling supervenient symbols for his Inhumanist vision. They embody the vast, uncaring universe. Jeffers' preoccupation with the hawk's predation demonstrates the significance of violence in his Inhumanist doctrine.

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As with other forms of violence in his poetry, predation is an essential, even beautiful component of an impersonal cosmic order. However, Jeffers loathed how humans "often kill for self-indulgence and control"; instead, he admired not only the grace and swiftness but also the "motivation" of raptors that "kill for sustenance" (10). Whether hunting or hurt, the hawks of his poems participate in what Jeffers saw as the universe's unbending indifference to individual suffering. Perhaps most often in his raptor imagery, eagles, hawks, falcons, and vultures symbolize transcendence of human experience. In early poems, "a bird of prey in flight often symbolizes the young poet's desire to transcend his human limitations" (32), and as Jeffers constructed his Inhumanism, these birds on the wing "both peacefully and ominously" represented "the infinite beauty of the trans-human divine, and other ideas related to the notion of human transcendence" (27). Malnar identifies Jeffers' "lead gift" (*CP* 1: 378) to an injured hawk in 1927, memorably rendered in "Hurt Hawks," as contributing significantly to his transformation from apprentice to mature poet, marking a specific shift in his treatment of transience, death, and the cosmic order. In "Vulture," one of his last poems, Jeffers reconciles his own death with his unwavering Inhumanism.

When writing about raptors, Jeffers often is portentous, a prophet speaking from a position of cosmic authority. Yet in Malnar's estimation, Jeffers could not envision birds of prey as Inhumanist symbols without closely watching their flights, stoops, and strikes in nature and at Tor House and Hawk Tower. His poems and letters evince that Jeffers's fascination with the birds was the result of first-hand observation. His knowledge of hawks is revealed in his intense, realistic descriptions of them. Studying their territory, biology, and behavior, in writing about raptors Jeffers not only developed his symbolism but also exhibited his descriptive prowess. The realistic depictions of birds of prey contribute meaningfully to their symbolic power. The book successfully connects the literary and naturalistic dimensions of Jeffers' raptor imagery, and Malnar, himself a falconer, displays his own ornithological knowledge throughout the work, detailing the anatomical and behavioral differences between falcons, kestrels, and hawks to account for the evolving symbolism of Jeffers' birds of prey. In the chapter "The Hawks of Jeffers Country," Malnar sufficiently describes the hawks that Jeffers encountered and studied along the headland and the

surrounding landscape. Extensive footnotes explain hawk habits, and ample illustrations draw attention to the features and characteristics of the birds that gripped Jeffers' imagination.

In addition to elucidating the philosophical commitments shaped by Jeffers' deep appreciation of raptors, this book considers the significance of birds of prey in the personal life and public reputation of the poet. The hawk was his "totem animal," and the chapter "The Hawk Poet of the Tower" presents an interesting study of the image of the poet himself that has developed over time. Contemporary reviews and critiques frequently characterized Jeffers as "hawk-like" in appearance and demeanor. Even today, "the poet's celebrated hawk figure has become coterminous with the poet himself" (140). To Malnar, Jeffers' controversial status during the war could make sense only "during a time when hawks had been vilified in their natural state" (141), and Jeffers' reception has coincided with changing attitudes toward hawks and other birds of prey: if, in the more distant past, critics perceived Jeffers as indifferent and aloof as the birds of prey gliding above Tor House, today the image of Jeffers, perched in Hawk Tower at the western end of the continent, suggests a prophet in quiet reflection, attuned with wondrous, wild nature and dedicated to studying the freedom, peace, and beauty of hawks and other birds of prey that the American environmental consciousness, coming to terms with vanishing wildlife and ecological collapse, is now better placed to appreciate. In the chapter "Beasts in Peril," Malnar explores the environmentalist dimensions of the poet's work, suggesting that Jeffers' hawk poems may have motivated regional environmental stewardship groups. His dynamic poetic hawks deflate the view that animals are purely instinct-driven or mechanistic, humbling anthropocentric denial of animal complexity and "[encouraging] us to become responsible and sound citizens and realize that our misanthropic actions have been detrimental to the ecology of our planet" (119).

Malnar convincingly argues that no American poet or writer has so consistently drawn from the power, magnificence, and beauty of these raptors, let alone given such full expression to their unique, enduring qualities, quite like Jeffers. Readers interested in one of Jeffers' prevailing images will find an analysis bolstered by careful ornithological research and reinforced by natural history. Although Malnar rehearses critical viewpoints of Jeffers in the

first chapter, those seeking a theoretically grounded study of the poet's imagery–in, say, ecocriticism, animal studies, or even literary theory–will have to look elsewhere. Malnar is deliberate in his close reading, citing only in passing "reader-response critique" (xxiii) as facilitating his individual interpretation. However, the intense concentration on a precise image is appropriate given that the series in which the study is published focuses specifically on themes and motifs in literature, and Malnar, in lively prose, admirably analyzes one of Jeffers' most stirring, indelible symbols.

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Louise Economides. *Wild Anthropocene: Literature and Multispecies Justice in Deep Time*. Routledge, 2025. 196 pp.

Reviewed by George Hart

Although the International Commission on Stratigraphy recently rejected *Anthropocene* as the designation of a new geological epoch, the concept is finding fruitful use in ecocriticism. Louise Economides's *Wild Anthropocene: Literature and Multispecies Justice in Deep Time* joins studies such as Timothy Clark's *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015), Lynn Keller's *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene* (2018), and David Farrier's *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction* (2019), in considering how literature can respond to issues such as global warming, mass extinction, and environmental injustice. Each of these problems is a matter of scale and interconnectedness, and the concepts that such ecocriticism sees as effective are ones that get readers to see how the Anthropocene's massively shifting scales and radically expanding interconnectedness change how we perceive time, agency, and responsibility. As its subtitle indicates, *Wild Anthropocene*'s two key concepts are deep time and multispecies justice.

Deep time creates a scalar disjunction that Timothy Clark dubs "Anthropocene disorder": the discovery of massive geological timescales reduces humanity's significance even as humanity has become a geological agent itself. Action that is insignificant on an individual level becomes catastrophic at the species level, and these shifting scales disorder how we perceive and understand agency and responsibility, potentially debilitating political action. Economides borrows Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between "anthropos" and "homo" levels of agency. Global warming, for example, is produced at the species (anthropos) level, and the only species releasing excessive amounts of greenhouse gases is homo sapiens; at the political (homo) level, only certain members of that species are responsible for burning all that carbon. *Wild Anthropocene* argues

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that literature can provide the space in which the decentering of humanity in deep time can lead to engagement with environmental and multispecies justice rather than political detachment. As Economides observes, "One of the most critical challenges we face today is how to bridge anthropos- and homo-level agency such that human praxis can interface in a more ecologically responsible way with the Earth's dynamic more-than-human systems" (8).

Most of the literary works in *Wild Anthropocene* are novels that generally fall into the category of climate fiction (CliFi): James Bradley's *Ghost Species*, Jeff VanderMeer's *Hummingbird Salamander*, Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam* trilogy, Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, and Richard Powers's *The Overstory*. Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* is the earliest of these novels, published in 1985, and VanderMeer's novel is from 2021, so the fiction covered in this study self-consciously addresses Anthropocene issues. The book begins with two chapters on three poets: one on Robinson Jeffers and one on contemporary Canadian poets Don McKay and Dionne Brand. The three poets are linked by their practice of "geopoetry" (30), though Jeffers is mentioned only a few times in the chapter on McKay and Brand. When the discussion moves to the novels in later chapters, Jeffers is never mentioned again. For Economides, Jeffers is a "transitional figure" or "thinker" in twentieth-century literary environmentalism, so there is no influence, necessarily, for Economides to trace in her argument (31, 39). Nonetheless, though Jeffers serves only as an introductory figure, his longtime readers will be interested in how Economides situates his work in the context of Anthropocene ecocritical theory.

At the beginning of "Robinson Jeffers, Deep Time and the Geological Sublime," Economides writes, "There is nothing particularly new about literary representations of deep time that seek to counteract human hubris," citing Shelley's "Ozymandias" as the classic example of deep time in Romantic poetry (28). Economides is concerned with "two key dimensions in Jeffers' poetics that anticipate the current 'geological' turn in Anthropocene theory—namely, his revelation of stone's vibrant materiality and his explorations of stratigraphic deep time," as opposed to astronomical deep time, another major interest of Jeffers, which she brackets here (31). Economides charts these "dimensions" in two sections: "Embracing Stone: Jeffers's Vital Materialism" and

"A certain detachment: Jeffers's geopolitics in the context of deep time." These two sections exemplify how Economides sees Jeffers as a transitional figure. Jeffers' "geopoetry" is the transition from a Romantic sublime in which humanity is decentered in deep time to a recognition of material agency. Jeffers' intimacy with stone and understanding of geology allow him to engage deep time both to decenter humanity and to realize nonhuman agency. This process happens at the anthropos level, but Jeffers' nonanthropocentric perspective (that is, his Inhumanism) is too detached from the homo level to make the distinctions required for environmental and multispecies justice, and, Economides writes, "his project of 'un-centering' the human via what Kirk Glaser terms the 'geological sublime' at times devolves into a misanthropic fantasy of wiping the Earth clean of our troublesome species so that Nature can rebound" (32). Here is where Jeffers' transition to the Anthropocene ends because the tipping points and cascade effects of extreme climate change disallow any kind of "rebound" without the political action of humans.

The first section uses Jerome Cohen's "geophilia" and Jane Bennett's "thing-power" to frame Jeffers' engagements with masonry and geology as a discovery of stone's agency (33). In close readings of early poems (such as "To the Rock that Will Be a Cornerstone of the House," "Tor House," "Credo") and "Oh Lovely Rock," Economides demonstrates Jeffers' sense of deep geological time that comes from working with stone and the wonder in the later poem that brings "geological time into a complex conversation with human time" (38). Whereas this conversation between humanity and deep time is largely Jeffers' Romantic inheritance, it is his position as a transitional figure that makes this "lithic lyricism" significant (30). That is, his late Romanticism propounds "a Holocene understanding of Nature as a transcendent domain that will always remain separate from humanity," while it also "strives to deconstruct ('decenter') anthropocentric hubris in the name of a more holistic worldview that anticipates Anthropocene-era perspectives" (40). Economides combines excellent close readings with thorough research into the abundant Jeffers scholarship on stones and geology (Karman, Tangney, Hart, Glaser). In her lovely phrase, Jeffers' "geophilic excess" is the recognition of nonhuman agency by means of a "lithic encounter" (34, 38).

In the next section, Economides surveys the scholarship that examines Jeffers' geological sublime in regard to his politics, finding some critics who argue that it doesn't necessarily lead to an apocalyptic end of humanity (Tangney), some who do (Glaser), and some who see it verging on ecofascism (Cone). Economides finds that Jeffers' geological sublime is either "too pessimistic" or "too optimistic" for Anthropocene politics (41). It tends to discount the ability of political action to solve problems and to underestimate the damage humans can do to global ecosystems. She observes,

> what we see in Jeffers's poetic explorations of geological time is a conflict between a holistic perspective that perceives human and ecological catastrophe as inextricably linked versus a detached, dualistic outlook that portrays human destruction as ephemeral compared with the power and beauty of eternal Nature. Though he is never able to resolve this tension, the conflict itself has important implications for Anthropocene politics. (42)

Economides reads through some of his political poems acknowledging the suffering and violence of the time, but finds that he returns to that "dualist outlook" consistently, perhaps "as a form of psychological distancing from potentially overwhelming and painful trauma" (44). I think that this is a fair assessment of Jeffers' Inhumanism from the perspective of Anthropocene theory. Although Jeffers might be "transitional" in the literary ecology Economides is tracking, many of us humans have yet to make the *transition* (if that is even possible) from such forms of dualism. As Economides notes, "Jeffers's struggles continue to be our struggles, including the struggle to resist channeling rage and despair at ongoing eco-social devastation into misanthropic fantasies of human apocalypse" (32).

In concluding this review, I would like to offer some examples of how Econimides's reading might be extended by considering Jeffers' use of narrative. If she finds little connection between Jeffers and the other poets in her study, other than an interest in geological deep time, then might his use of narrative have found some connections with the works of fiction that concern the rest of *Wild Anthropocene*? As is common in readings of Jeffers, Economides cites only lyric poems and treats them as direct statements of Jeffers' philosophy and worldview. Narrative, however, as *Jeffers Studies* readers are well

aware, was a major generic convention that Jeffers used throughout his career. His use of tragic form dominates his major narratives, and perhaps that fact sorts them to the "too pessimistic" side of Economide's equation. Nonetheless, three narrative poems from Jeffers' mid-career that have much to offer her analysis stand out in my mind. "The Stone-Axe," from *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, would exemplify the "too optimistic" side of Jeffers' dualism, being set in a distant future in which humans have returned to hunting and gathering after the collapse of civilization. The hand axe that travels through time and space, from an origin in neolithic Europe to twentieth-century California to a far future, is one of the most remarkable examples of a "lithic encounter" in Jeffers' work. In "The Inquisitors," from *The Double Axe*, geological deep time is personified in the uncanny story of anthropomorphic mountains assessing humanity's potential threat against the planetary ecosystem. By "thinking like a mountain," Jeffers indulges in the anthropos-level distancing that diminishes human suffering, and human agency, foreclosing any homo-level distinctions between members of the species less responsible for the damage. The second half of *The Double Axe*'s title poem, "The Inhumanist," is perhaps the most relevant to Economides's reading. Jeffers uses the figure of the caretaker and his philosophical ruminations to stage a number of the Anthropocene debates that Economides examines. Although the old caretaker might be the ultimate projection of Jeffers-as-misanthrope if we take him as simply a mouthpiece for the poet, as a character he allows Jeffers to dramatize his position through debates with other characters, including not only other humans, but also his dog, a doppelganger, and an animated double-bit axe that flies, sings, barks, swims, and kills on its own (talk about "vibrant matter" or "thing-power"). The lack of attention to Jeffers' narratives does not undermine Economides's argument in any way. Rather, narratives such as these widen and deepen how we understand Jeffers' response to the issues presented by the Anthropocene, whether we have made the transition to that new epoch or not.

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Thomas S. Hibbs. *A Theology of Creation, Ecology, Art, and Laudato Si'*. Notre Dame University Press, 2023. 208 pp.

Reviewed by David J. Rothman

1.

In Book X of *The Republic*, Socrates points out that "there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (Jowett's translation). After a lengthy critique of poets as deranged liars who constitute a threat to the ideal state because they cannot tell the difference between truth and illusion, Socrates throws down a challenge:

> And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to states and to human life, and we shall listen in a kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers—I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight?

In his recent book, *A Theology of Creation*, Thomas Hibbs takes up this challenge seriously and thoughtfully. Hibbs comes by his defense of poetry to the philosophers honestly, for he is one of them, the J. Newton Rayzor Sr. Professor of Philosophy and Dean Emeritus at Baylor University. In a long and distinguished career, Hibbs has published widely both as a scholar and as a critic on subjects ranging from film to theology, ethics to nihilism, along with thinkers as diverse as Aquinas, Nietzsche and Jacques Maritain, painters such as Georges Roualt and Makoto Fujimura, and many more. In *A Theology of Creation* he seeks to demonstrate the Socratic and also Christian utility of poetry and art in a particular way, focusing on Robinson Jeffers, William Everson and painters such as Roualt, Mark Rothko, Fujimora and others.

Specifically, Hibbs is eager to demonstrate how artists can fulfill what Pope Francis calls for in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato 'Si,* which bears the subtitle "on care for our common home." Francis takes

his title from his namesake saint's "Canticle of the Sun," which was written in about 1224 (and may be the first poem we have in Italian by a named author). Most of the stanzas begin "Laudato si mi Signore," "Praised be you my Lord," and then describe an ecstatic vision of the creation, e.g.:

> *Laudato sie, mi Signore cum tucte le Tue creature,*
> *spetialmente messor lo frate Sole,*
> *lo qual è iorno, et allumini noi per lui.*
> *Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore:*
> *de Te, Altissimo, porta significatione.*
>
> Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures,
> especially for my lord Brother Sun,
> who brings the day; and you give light through him.
> And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour:
> Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.
> (translation posted on *The Italian Language Blog* by "Serena," 10/6/2010)

St. Francis' poem integrates the creation with the creator in a vision that so many since then have found they could not follow, from Matthew Arnold and Nietzsche to Henry Adams, T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* and so many more. Like these figures, Hibbs conceives the modern world to be in a spiritual crisis that has, among other ills, led to and become manifest in an ecological crisis, in which not only is the world polluted, but our spirits are as well. Following Pope Francis, Hibbs agrees that we need "a reimagining of human persons in the entirety of the created cosmos" (x) if we are ever once again to achieve the kind of balanced vision exemplified in St. Francis' poem, where human beings stand in intellectually and spiritually healthy relation to both the world and to the divine.

Hibbs' articulation of the spiritual alienation of modern life, specifically in our relation to the natural world, is compelling and deeply informed. Drawing on an extraordinarily wide range of philosophers, theologians and critics, his book is a serious attempt to make the case for poetry and art as the most useful way to reimagine our relation to the creation. It is offered with humility, for "artists have much to teach us…they are often wiser than philosophers and theologians" (xi). They can describe for us "the sources of our dislocation and…how we might come to see and speak in

a discourse that recovers a sense of our place within the whole" (xiii). One can see how such an approach, in which strong artists' vision of the divine as manifested in the natural world and in our relation to that world, would lead a philosopher to Jeffers, Everson, and other artists who treat the creation as holy, even if not always in Catholic terms.

Before Hibbs gets to the artists, however, there is a lot of philosophical and theological business. In his Preface and first chapter, "*Laudato Si*, Technocracy and the Renewal of Human Making," Hibbs follows Pope Francis in identifying (in Francis's terms) the sources of the "spiritual crisis of modernity," observing that "[e]cological threats are symptoms of a much broader predicament" (2). Francis lays this predicament out as follows: "'If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships'" (*Laudato Si'* 119; quoted in Hibbs, 2). In other words, the ecological crisis is not merely a technological or even broadly social problem, but a spiritual one.

In response, following Pope Francis and drawing (as Francis does as well) not only on St. Francis but also on a wide range of Catholic thinkers from Aquinas to Romano Guardini (author of *End of the Modern World*) and Maritain, Hibbs endorses Pope Francis' "plea for an integral ecology [that] calls to mind Maritain's notion of integral humanism" (4). Such an integral humanism, grounded in Catholic theology, would chart a course between the anthropomorphism of technocracy and the atheist and therefore (in Hibbs' view) ultimately nihilistic biocentrism that Hibbs sees as having developed out of Romanticism. Perhaps a Homeric analogy is not out of place here: to one side we have a Scylla, the terrifying logic of anthropocentric technocracy, in which, as Hibbs quotes Pope Francis, "Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic" (Hibbs 4); in this technocracy there is a "shift from a conception of the human person as receptive of the order and beauty of the cosmos to one that accentuates the human capacity to transform nature" (3), leading ultimately to a sci-fi dystopia of machine control. On the other side, we have the modern Charybdis of post-Romantic environmental biocentrism, an unadulterated natural sublime in which human beings are alienated from creation, and we face an opposition of "malign civilization" to "benign nature" (20; Hibbs appears to be

quoting William Cronon here). Hibbs argues that "[w]ithout some acknowledgment of the peculiar status and role of human persons in the natural order, environmentalists cannot make sense of their moral pleading to the human animal to reform its behavior so as to avoid the destruction of nature" (20-21, again following Cronon).

In response to Pope Francis' vision of the sources of our linked ecological and spiritual crises, Hibbs, following Pope Francis and in the spirit of St. Francis, Aquinas, Maritain and others, argues that we can chart a path between the pride of anthropocentric technocracy and the misanthropic alienation and despair of Romantic biocentrism by heeding the Catholic vision of the relation between human beings and the natural world. Hibbs draws heavily on Aquinas to ground this argument and is worth quoting at some length here:

> Concerning created nature, Thomas holds that God creates in order to manifest his power, goodness, and wisdom. Because God's goodness is infinite, no single created thing, indeed no sum of created things, can fully reflect the divine. A vast multiplicity of beings is the most fitting way for the created order to reflect God. Moreover, God gives to creatures their own proper powers to act. These ends are internal to the creatures; they are not raw material whose purpose is to be determined or refashioned by human whim. In actualizing these powers, creatures become like God. In so doing, they seek and imitate God. Thus the capaciousness of created being offers a panorama of the divine wisdom. As Elizabeth Johnson states in *Ask the Beasts,* "Biodiversity in its own natural way manifests the goodness of God which goes beyond our imagination." (6; Johnson 149)

The Socratic utility of art in light of this argument depends on realizing that "Aquinas rejects the notion that the human intellect has any direct unmediated access to the divine. Instead, it must travel an indirect route, through created things, as effects, to God, as cause" (7). This is why St. Francis' song is so important. It expresses "[c]ontemplative and providential dominion over the order of things" that cannot be otherwise expressed. In this way, sound Catholic teaching mediates between destructive technocracy and profane biocentrism, with art pointing the way. This is the path to a "reconciliation" (11) between man and God, with the entire creation as its medium. In this view, human beings are not alienated from

the creation, nor is man's dominion over nature merely a license to exploit it. Rather, the relation is ultimately contemplative: "By knowing and naming created things, human persons come to know the creator who has fashioned all created things." (7, citing Michael Hanby, "The Gospel of Creating and the Technocratic Paradigm: Reflections on a Central Teaching of *Laudato Si'*, *Communio* 42 (2015): 724-47). Following Maritain, Hibbs argues that "Like contemplation, art fosters virtues of wonder, silent receptivity, humility, gratitude, and awe" (40). Maritain is even more emphatic, arguing that "…the fine arts…like wisdom…are ordered to an object which transcends man and which is of value in itself, and whose amplitude is limitless, for beauty, like being, is infinite. They are disinterested, desired for themselves, truly noble because their work taken in itself is not made in order that one may use it as a means" (Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 36-37, quoted in Hibbs, 40).

The challenge here, one that seems obvious but is rarely addressed directly in this kind of work, is the problem of evil, both in art and in the lives of artists. What do we do with, say, de Sade, an artist so powerful his name has entered the language as a psychological malady? What about Pasolini's *Salò*? What about pornography, which is, after all, a form of art? Slasher films? Ezra Pound and Leni Reifenstahl? For that matter, what about *King Lear*, which many, including Tolstoy, denounced as wicked? The rambunctious energies of art should perhaps trouble the dreams of philosophers more than they do. Plato had a point. We will return to this below.

Hibbs' articulation of the relations among God, the creation, and human beings' place in it is what leads him at last to art itself and its usefulness. For if, as he argues, we need "a renewed appreciation of embodiment" to understand our place in the universe, it helps, again following Pope Francis and St. Thomas, to have an "understanding of divine creation as a kind of artistic activity" (9). He is well aware that this position "revives medieval themes" (8). It strikes me as an attempt to reassert not only the arguments of Aquinas but also, e.g. the values of Henry Adams' Virgin as against those of the Dynamo. Hibbs then turns to artists and modern and contemporary visions of art to answer his fundamental question: "The question for human making is whether it can enhance rather than foreclose the discovery of the natural and the human—that is, whether, in addition to inspiring awe at technical artistry itself,

it can return us to the natural world as a source of wonder and gratitude" (38). This is what motivates his book and leads him to the artists he considers. The question is whether, in addition to the thoughtful, dense, and learned exposition of his compelling assertions, he delivers the evidence.

2.

The answer to the above question is…mixed. Hibbs seems to do better with visual art than with the verbal kind, and his chapter on Roualt and discussions of Rothko and Fujimora offer some real insight into how an artist can integrate the human, the natural and the divine. He also does fairly well with Everson, as he can grapple with the shared theology. The problem throughout, however, is that frequently, just as he approaches the poetry itself, he skates away from it, back into ideation and circling waves of commentary, a whirlpool he apparently cannot easily escape. While it seems clear he is quite sincere in arguing that "The highest sort of knowledge available to us in this life is a personal communication through love with God, a suffering of divine things rather than a reduction of being to abstract categories" (60), this is exactly what happens again and again in his treatment of the poetry, especially Jeffers, where he makes some egregious errors and omissions. He understands that "For Maritain, the work of art is especially open to indefinite expansion, in part because it does not terminate in an abstract concept" (60), yet this does in fact often seem to be his own terminus, as if poets were philosophers whose verse merely sets ideas to verbal music.

Hibbs can tell us something about what water is, and what it is for, but has trouble describing what it feels like to drink it when we are thirsty. He loves ideas so much he often turns them into people, at the expense of the people he aims to be discussing. Among other rhetorical moves that occur as he approaches the poetry itself, he anthropomorphizes concepts, creating a certain kind of annoying enthymeme, e.g., "Philosophy involves a disruption of ordinary life, but it aims to answer questions that arise in ordinary experience" (56). No—that is what philosophers do, not philosophy. Or: "Maritain seeks a restoration of classical eros as that element in the human soul that is aroused by beauty—a notion to which modernity in its anthropocentric and biocentric modes is allergic" (48). No—elements are bloodless and cannot be aroused, and modernity

does not have allergies, because concepts do not have bodies. Near the beginning of the chapter on Jeffers, "The Ecological Poetics of Robinson Jeffers," he writes "If Platonism and Christianity depict human nature as dissatisfied with what the merely natural supplies, Nietzsche, we might say, seeks to reverse that" (72). Again, no—Platonists depict, not Platonism; and Christians, it seems fair to say, depict human nature in many ways, a variety that the abstraction elides. This may all seem like a small matter to philosophers who are often concerned to correlate the truth among concepts, but consider it a rejoinder from poets in the ancient quarrel, as in fact the poets are perhaps more concerned with the agency of words. This is not an argument against metaphor—rather against metaphorical overreach.

Hibbs' problems multiply when he approaches the poems themselves. In his treatment of both Everson and Jeffers, he frequently turns to letters and essays rather than poems, because, again, he seeks to place the poetry instrumentally in an argument. And that argument seems clear. Near the conclusion of his Jeffers chapter, he writes: "Jeffers's inhumanism, understood as a moment within a larger pedagogy of reconciliation, is indispensable—a necessary sobering and perhaps humiliation of the human impulse to want to control all of external nature, including the human body" (82). While there is certainly a didactic tone to much of what Jeffers writes, to describe his project as "a moment in a larger pedagogy of reconciliation" strikes me as myopic. It is hard not to think, in this context, of Jeffers' observation in "Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years":

> I write verses myself, but I have no sympathy with the notion that the world owes a duty to poetry, or any other art. Poetry is not a civilizer, rather the reverse, for great poetry appeals to the most primitive instincts. It is not necessarily a moralizer; it does not necessarily improve one's character; it does not even teach good manners. It is a beautiful work of nature, like an eagle or a high sunrise. You owe it no duty. If you like it, listen to it; if not, let it alone. *CP* 4: 425)

I am perfectly fine with not taking Jeffers entirely at his word, but that argument has to be made, not assumed. In any event, this passage does not seem useful to exemplify "a moment within a

larger pedagogy of reconciliation." That would be Hibbs' project, not Jeffers', and he needs to make that distinction clear.

In an earlier chapter of his book, Hibbs also writes that "It is undoubtedly the case that some degree of moral virtue is instrumentally necessary for art and philosophy" (39). Of course he realizes the problems here, but he hardly seems to be grappling with the real issues by avoiding Jeffers' own statements, including this famous passage, the conclusion of section VIII from part II of *The Double Axe*, "The Inhumanist" (in quotation marks below because the Inhumanist is speaking):

> "The human race is bound to defile, I've often noticed it.
> Whatever they can reach or name. They'd shit on the morning star
> If they could reach." (*CP* 3: 260)

There are many other problems in Hibbs' analysis, not least the fact that he never grapples with the sources of Jeffers' cosmology, which clearly grows out of his Presbyterian background. It is certainly possible to make the argument that his vision of the natural world might be harmonized with Aquinas, Maritain, Pope Francis et al., but not by evading issues like this. The problem is that, much as Hibbs sincerely admires the poetry, he in effect continues philosophy's quarrel with it…by transforming it into philosophy. Consider this paragraph from the Jeffers chapter:

> One of the problems, according to [David] Walsh [author of *The Modern Philosophical Revolution: The Luminosity of Existence*], with the tradition of philosophy from Hegel through Derrida, is that it begins from within theory. In contrast, thinkers such as Nietzsche, along with Kierkegaard and Levinas, begin from the question of how we should live. In some measure indebted to the Greeks, these philosophers recover a conception of philosophy as a way of life that seeks, but never achieves, wisdom. The modern philosophical revolution thus reverses the priority of the subject to the real. Luminosity of existence precedes and envelops the subject. These themes are central to the prose and poetry of Jeffers. (78)

These are interesting ideas, but they still fall squarely inside debates among philosophers who do not seem to know how to read poetry because they insist on considering it as the wrong form of rhetoric. Jeffers did not articulate his own motivations and interests in

anything like this way. Jeffers may have had a good deal to say about this, but he didn't say it, at least not in anything like this way, and to suggest such themes are "central" to his work is to misrepresent it.

Jeffers is nothing if not a didactic poet, but his didacticism exceeds the grasp of any philosophical "method," a term Hibbs applies, even if only "provisionally" to Everson's poetics, in another blizzard of ideation:

> If Jeffers moves from a biocentric vision to an acknowledgment of the peculiar status of human persons within the natural order, Everson begins within the self and moves outward. It is important to see that this is not an adventitious or forced movement from a clearly demarcated interior to an easily identifiable exterior. The constituting drives, desires, and thoughts of the self bear it ineluctably toward what is other. One useful way to frame Everson's "method," if we can use that word provisionally, is in terms of Charles Taylor's opposition of the buffered and the porous self. (84)

This is what happens again and again in Hibbs' book as he (again, sincerely, I believe) tries to engage the poetry. Waves of philosophical and theological commentary descend upon the poems like a swarm of locusts and devour them.

I suggest another approach. Jeffers, like every strong poet, creates poetry not out of ideas, nor out of his quarrels with others over ideas, but rather out of his quarrels with himself. He contains multitudes and contradictions and is a poet of negative capability par excellence. His poems do not resolve the anxiety of contradiction—the philosophical Rosetta Stone—but rather achieve it. This may be hard to see at times because of Jeffers' direct and even strident idiom, which many, not least Everson, have taken as an articulation of spiritual principles, but it is clear enough if we read the poems as poems first and foremost, and not primarily as evidence of something else.

Two very brief but apropos examples: "Shine, Perishing Republic" is often taken as a misanthropic denunciation of social life. The ending, in particular, can sound like an oracular, even prophetic renunciation of a fallen and corrupt people:

> 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. (*CP* 1: 15)

This seems clear enough at first reading. Yet we know that when Jeffers wrote it, in the early 1920s, his sons were no more than five or six years old. And Jeffers, stern as he was, seems unlikely to have been thundering at them about corruption over the dinner table. More importantly, why would any man need to warn his young children about the trap of "love of man" *if he did not feel its pull himself?* Read throughout in this light the poem becomes far more than a diatribe or series of philosophical propositions; no, every observation and proposition in it is the result of a passionate internal debate that is and must remain unresolved to retain its force. Let us say that his relationship with Christ is complex and leave it at that for now.

Just one more, from an embarrassment of riches:

> Love The Wild Swan
>
> "I hate my verses, every line, every word.
> Oh pale and brittle pencils ever to try
> One grass-blade's curve, or the throat of one bird
> That clings to twig, ruffled against white sky.
> Oh cracked and twilight mirrors ever to catch
> One color, one glinting flash, of the splendor of things.
> Unlucky hunter, Oh bullets of wax,
> The lion beauty, the wild-swan wings, the storm of the wings."
> —This wild swan of a world is no hunter's game.
> Better bullets than yours would miss the white breast,
> Better mirrors than yours would crack in the flame.
> Does it matter whether you hate your... self? At least
> Love your eyes that can see, your mind that can
> Hear the music, the thunder of the wings. Love the wild swan.
> (*CP* 2: 410)

Leaving aside the contradiction that Jeffers claimed he had forsworn rhyme, yet here produces a sonnet, the epitome of humanism, this poem does nothing less than literally dramatize a quarrel with himself, quotation marks and all. The point is not the

resolution to carry on beyond his sense of failure and self-loathing with his love of the world; only philosophers and their epigones are fooled by such statements. *The point is the internal quarrel, without which there would be no poem in the first place.* This quarrel is never to be resolved, for the octave of the poem will also always exist as much as the sestet. Without that octave the *volta* makes no sense. The triumph is not the resolution. The triumph is the successful articulation of the *unresolved* quarrel. It is certainly possible and appropriate to discuss this movement in the context of philosophy and theology, but not at the expense of the qualities that make it poetry in the first place, which themselves must contradict the conclusions that philosophers cannot seem to help but seek.

To be fair, Hibbs seems to approach works of pictorial art more concretely than he does poems. In his discussion of Rouault's 1948 painting *Autumn (Nazareth)*, the work that appears on the book's cover, one feels that he is in fact looking closely at the painting itself, at the same time as the ideas remain clear:

> The sense of a restoration of harmony among human persons and the environment (both natural and built) and the divine permeates *Autumn*…the color scheme—deep blues, strong vertical browns, soft yellows, and fiery orange—is stunning….the sun acts as a source of light and warmth. The barren trees divide up the canvas but in a way that brings unity and concord rather separation or opposition. Buildings, scaled to fit the human and natural environment, populate the horizon. Smaller human figures, which occupy the center, lack detailed definition. (131)

There is more and it is welcome. When Hibbs integrates this description with his own argument, the result is more convincing as an example of an art that aspires to reintegrate human beings with the divine and the creation.

But to return to the poems, Hibbs' odd distance from them leads to basic errors. He is so wrapped up in his argument that when at last he does get to the verse he seems so unaware of how it works that he even frequently mislineates the passages he quotes. In his discussion of "Credo," Hibbs writes that Jeffers:

> …eschews the view that "nothing is real except as we make it" and that, in the powers of our mind, we can create an "ocean more

> real than the ocean, the salt, the actual appalling presence, the power of the waters." Jeffers adopts a "humbler" view, a "harder mysticism." He concludes, "the heartbreaking / beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it." (76)

Now this may be what the quoted lines say, but it is not what they do. Hibbs cites Albert Gelpi's *The Wild God of the World* as his source, but his lineation in no way follows what is there. In any event, whatever source he may be using, I'm willing to wager that he is reading the wraps of Jeffers' long lines as independent verses when they are of course continuations of the lines above. The actual lineation in the misquoted lines should read:

> …creates an ocean more real than the ocean, thesalt, the actual
> Appalling presence, the power of the waters.

and

> …the heartbreaking beauty
> Will remain when there is no heart to break for it. (*CP* 1: 239)

If Hibbs does not understand how much this matters, how much Jeffers cared about it, indeed how much all strong poets care about such matters, he has missed the boat. This poem is *very* carefully constructed in alternating lines of eight and four phrasal stress-maxima, the forging of this versecraft of non-alliterative strong-stress measurement was a tremendous innovation, and Jeffers was passionate about it, seeing it as a manifestation of the "tides of fire" of the universe. To be clear, this is not the only time Hibbs does this. He repeats the error on the very next page, mislineating a quotation from "Birds and Fishes." This is no minor matter. To disregard, dismiss or misconstrue a strong poet's hard-won versecraft is to treat it as irrelevant and that will not do (except, perhaps, for philosophers). It is perhaps comparable to naming the colors of a painting incorrectly. The poetic rejoinder is to point out that poems not only say things; they also do things, and, difficult as it may be to describe those actions without turning them back into propositions, they matter profoundly. While it is almost impossible to construe the meanings of verse structure, we do sense its meaningfulness and we should therefore at least describe and quote verses accurately. This is not sophistry; it is an insistence that we should treat poetry as poetry.

3.

Much of section 2 above may leave the impression that I am highly critical of *A Theology of Creation*. That is only partly true. I do find Hibbs' approach to the poetry distracting at best, misleading at worst. When it comes to poems, he wears too much erudition on his sleeve, burying them in waves of commentary that quickly leave the words in the dust. And this is what happens when poems become mere evidence in academic or philosophical arguments instead of being allowed to conjure delight, or at least to conjure delight first. It is admittedly difficult to devise a critical language that allows poems to feel as if they breathe at the same time as it helps us to understand the more complicated things about them. But it has been done, it can be done, and we should aspire to that lofty goal. Otherwise, we become, say, like a cook who insists on explaining the meaning of a soufflé at such great length that it cools and falls before it can be enjoyed. Poetry is older than philosophy and deserves more respect than that.

Despite my criticism of Hibbs' treatment of poems, I hope part 1 of this essay demonstrates I also take Hibbs seriously and have nothing but respect for his learning and his construal of the challenges we face. Let the contradiction stand. His book has much to teach us about the philosophical and theological issues he addresses. One of his final questions, which he asks in the context of a discussion of Rothko and Nietzsche, is profound and appropriate: "Is there reason to think that art can perform its vivifying role apart from a religious context in which the transcendent is grounded, not in self-constructed myths, but in an affirmation of the reality of the divine?" (153). Jeffers certainly thought it could not, though his renegade Presbyterian theology was far different from Hibbs'. Jeffers did assert that art should affirm the reality of the divine, albeit an Inhumanist divine in a tragic transcendence. However, as a strong artist he articulated his divine vision's vivifying role not by trying to make it "useful to States and human life," but rather by embodying in it necessary contradictions where faith and doubt, skepticism and passion, man and the creation, truth and beauty, self and other, desire and aversion, love and violence, consciousness and reality—take your pick—collide and explode in a holocaust or sparagmos that should leave philosophers gasping if they see them clear.

Perhaps, instead of considering if we can find a use for poetry, we should begin there, by doing our best to describe the delight it brings before we rush to turn it into a tool. Then it might come to matter all that much more.

Matthew Calarco. *How Not to Be Human: The Inhumanist Philosophy of Robinson Jeffers*. Anthem Press, 2024. 111 pp.

Reviewed by James Karman

Among the many books recently published about antihumanism, posthumanism, transhumanism and other challenges to traditional notions of "the human," one by Adam Kirsch—*The Revolt Against Humanity: Imagining a Future Without Us*—is worth noting. In describing a pessimistic trend of modern thought he calls "Anthropocene antihumanism," Kirsch cites Jeffers as the leading poet-spokesperson for a view of life that holds humans responsible for a forthcoming environmental apocalypse, one that will destroy civilization and possibly lead to humanity's (welcome) demise. Kirsch writes,

> The poet who most nearly predicts Anthropocene antihumanism is Robinson Jeffers, a twentieth century American writer who described his philosophy as "inhumanism." For Jeffers, who spent much of his life in remote Carmel, California, humanity was a contamination on an otherwise beautiful planet. In his poem "The Place for No Story," he describes an austere landscape on the California coast—rock, ocean, hawks—and concludes "This is the noblest thing I have ever seen. No imaginable / Human presence here could do anything / But dilute the lonely self-watchful passion."

Fair enough, one might say. Jeffers, as Kirsch suggests, is the only major poet of the Modern era who has something important to say about an issue central to the manifold crises of our time. But then Kirsch adds this: "Jeffers demonstrates the tendency of antihumanism to turn into misanthropy" (32).

Matthew Calarco does not address Kirsch directly in *How Not to Be Human: The Inhumanist Philosophy of Robinson Jeffers*, but he picks

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up where Kirsch and others who share his opinion leave off. In a close study of Jeffers' practical philosophy, Calarco effectively lays the charge of misanthropy to rest—shifting the focus from what Jeffers condemns to what he commends. In his preface, Calarco says his book is "addressed primarily to readers who are new to the poetry of Robinson Jeffers." In fact, however, his careful examination of Jeffers' aims as an artist, along with his probing analysis of key ideas, will enlighten even the most practiced scholar.

As the title of his introduction—"Between Poetry and Philosophy"—suggests, Calarco begins with the premise that Jeffers is a philosophical poet, where philosophy is understood not as an academic field but as a way of looking at and living in the world. Calarco's model for this kind of philosophy is the one found in Greece and other ancient cultures, where philosophy was regarded as a discipline designed to help people overcome the doubts and insecurities of existence, to help them live authentically, and to point the way to spiritual and existential renewal. One of the goals of his book, Calarco says, "is to demonstrate that Jeffers' poetry seeks to enact something very much like this philosophical conversion in thought and life through his poetry" (6), and to provide a path for others to follow.

At the heart of Jeffers' own conversion, Calarco observes, is the insight that "emphasizes the existence of something 'outside' the boundaries of human culture, an outside that precedes human evolution, that continues as a force of interruption and creativity in the present, and that will outlast us as human individuals and as a species." This "outside" is, of course, the natural environment of Earth, our solar system, and the universe as a whole. "For Jeffers," Calarco maintains, "our lives can be rendered meaningful and worthwhile only if we learn to *love* inhuman realities (and not just acknowledge and affirm them)." The task of Jeffers' poetry, then, "is to sketch a way of thinking and living that encourages a passionate affirmation of the more-than-human world"—an engagement with the totality of life that allows us to be reborn, or "reconstituted, as inhuman subjects" (15).

In "Cosmos," the third of five chapters, Calarco compares Jeffers to Lucretius and demonstrates how both poets offer in their work a comprehensive naturalistic vision—one that provides insight regarding the mystery of existence, consolation for the challenges humans face, and opportunities for the experience of beauty.

Through discussions of "Return," "Evening Ebb," "Contintent's End," "Oh Lovely Rock," "Nova," "Margrave," and "De Rerum Virtute," Calarco carries the reader through the widening spirals of Jeffers' vision, from the minute particulars of the California coast to the immensities of interstellar space; from the lived experience of day-to-day life to the incomprehensible vastness of geological and astronomical time. "The splendor and beauty of things toward which Jeffers' poetry orients us," Calarco writes,

> is anything but the facile sort of aesthetic beauty that comes from merely turning one's eyes toward a scenic landscape; to see the sort of beauty and wonder he has in mind requires a different sort of attention and disposition, one forged in the ancient 'tides of fire' that preceded the emergence of life as we know it and participate in it on an everyday basis. (52)

All life is one, Jeffers insists, and differences are only a matter of scale.

> The ultimate point of considering the life and death of stars, or the sun, or the earth is for Jeffers to reframe our own existence and to put it into proper perspective. He seeks to remind us that we, too, belong to the larger cosmic cycles of generation and destruction—and that the miracle of catching sight of the splendor of these recurring cycles can, if properly framed and appreciated, lead us to live and die more resolutely, more intensely, perhaps even more beautifully. (53)

Jeffers' panoramic vision also informs "Evil" and "Saviors," the two chapters that precede "Cosmos," and "Human" and "Value," the two that follow it. In "Evil," Calarco examines the way Jeffers addresses the coincidence of pain and beauty in life, as in "Apology for Bad Dreams" and other poems. For believers of the Bible, the existence of suffering requires a nuanced understanding of God's transcendent omnipotence. For nonbelievers, like Jeffers, nuance (theodicy in any form) is foreclosed: within a wholly immanent frame, nature is what it is. This "other" fact of evil, as Calarco calls it, means that suffering (natural and human-caused) cannot be explained away. If, he says, "we accept and 'recognize cruelty and evil as part of the sum of things,' as Jeffers suggests we must, we are faced with the challenge of articulating how and whether life can be lived and affirmed in the face of such recognition" (33). In chapter 2, "Saviors," Calarco considers the role of religion in human life. Using Freud's ideas to focus his discussion, Calarco reflects on

the way humans cope with the anxieties and hardships of life by immersing themselves in religious traditions, political movements, and other forms of faith. To follow a messiah like Jesus, for instance, or a political leader like Marx, offers people the solace of conviction and the comfort of a shared identity with like-minded believers. For Jeffers, as Calarco makes clear from close readings of such poems as "Point Pinos and Point Lobos," "Quia Absurdum," "Intellectuals," "Blind Horses," and "Meditation on Saviors," this adaptive strategy does not (and will not) work. "We have inherited a culture that is deeply unsustainable and clearly in decline," Calarco says, restating Jeffers' opinion, "and the dominant models of religion and leadership on offer within it are simply not up to the task of extricating us from the existential difficulties in which we find ourselves." One of Jeffers' goals, Calarco argues, "is to help us appreciate this conundrum, to seek a way out of the dead-end at which Western culture has arrived, and to strive to live well and live through this limit by charting another path" (40).

The other path is Jeffers' philosophy of Inhumanism, the transformative vision of existence at the center of Calarco's study. In chapter 4, "Human," Calarco looks closely at Jeffers' reflections on human nature—as shaped by evolution and the effects of culture. In a perceptive reading of "The Humanist's Tragedy" (a retelling of Euripides's *Bacchae*), Calarco shows how Jeffers uses the figure of Pentheus to identify some of the distinguishing pathologies of human life, such as Pentheus's insistence on his innate superiority—as a human, not a beast; a man, not a woman (or an effeminate male); a king, not a commoner; a Greek, not a barbarian; and so on, through additional forms of inflated self-centeredness. Using Darwin, Nietzsche, Kant, and other thinkers to augment his discussion, Calarco examines Jeffers' reflections on the origins and effects of human narcissism through compelling expositions of "Original Sin," "The unformed volcanic earth," "Orca," "Monument," and related poems. In a section of the chapter, titled "How (Not) to be Human," Calarco offers a succinct summary of Jeffers' advice concerning the predicament we find ourselves in. According to Jeffers, as he says, "we are not utterly distinct from or more remarkable than the more-than-human world." Furthermore, "in our vain efforts to institute an anthropological difference, we have given massively outsized attention and value to human existence and interhuman affairs." To live authentically, we must break

out of the anthropocentric trap we have set for ourselves and see, even revere, the "inhuman temporalities, relations, and forces" that comprise the larger world. "In directing ourselves outward beyond the traditional notion of the human and its concomitant tragedy, we make the first step toward becoming something other than human" (73–74).

In the final chapter, "Value," and in a conclusion subtitled "Inhumanism," Calarco reflects on the challenges and benefits of escaping the net of human self-centeredness and living authentically—or "earnestly," as Jeffers says. California in "Roan Stallion" and Orestes in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" are two characters Calarco cites who "break out" of humanity and who experience, if even for a moment, the "transhuman magnificence" of life. Breakthroughs like those of California and Orestes, according to Jeffers, are not required for a person to live and die well. All it takes, as Calarco explains in thoughtful readings of "Sign-Post," "Shine, Perishing Republic," "The Answer," "Boats in a Fog," "Air-Raid Rehearsals," and other poems, is a willingness to see beyond humanity, to accept one's place in the larger scheme of things, and to revere the great wheel of becoming and passing away that governs everything. An interesting feature of the concluding portion of Calarco's book is the attention he gives to the political ramifications of Jeffers' vision. Drawing on "The Poet in a Democracy" (Jeffers' 1941 Library of Congress lecture), his original preface to *The Double Axe*, and other sources, Calarco describes how Inhumanism, if widely practiced, could shape a society truly devoted to the common good—for humans and for the "more-than-human" world in which we live. "Jeffers maintains, and I think rightly so," Calarco argues, "that if we learn to anchor ourselves in the inhuman majesty of things, and to find 'the secure value' there, we will be able increasingly to turn away from the petty antagonisms and strife that tend to pervade many of our interhuman interactions." "Learning to love the beauty of inhuman things is, thus, not a matter of ignoring or denigrating our fellow human beings," Calarco asserts, "but is a way of finding the perspective necessary to see them and ourselves anew, as but one part of that larger inhuman beauty, and striving in a corresponding way to articulate collective ideals and ways of life that allow us to become worthy of our belonging to its majesty and grandeur" (96).

While the quotations I have included from *How Not to Be Human* might give the impression that Calarco attempts to explain away Jeffers' often harsh denunciation of humankind, that result is unintended—for Calarco does not ignore the painful realities found in Jeffers' verse nor minimize the extent of his challenge to traditional norms and established orders. What Calarco does, masterfully, is to think through the particulars of Jeffers' worldview in order to determine if, and to what extent, his vision contains truth and practical value. His writing is clear throughout, eminently rational, and quietly persuasive. The best word to describe his voice is "humane"—a virtue "characterized by tenderness, compassion, and sympathy for people and animals, especially for the suffering or distressed." As Calarco demonstrates throughout, Jeffers himself serves as a model for this virtue. From the beginning to the end of his career, Jeffers directed attention to "the great humaneness at the heart of things" ("The Excesses of God") and to "the extravagant kindness" that, in the best of all possible worlds, each of us should aspire to (*CP* 1: 4).

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Rachel Cusk. *Second Place*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. 192 pp.

Reviewed by Geneva M. Gano

The electrifying beginning of British writer Rachel Cusk's 2021 novel, *Second Place*, relates the rising up and disgorgement of evil into the world in the shape of a horrible, yellow and bloated man—it is the devil—who pursues the book's narrator up and down a train in Paris, sweating and gabbling while fondling a painted, dumb, barely clothed young girl. No one on the packed train moves to intervene. Readers of Robinson Jeffers' shattering narratives will surely respond with a jolt of repulsion and recognition: this sensational image of evil just as easily could have emerged like this, as nightmarish vision and tangible presence, in his work. In the midst of this vivid relation, Cusk's narrator pauses to ask, "What did he want with me, Jeffers?" For virtually all readers and reviewers of *Second Place*, this question has been treated rhetorically, and her named respondent, "Jeffers," has been dismissed as a random, obscure, and essentially meaningless stylistic tic. However, this review, aimed at the readers of *Jeffers Studies*, will take Cusk's question—and repeated invocations of Jeffers—seriously.

At first glance, Robinson Jeffers may seem a surprising figure for Cusk to invoke. Jeffers' power, voice, and vision has been generally coded as rugged and masculine, sometimes cold and unfeeling, philosophically inclined. Cusk is an avowed feminist whose critically acclaimed work (she is author of eighteen books of fiction and non-fiction) has taken up, reinvigorated, and transformed the project of "women's writing," the specific practice of writing in and through her own personal, gendered experience both in terms of subject matter and style. *Second Place*, which was awarded the Prix Femina Étranger and longlisted for the Booker Prize as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award, hews more or less to Cusk's established themes and interests: the challenges of marriage and motherhood, artistic creation and erotic desire, and the specifically

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gendered struggle toward individual freedom against social strictures that would consign women to a limited set of possibilities for their lives. Sam Byers, in a review of the novel, has named Cusk "our arch chronicler of the nullifying choice between suffocation and explosion."

Though few have associated Jeffers with feminism—a major exception being scholar ShaunAnne Tangney—he indeed has quite a bit to say on these matters, particularly as they are expressed in his wild, long, female-centered narratives. Although in an interview, Cusk has misleadingly minimized Jeffers by identifying him as "a poet and friend of Mabel Dodge Luhan's who was famous in his time and is possibly still famous somewhere" (qtd. in Emre), his particular relevance as her first-person narrator's silent interlocutor in this narrative is significant. A hint about his role in *Second Place* can be found in a note appended to the novel's conclusion, which sends readers scurrying after an only minimally helpful clue: she informs them that *Second Place* "owes a debt" to Luhan's 1932 memoir, *Lorenzo in Taos*, which focuses on her friendship (or foeship) with the recently-deceased author, D.H. Lawrence. As those familiar with this memoir know, it is similarly, oddly, addressed to "Jeffers" and, like Cusk's novel, offers very little in the way of explanation for his highly unusual, almost spectral presence there. Luhan states with some urgency that she wants Jeffers to "see" and "know" Lawrence and suggests that where Lawrence failed to capture the spirit of place in "her" Taos, Jeffers might—she hopes—succeed. (We Jeffersians know that he did not, in fact, take up this assigned mission.) The book is framed as an appeal to Jeffers to come to Taos, but the act of making this appeal so public, to *publish* it, as a book, is astonishingly absurd. While the idea that Jeffers, as a masterful poet of place, might indeed have the special sensitivity and vision to be able to express the ineffable substance of Luhan's Taos seems plausible enough, it is inconceivable to imagine that Jeffers, an extremely retiring and close man, would be either flattered or enticed by Luhan's address. As a scholar of both Jeffers and Lawrence (and one well-versed in the life and writings of Mabel Dodge Luhan), I see nothing in Luhan's memoir that could make a plausible claim on Jeffers' interest or attention. The book is a gossipy confessional, one that frankly and candidly relates very personal and humiliating incidents of conniving and social intrigue: it is a document of self-exposure that cannot fail to make the reader cringe, not only on

Luhan's behalf but also on the behalf of Jeffers, simply for the fact that he is implicated in the whole mess as the designated auditor of her ignoble account.

Cusk's admission that she "owes a debt" to Luhan's memoir vastly undersells the fact that *Second Place* is built directly onto that memoir. Both books begin mid-conversation, without a formal opening or address, each naming Jeffers as the intimate auditor of what turns out to be a very long monologue, one that runs on, chatty and breathless, through the length of the book. Jeffers is queried throughout the memoir in a rhetorical fashion (just as in the question from *Second Place*, quoted above), but neither Luhan's Jeffers nor Cusk's respond: he is a silent confessor who fails to endorse or absolve. Cusk names her book's central antagonists L (Lawrence) and M (Mabel), but makes L a painter rather than a writer. Others who appear in Luhan's book appear in Cusk's, too, although modified: central characters Brett and Tony are figured as M's rivals for L's attention, as they are in *Lorenzo in Taos* (Tony is figured almost exactly the same, as her silent but uncannily perceptive and good Native American husband, while Brett is quite reconfigured in *Second Place* as L's gorgeous, talented, younger lover), while memorable minor personages Jaime de Angulo and Clarence are combined and reworked in the fiction as Kurt, the mostly useless boyfriend of M's adult daughter.

Other "remnant[s] of that original book" (Cusk's words) appear in substantial and insubstantial ways throughout the novel, most obviously in the characterization of M: in her middle-aged, plump, not-exactly-handsome physical body; in the shapeless clothing she wears until L tells her to dress differently; in her breathless sentences that roll on and on, frequently capped with an exclamation point; in her tireless efforts to "force things to happen," to *do* things with herself and with her life, apparently heedless of their potential outcomes; in her hearty resilience in confronting life as it comes and insistent probing and seeking after answers. Cusk also imports from Luhan's memoir some of the most outlandish scenes in the novel, as when boyfriend Kurt dons a cape and tam-o-shanter and reads aloud his trite and exceedingly long novel-in-progress, or when Tony catches M sneaking out of the house to consummate her feelings for L and he orders her to "COME BACK HERE" (an order she ignores) or when Brett and L ecstatically deface M's house with a crude, satirical mural of the garden of Eden. The whole premise of

Lorenzo in Taos, in which a wealthy and ambitious woman invites a stranger, a famous artist, to come stay in her guest house and create art at the edge of the world, is exactly the premise of *Second Place*. In both works, the story follows the escalating, borderline murderous antagonism that develops between artist and patron, one thoroughly conditioned by their sense of themselves as gendered and sexual beings. Both books end with L's belated reconciliation with M and his death.

Luhan's readers would have had no question in their minds who Jeffers was: her memoir was published at the height of Jeffers' international popularity when he had achieved the status of literary celebrity and popular icon, the same year he appeared on the cover of *TIME* magazine. In less than a decade, he'd become infamous for his stunning, often nightmarish narrative poems that took on weighty topics such as freedom and fate, good and evil, power and corruption, all set in the obscure, rural lands of the rugged California coast. His personal reputation was part of his fame: he was known for being reclusive, uncompromising and cold—apparently as "inhuman" as his favorite symbols, rock and hawk. Knowing who Jeffers is and what he was about, however, bears little on a reading of Luhan's memoir, except perhaps to magnify just how unmerited and bizarre his presence is there.

Although Cusk's readers have protested that they "have no idea who Jeffers is," the author, in pointing to *Lorenzo in Taos* in the novel's endnote, obviously also points her readers to Jeffers; the insistence with which Jeffers is addressed in the text begs for at least a quick scan of Wikipedia (McAlpern). But *Second Place* also deliberately offers clues about Cusk's Jeffers (or, in her dismissive words, "the Jeffers character") (qtd. in Emre) that indicate her own keen familiarity with the poet. In the book's opening pages, "Jeffers" is identified as a writer and a "moralist" whose work regularly called out "what was wicked and wrong…even when others didn't want to hear and found it tiresome," a subject position that Jeffers himself acknowledged by aligning himself with Cassandra, a truth-teller who "mumble[s] in the corner" while being reviled by gods and men (*CP* 3: 121). Nonetheless, as Cusk affirms, Jeffers "carried on, building a shelter for people to use" when they found themselves face to face with evil in their own lives. This is a recognizable and verifiable Jeffers, the unhappy and unheeded Jeremiah self-obligated

to "shame the devil" (as he phrased it) lodged within and among ordinary humanity (*CP* 4: 372).

Cusk's Jeffers, which is to say our Jeffers, is an appropriate guide to *Second Place*. It is by invoking this Jeffers that Cusk is able to directly ask unsettling questions—ones that presumably call forth unsettling answers—about one's moral duty toward her own life and the lives of others. This aspect of the novel is not one borrowed or left over from *Lorenzo in Taos*, but it is one of its most striking (and for more than a few readers, grating and distracting) elements. This is stylistically flagged in *Second Place*, as Cusk frequently and conspicuously disrupts the narrative flow of her story by pulling back to probe the subconscious motives and impulses that drive humans to act in sometimes irrational and inexplicable ways. This gesture is an uniquely idiosyncratic element in Jeffers' narratives as well: think, famously, of the strangely disembodied, declamatory "Atom to be split" segment of "Roan Stallion" that breaks that narrative in two, in which we hear not the voice of a character so much as the voice of the storyteller, presumably of Jeffers himself. In *Second Place*, we encounter a running series of such questions throughout the book, ones arguably posed in Cusk's own voice, which seems to diverge from that of her fictional narrator, M. In one of the earliest of these, she asks, "Why do we live so painfully in our fictions? Why do we suffer so, from the things we ourselves have invented? Do you understand it, Jeffers?" The Jeffers she queries is silent, but the Jeffers we know was very interested in asking the same thing. Jeffers is not an empty signifier in *Second Place* (as he seems to be in Luhan's memoir) but rather a crucial preceptor who gives license and encouragement to Cusk's prominent, persistent, metanarrative questioning.

Another significant break from *Lorenzo in Taos* may be located in some of the specific ways in which Cusk transforms Luhan's Mabel to her own "M." Again, this transformation brings Cusk closer to Jeffers. Cusk's M could be a Jeffersian heroine: she is bent only semi-consciously on both freedom and destruction, dimly recognizing that for a woman who feels hemmed in by convention these may inevitably come to the same thing. In *Second Place*, this heroine is a middle-aged woman, a writer of "little books," who has already passed through the valley of the shadow of death, of rebellion and near-self-destruction, and emerged somehow in the calm of a quiet and comfortable life, safe in the arms of a good

and gentle man in a beautiful home by the sea. And yet, she feels not-quite-satisfied and willing to blow things up—or just *almost* blow things up—in order to shake loose shackles that she senses but only dimly perceives. Critic Constance Grady, writing in *Vox*, describes M as being "in search of some missing piece, some object that will bring meaning to the world but is utterly inaccessible." The tragic nature of that dangerous pursuit of freedom, beauty, and art (the three are inseparable in Cusk's vision) resonates especially with the heroine who made Jeffers Jeffers: Tamar. To be sure, Tamar is younger and thrashes wildly to free herself of the restraints she feels trap her as a woman, sister, and daughter, whereas M has only come to perceive such restraints at middle age and from a place of comfort and security; her rebellion takes place mostly in the mind. Both women, though, find them unbearable, intolerable, and—right or wrong—seem compelled to seek out what turns out to be an impossible vision of freedom.

Without being aware of it, a number of Cusk's readers have observed in her writing what Jeffers' readers found in his. Reviewing *Second Place*, Claire Harman notes that "violence is always bubbling beneath the surface in this novel," while Emily Donaldson observes that it "operates according to a sinister dream logic." Marek Makowski, writing for *The Rumpus*, also registered the uncanny quality of Cusk's fable, calling attention to the poetic quality of the prose: "the novel's unusual rhythms and voice lingered with me like those strange, violent dreams in which the secrets you perceive in close ones reveal themselves and alter you for hours, for days. The voice reaches and reaches at answers to broad questions." Perhaps not coincidentally (and I think of interest to Jeffersians), both Cusk and Jeffers wrote for the dramatic stage only once and were drawn to the same compelling figure. Cusk's *Medea* was performed in London in 2015 and was described as "coruscating" and "fierce" by reviewers. A comparison of their adaptations from the Greek would be interesting, but I leave that project for someone else.

A final note of interest to Jeffersians who might want to delve into Cusk's *Second Place*: the physical settings of *Lorenzo in Taos* and *Second Place*, which are elaborated with great care and attention and are understood to be crucial to their plots and meaning, are vastly different. The former is set in the high desert of Northern New Mexico, while the latter is set on a secluded coastland marsh. This is neither a subtle nor inconsequential shift. It hardly seems to

matter for Cusk if this book is set in (or "about") a marsh or a desert or the wild central California coast. My own interpretation of this stark and dramatic transposition is that, for Cusk, the "spirit of place" in art—and perhaps of the material world more broadly—is a seductive fallacy that she means to expose as an entirely subjective business.

An example from early in *Second Place* illustrates the seductive appeal of place. As M and L meet for the first time, her mind drifts away from the words that come out of his mouth and instead she becomes absorbed in her own observations of the marsh that at first seem objective but noticeably shift inward, resulting in gorgeous and compelling descriptions:

> The sun had risen higher and was driving back the shadows of the trees across the grass where we stood, and the water was likewise advancing, and so we were held between them. In one of those processes of almost imperceptible change that occur in the landscape here, whereby you feel you are participating in the act of becoming. The stillness mounts and mounts, and the air becomes more and more charged with intensity, and finally the sea begins to give back its light like a shield. (59)

In this excerpt, and throughout Cusk's novel, the environment (or material place) is closely aligned with the protagonist's experience of her own sense of self. Initially, she makes simple observations about the locale, but almost immediately becomes interested in her subjective impression that what "occur[s] in the landscape" leads "you [to] feel like you are participating in the act of becoming," and she perceives a "stillness" "charged with intensity" that then transforms, for her, to a symbol of divine protection, "light like a shield." Indeed, as the rest of the novel reveals, M herself is going through "processes of almost imperceptible change" that she feels or senses but can barely consciously register as her own. She sees the marsh as intense, powerful, subtle, and beautiful; it reflects, rather than directs, M's actions, thoughts, and emotions. This early scene is paired by a similar meeting between M and L towards the very end of the book, after L has an artistic breakthrough in which he paints a series of self-portraits while immersing himself physically in the marshland's nightscape. In this final encounter between L and M, he tells her that he has "made a discovery": that while "it's so lovely here," "nothing is real after all." In other words, despite his simple

and surely sincere admission of the loveliness of nature (and this particular place), his great insight resoundingly rejects a scientific empiricism of the material world, affirming instead, in the starkest of terms, a broad, Kantian idealism.

This amounts to a pretty major confrontation with Jeffers, who is, in fact, the only writer or artist actually mentioned by name in her novel and, crucially, whose work is said to be greatly informed by a particular and singular "spirit of place." While Jeffers scholars, including Robert Zaller and George Hart, have offered us views of the complex philosophical struggle between the material and the metaphysical that animate Jeffers' work, Jeffers is popularly understood to be a poet of the physical, material world. In his poetry, he affirms that the business of the poet is not so different from the business of mankind: to perceive and praise the beauty of the world. For Cusk, however, art and imagination and the subtle workings of the human mind are the business of the writer and artist, not the material and physical world, no matter how much we may love "outward" (as Jeffers might insist) and appreciate it.

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