



Robinson Jeffers

ROBINSON JEFFERS had a life-long affair with the “beauty of things,” a life-long standoff with the human race. His vision of both was heightened by the archetypal presences of his Big Sur coast.

It is easy to know the beauty of inhuman things, sea, storm, and mountain; it is their soul and their meaning.

Humanity has its lesser beauty, impure and painful; we have to harden our hearts to bear it . . .

(“The World’s Wonders”)

John Robinson Jeffers was not born into an ordinary family. His father, Hamilton Jeffers, was a teacher and scholar, Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis and of Biblical and Ecclesiastical History at Western Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His mother, a beautiful and talented young woman, as church organist fell in love with the visiting curate, Jeffers, over twenty years her senior. Instead of taking her on a honeymoon, he moved her into a seminary dormitory. John Robinson, born 1887, their first of two sons (the first name was dropped after publication of his first book) may have been caught in the dynamics between the distant, older, stern father and the young, vivacious, and emotional mother. One critic, William Everson, suggests that the mother-son relationship and its inner strategies for resolution constitute a major influence in Jeffers’s verse.

Though not wealthy, the family was characteristically able to move about rather freely. In 1891, when the boy was four, his parents took him on the first of what was to be a succession of European sojourns, placing him in a Zurich school. In 1893 there was a second tour, the school this time in Lucerne. After six years at home in “Twin Hollows,” Sewickley, Pennsylvania, he was returned to Europe for a longer stay, with schooling at Leipzig, Geneva, Lausanne, Geneva again, and Zurich. During these years, eleven to fourteen, Jeffers gained a reputation among his peers for solitariness and stoicism—the result of stern teachers, the grandeur and awesomeness of the landscape, some perversion among classmates, separation from the family, and repeated relocation (his father, for reasons unexplained, seems to have visited from the United States only to put him in successive schools).

Then westering entered into the family pattern. In 1903, for health

reasons and perhaps to move away from the political tensions of the seminary faculty, the patriarch Jeffers moved his family to California, first to Long Beach, then to Highland Park (Los Angeles), where young Robinson matriculated as a junior, age sixteen, at Occidental College, then a small Presbyterian school. With his native intelligence and wide background in language and culture no doubt impressing his peers and professors alike, he took courses in biblical literature, economics, geology, history, Greek, rhetoric and astronomy, a discipline which featured frequent field trips to Mount Wilson and Echo Mountain observatories. He made fast friends perhaps for the first time in his life and took part in athletics and class hiking. Here he began writing and publishing verse for the school literary magazine, *The Aurora*, which became *The Occidental* under his editorship in his senior year. He graduated in a class of eleven in 1905. Jeffers immediately entered graduate school at the University of Southern California in mid Los Angeles as a student of literature. There in a class on Faust he met his future wife Una, who was then married to a young barrister, Edward Kuster. In April 1906 came another abrupt family interlude in Switzerland, where Jeffers took courses in philosophy, Old English, French literary history, Dante, Spanish romantic poetry, and the history of the Roman Empire. The following semester found him back at USC, translating German articles for one of the medical school faculty. In September 1907 he was accepted into the medical school and, although evidently not intending to become a practicing physician, he rose to the top of his class, becoming special assistant to Dr. Lyman Stookey and teaching physiology at the USC dental college. Una meanwhile was finishing a master's thesis on "Mysticism" at USC and meeting Jeffers clandestinely at Hermosa Beach, where he moved to be near her during the summer. The events of these years could easily sound like a soap opera script: a code name for phone calls, a painful "final" separation as Jeffers accompanied his family to Seattle and enrolled in forestry school there, a summer return when they met by chance at a downtown intersection and began their affair again, an outraged husband discovering they had spent a night together on Mount Lowe, a five-month cooling off period at Kuster's request during which Una agreed to go on a European tour, Kuster then falling in love with a young girl and seeking a divorce himself, the divorce which, though uncontested, received banner headlines in the Los Angeles papers.

The year 1913 found Jeffers and Una in a holding pattern, she at the University of California at Berkeley, ostensibly seeking a Ph.D. in philosophy, he back at the University of Washington, again following forestry. They were married August 2 at Tacoma after living together a few months on Lake Washington impatiently waiting for the divorce to be final.

The first months of married life were spent in the beautiful beach com-

munity of La Jolla just north of San Diego. There followed an eventful year. Their first child Maeve died after one day's life; the Great War began and they had to give up plans for living in Europe; they moved to Carmel at the suggestion of a friend, Mortimer Clapp; and Jeffers's father died.

The war years were evidently terrible for young Robinson, torn between the idealism which drove him toward enlistment and the beginning of the disillusionment which would make him a pacifist. The war was matrix to many themes of his later poetry.

Much has been made of Jeffers's first impression of Carmel as the "inevitable place"; but the cliché is nonetheless true. The magnificent natural surroundings must have been all but overwhelming. Life in Carmel was simple, almost primitive: a rented log cabin, many walks in the woods and along the beach, much reading, few friends. In 1919 the young couple managed to buy land on a hill overlooking Carmel Bay facing Point Lobos. There on August 15th, apprenticed to a stonemason, Jeffers began work on the structure which was to be so formative in his thinking and expressive of his aesthetics—Tor House. This stone cottage was followed by a five-year opus, the forty-foot, multileveled Hawk Tower, from which he could view the Pacific and the brilliant night sky.

During his early adult years Jeffers had been writing poetry—initially romantic, imitative, melodramatic, and melancholy verse which filled his first two books, *Flagons and Apples* (1912) and *Californians* (1916); then, after a dramatic but undocumented conversion experience in many ways reminiscent of Whitman's, his writings turned turbulent, richly ritualistic and mythical, and philosophically integrated. There were from time to time attempts at publication but, when James Rorty found the poet in 1925 after the failure of *Tamar* at its New York publisher, he sensed one who was resigned to writing without an immediate audience but who found himself compelled to "chronicle the human landscape of the Western Shore."

Rorty's enthusiasm was the catalyst for discovery. A man of contacts, he sent Jeffers's *Tamar* to Mark Van Doren and Babette Deutsch. They each reviewed it favorably for major New York papers and journals, and Jeffers, for several years at least, became the sensation of the cocktail parties and literary circles of the East.

From this point on, Jeffers's biography can easily become a list of yearly publications (Melba Bennett's book takes this expedient). There were few dramatic turns, no world tours, no great milestones, little domestic drama. Jeffers became a master stonemason, expanding Tor House year by year with extensions, walls, and a courtyard. There were three trips to Europe, instigated by Una, a change in publishers (Liveright to Random House in 1933), yearly summer trips to Taos, New Mexico, beginning in 1930, also instigated by Una and protested but endured by Jeffers. Their twin sons,

Donnan and Garth, born in 1916, grew up and went away to the University of California, Berkeley, in 1936. Recognition, after the first Jeffers hysteria of the late 1920s, came intermittently: a Book of the Month award, a Doctor of Literature from his alma mater Occidental in 1937, an honorary Phi Beta Kappa from USC in 1940, and election to the National Academy of Arts and Letters in 1945. Jeffers's one public appearance, a reading tour in 1941, had ironic beginnings. Significantly, his house and tower had been turned toward the sea and away from the hamlet of Carmel; Jeffers methodically hedged his property on the three land sides with a dense wall of eucalyptus and Monterey cypress; he was almost comically intent on shutting out the hordes of humanity whom he imagined pouring over the hill to the north, shattering his privacy. Developers were high on his list of villains. Yet we owe his one reading lecture tour to the department of sanitation's assessment of \$ 1600 to extend sewer lines to take care of real estate development on Carmel point.

If there was one central thread of life concern for Jeffers in the 1930s it was the new great war abuilding. If World War I was an after-the-fact disillusion and fundamental reorientation for him, the second war in Europe was a decade-long anticipation, a giant wave building toward a disastrous fall. Jeffers philosophically believed in the inevitability of the grand processes of history; they had a fatalism like the seasons. Yet he was human enough to care and to protest the stupidity of war's inevitable cruelty and fruitlessness. He began to write anti-war poems as early as 1933; he was still writing them at the end of his life. His post-war volume, *The Double Axe* (1948) was the occasion for a dramatic downturn in his critical reputation and fortunes. The book was accompanied by an unprecedented publisher's disclaimer. It was received hostilely from all quarters. Jeffers was singing no new song; it was just that his bitterness had increased and the age was bent on big-brother patriotism. It was another fifteen years before critical attitudes moved beyond the *Double Axe*. Meanwhile Jeffers received his sons back from the jaws of one war and looked ahead to the apocalyptic conflict that might more finally and fatally claim his grandchildren. Amidst all this, his life was filled with daily events, a few mini-crises, and a gradual growing old.

His daily routine, since the early 1920s, was unswerving: writing in the mornings, stone work or tree planting in the afternoons, with an occasional pause to watch the sardine fleet slipping past the Point through the fog or the great zeppelin droning out into the Pacific. In the evenings there were awesome sunsets, walks under the constellations, reading by kerosene lamps (electricity came only in 1946), evening trips to the tower parapet to attune his microcosm to the universe of stars and galaxies (see his poems "Night" and "Margrave"). Jeffers's *Selected Letters* (1968) and Una's letters document

this simple life, this centered, satisfying, day to day life-celebration. The family had a succession of Fords but travel was the exception. Aside from the summer trips to Taos and the cross-country stint in 1941, there were only necessary trips over the hill to town, biweekly pilgrimages to canyons and picnic points down the coast, a supper party at Noel Sullivan's up Carmel Valley, a rare one-day excursion to San Francisco or to Berkeley to retrieve their sons. Often when a trip was called for, Una went without her husband, who preferred to keep his consciousness uncluttered and his solitude unperturbed. Social life was almost exclusively orchestrated by Una, who was naturally gregarious and from all evidence a very fine hostess and an informed, fluent conversationalist. There was no great stream of guests to Jeffers's door but, since he would not come to them, many celebrities did eventually come to him, or at least visited him while they were in the Carmel area, coming on the arm of George Sterling or Noel Sullivan or some other friend. Visitors included Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Lincoln Steffens, Irvin Cobb, Krishnamurti, James Cagney, Ralph Bellamy, Charlie Chaplin, Jo Davidson, Liam O'Flaherty, George Gershwin, Bennett Cerf, Van Wyck Brooks, Louis Adamic, Thornton Wilder, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, William Rose Benét, William Saroyan, Aldous Huxley, Vincent Sheean, Toscanini, Salvador Dali, and others. Many celebrities were periodically neighbors in a Carmel community which drew artists and the wealthy because of its extraordinary beauty, its seasonal climate, its vacation facilities, and its perennial artists' and writers' colony. Much of the family time was spent in simple living—which included an intense intellectual life filled with books and discussions which ranged through philosophy and history, culture and art. Visitors found a charming but rather austere household: a low-ceilinged, dark living room with a faithful bulldog by the hearth, a stone-floored dining room with rough-hewn table and benches beside another hearth, a tiny kitchen made over from a garage, a colorful garden with an extensive herb annex, and of course the legendary tower.

After the war, Garth Jeffers returned with a German bride, Lotte, then went to forestry studies in Oregon, later settling in Susanville. Donnan, after a few short years in Ohio during his first marriage, rejoined the household at Tor House, marrying Lee Waggener in 1947 and raising four children there. Life remained simple and subdued. After the triumph of Jeffers's *Medea* on Broadway, starring Judith Anderson, there was a trip to Ireland in 1948, during which Jeffers almost died of pleurisy. Then tragedy struck. In 1949 Una Jeffers contracted what she insisted on calling sciatica, but which was a very painful cancer. Jeffers took her to San Francisco in January for a month of intensive and experimental treatments at the University of California Hospital. There was some relief but no cure and Una's remaining months were filled with bedrest, general weakness, and pain-relieving

drugs. This very harrowing time was the subject for Jeffers's most autobiographical poem, "Hungerfield" (1952). The remainder of Jeffers's life, after her death in September 1950, involved living out the pact he had made early in his career, not to take his own life but to drink it to the dregs. As his health and eyesight failed, he could read only sparingly. He watched his grandchildren grow and thought grim thoughts of world-annihilation as the testing of atom and hydrogen bombs filled the news. In these final twelve years he wrote a few poems. Some of them, significant as his culminating thought on various subjects, were published posthumously in *The Beginning and the End* (1963). He agreed to help adapt *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* for Judith Anderson and for Broadway production (1951) and began an adaptation of Schiller's *Mary Stuart* but left it after completing one act. There were infrequent visitors still, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Richard Eberhart among them. Jeffers died January 20, 1962; Carmel was covered with an all but unprecedented snow.

Jeffers's themes are identical with his overview of life and consistent from the beginning of his mature period (*Tamar*, 1924) till the end of his life (*The Beginning and the End*, 1963). He was a pantheist who believed that God is the evolving universe, a self-torturing god who discovers himself in the violent change which is at the center of life's dynamism. One need not go far in Jeffers to find that all his images are cyclic: cycle is the truth of the stars, the life of the planet, the fate of man, insect, and flower. Cycle moves through birth, growth, fullness, decay, and death. In ritual terms cycle translates into sacrifice (fragmentation of each entity at the cycle's end) and sacrament (reintegration and rebirth). For him, being involves change which is brought about only by violence and pain because each form resists its own dissolution. These realities, though customarily repugnant to man, are essential to beauty and divinity. For Jeffers there is only matter and energy; there is no spirit, or soul, or immortality (these being merely men's attempts to escape the cycle). God endures forever; man is a temporary phenomenon, something of an anomaly in the universe because of his megalomaniac self-regard. But man is also unique, able to reflect on God. In fact man is, for the cosmic moment he endures, one of God's sense organs ("The Beginning and the End").

Consciousness is a universal quality of the cosmos, but man's participation in it will pass ("Credo"); beauty survives man's faculty to perceive it. Death is at the end of each cycle, ending the individual existence; the material from each man's body is reassimilated into soil and air ("Hungerfield"). Man's energy sometimes endures for a moment after death, like a St. Elmo's fire, in psychic phenomena. The world in its various rhythms is determined. The universe expands and collapses, oceans condense and evapo-

rate, mountains and civilizations rise and fall; nations emerge and grow old. The mass of men is fated in its course, but the individual can choose to remove himself from the breaking wave, can stand apart and contemplate instead of being blindly caught. God himself (the pronoun of course is an anomaly) is in no way like man; he is savage, indifferent, and wild ("Hurt Hawks"), encompassing both good and evil. If seen wholly, all things are sacred and in harmony. Evil itself is only part of the mosaic of beauty, indicating the close of the cycle ("The Answer").

To Jeffers the task of living a "good life" lies principally in detachment from insane desires for power, wealth, and permanence, in a measured indifference to pain, joy, or success, and in a turning outward to God who is "all things." Wisdom, a word little used in his poetry except in irony ("Wise Men in Their Bad Hours") means cosmic perspective ("Signpost") and unfocusing from mankind (Jeffers's "inhumanism"). Peace, as cessation from strife, is an illusion in life. True peace is found in death; in life it can be anticipated in a stoic balance which discounts man's innate anxieties for immortality, invulnerability, stability, and immunity from pain and sickness. The great and most subtle temptation for the good person lies in the implicitly self-aggrandizing notion that one can change the world (saviorism). Jeffers himself must have desperately fought this "demon," he writes about it so often. He saw love as an abnormality of an incestuous race, leading to many other insanities. One love is pure: the love of God who is indifferent to man. Piety lies in an undistracted regard for beauty, earthly and cosmic. Terrible beauty is the god who commands worship. The poet is one who creates as God creates ("Apology for Bad Dreams"), who reconciles existence for man, putting man's preoccupations with sin, guilt, corruption, pain, and all other confounding fears and desires into saving context. The "good person" is not the leader, rebel, or savior; he is the self-contained mystic, contemplating God and living out the necessary conspiracies of life with a certain aloofness (Tamar achieves this amidst her melodrama of family destruction).

Jeffers's art grew out of his life and vice versa; it was a consequence of his philosophy and of his sense of vocation. Once one grasps the dimensions of his beliefs, it becomes clear that Jeffers's poetry is incredibly centered and predictable. The theme of every poem, one way or another, is the divine beauty of the cosmos and the mutability of man. Jeffers has a deep sense of ritual, not only in nature's rites of death and renewal but in every rhythm of being. His ritual intent is strikingly evidenced in a letter to his editor in 1926, in which he explained that the movement of his narratives was "more like the ceremonial dances of primitive people; the dancer becomes a rain-cloud, or a leopard, or a God . . . the episodes . . . are a sort of essential ritual, from which the real action develops on another plane" (*Selected*

Letters, p. 28). He embraces tragedy in its pre-Sophoclean sense of the inevitable, blameless fall which yields new beginnings. "All life is tragic" translates into "all life is cyclic." Though civilized man flees the metaphysical implications of cycle, primitive man seems to have accepted and celebrated them. Characteristically in Mediterranean fertility cults, each year the cycle god, Attis, Osiris, Tammuz, Dionysus, had to suffer the consequences of reentry into being; each was born in order to die (and be reborn ten thousand times). Decline and death were not blameworthy or cataclysmic but inevitable and natural. Death is perhaps Jeffers's most frequent theme; it is a truth to understand, accept, and move within.

Of course subordinate themes abound in Jeffers's poetry, but they all bear on the truth of the cycle—human mutability, reconciliation with evil, confrontation of pain, indifference born of cosmic perspective, acceptance of God on his own terms, desirability of death and annihilation, inevitability of processes, delusion of human effectiveness, presumptuousness of man's self-importance, the nature of the poet's art, the omnipresence and beauty of tragedy.

The poetics of Jeffers are fairly simple and direct. His is a poetry of the external landscape, not the landscape of the mind ("Credo"). After the lyrics and semi-narratives of his first two books, he consciously avoided meter and rhyme. He replaced the first with the larger, more supple rhythms of Hebrew and Old English verse and the second with symmetries of parallelism and alliteration. Ten-beat lines are common in the narratives although there are many variations; four-beat lines are more likely in the lyrics.

Much of Jeffers's poetic effect comes through word-choice or diction. He chose words for etymology and for their successive layers of meaning. He kept a huge unabridged dictionary by his side and pondered word possibilities, sometimes for days. His imagery makes a fascinating study. Most of it is taken from his immediate coastal experience: hawks, herons, wild swans, pelicans, mountain lion, deer, and cattle; redwood, cypress, grass, wildflowers, rock, ocean, headland, clouds, sky, stars, and planets. Hawks are godlike, totem birds, representing what is noble and fierce. Lion and deer are the predators and victims, metaphors for all victimhood, neither blameworthy. Flora and fauna almost always fill a twofold function in his narratives: they are part of the realistic backdrop for the action; they also foreshadow the tragedy imminent in all drama, recalling animal surrogates of the year-gods and the sacrificial flowers which sprang from the gods' blood. Rock is a consistent image of God, mysterious chthonic presence and stoic endurance; it is volcanic origins, the bones of mother earth. The sea is a mind-subduing expanse, life and death, matrix of all life, source of story, change of season. Mountain and headland are measure of the heavens and

reminder of human life's precariousness. Storm represents elemental apocalyptic forces; earth, air, fire, water (quake, storm, holocaust, and deluge)—all are fearful agents in Jeffers's narratives. Clouds are a dream medium on which the poet projects human folly ("The Great Sunset"). Sky and stars are the universe beckoning. Stars are used both mythically, as in the constellation patterns of Orion and Scorpio in "Tamar," but more often scientifically—gigantic atomic fusion furnaces whose lifespan predicts the fate of our sun and solar system ("Nova"). The far stars and galaxies are the ultimate actors of Jeffers's ultimate metaphor, the expanding and contracting universe which recycles every eighty-two billion years and is God's heart-beat ("The Great Explosion," "At the Birth of an Age").

Jeffers wrote and spoke little of his poetics. His 1938 foreword to *Selected Poetry* declares his intent to reclaim the subject matter which poetry had surrendered to prose. He meant to write about permanent things or the eternally recurring ("Point Joe"). He promised to pretend nothing, neither optimism nor pessimism. He would avoid the popular and fashionable; he would write as he believed, whatever the consequences.

In "Apology for Bad Dreams," an early *ars poetica* in lyric form, Jeffers indicates that he creates his narratives and dramas (bad dreams) principally for his own salvation. Using the vignette of a woman beating a horse amidst the magnificence of a coastal sundown, he attempts to reconcile man's perversity with the essential beauty of things. The landscape, he says, demands tragedy (pain, sacrifice, horror); the greater its beauty, the stronger the demand. It would seem that the poet wrote out these vicarious terrors in order to be spared the real terror of personal tragedy. Exactly what metaphysics is involved, Jeffers does not explain. He may write stories to educate himself to violence and the cycle, thus taking some of the terror out of the pain that he, as everyone, must endure. He may write as a form of therapy, letting out his inner violences, lest he act them out (and beat horses himself). Or he may see in his writing a way of participating in being's ritual, acting out a discovery-process that parallels God's own creative process—a kind of "magic" (as he calls it).

Anyone who doubts the religious intent of Jeffers's poetry should read carefully the choric invocation in "Tamar" (section V), his first narrative poem of note. He calls on the god of natural beauty to enter into his "puppet" characters—a brother and sister who have just committed incest and the disintegrating family that surrounds them. God, Jeffers says, chooses the twisted and lame to be his signs and the agents of his revelation. For this same reason God has chosen him. The same kind of lyric interruption greets us in "The Women at Point Sur," Jeffers's most tortured and convoluted narrative. Here again he has created human grotesques, he says, to praise God,

“puppets” to speak of him; they “stammer the tragedy.” There are other writers, Jeffers tells us in the “Prelude” to the poem, who will tell tales to entertain; his vocation is to slit open the eyeholes in mankind’s mask. Human resistance to God and to integration into the organic whole of the universe can be broken only by dramatic means (“Roan Stallion”): disorienting vision, limit-vaulting desire, unnatural crime, inhuman science, and tragedy. “These break [the mould], these pierce [the mask], these deify, praising their God shrilly with fierce voices: not in man’s shape. He approves the praise” (“Roan Stallion”). Later Jeffers will clarify this view of storytelling and further its religious context in the lyric “Crumbs or the Loaf” where, in a parallel to Jesus’s story of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13), he characterizes his narratives as parables, as contrasted with his lyrics which are confrontive apodictic pronouncements.

Jeffers’s final statement on poetry comes toward the end of his writing career. In 1949, amidst the triumph of *Medea* and impending rejection of *The Double Axe*, he characterizes the truly great poet in an article for the *New York Times*, “Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years.” The poet, he says, stands alone. He renounces self-consciousness, over-learnedness, labored obscurity (by which Jeffers would probably have characterized most of contemporary poetry). He is direct and natural, saying what he must say clearly, out of the spirit of his time but as understandable for all times.

Elsewhere I have called Jeffers the “metaphysician of the West.” Metaphysics is that most fundamental area of philosophy which studies being itself. Metaphysics has to deal with all that exists; it delves into the nature of all processes, of all that is—the workings and interactings of the universe and of the molecule and atom. “Of the West” suggests more than writing in and from the point of view of the West, or using its scenes as a setting. Jeffers does all these things, but his peculiar genius is his use of the West, the Far West, the continent’s end and drop-off cliff of the world on which he perched his home, to explore the nature of being, the relevance of the human race, and the bridge between man and the furthestmost expanses of the cosmos.

Jeffers represented his western landscape exactly; it stretched from Point Pinos in the north to Point Sur and Pfeiffer Beach in the south. This fifty miles of storm-scoured promontories, precipitous headlands, wave-racked points, wind-twisted trees, and precarious beaches was known intimately to him. It was the subject for solitary walks and family pilgrimages. The place names in his poems are almost all right off the geological survey map: Point Pinos and Joe, Robinson Canyon, Carmel Beach, Point Lobos, Mal Paso Creek, Notley’s Landing, Palo Colorado Canyon, Rocky Point, Soberanes Reef, Bixby’s Landing, Mill Creek, Little Sur River, Point Sur.

The terrain, the beaches, the weather, the flowers, the animals are all true-to-life re-creations. Jeffers Country is no mythical Yoknapatawpha County; only the characters' names are made up.

Yet, in their own way, Jeffers's characters are authentic, arising as they do from the violent legends of this forbidding and isolating terrain. Someone has suggested that the Big Sur country causes madness because of something in its dynamism which either produces or attracts the grotesque, the macabre. Robinson Jeffers himself suggests this in "Apology for Bad Dreams." Jeffers's characters are ranch families, self-exiled hermits in shacks, wandering Indian cowboys from a previous era.

The land has never been domesticated; it is inconceivable that it ever will be; this is not so much remote backpacking country as impenetrable space. As one can see from the Sierra Club photo book, *Not Man Apart*, the coast is an almost continuous headlong precipice. The Coast Highway, an engineering triumph of the 1930s, strung a precarious ribbon of asphalt just above the drop-off, dynamiting through shoulders of rock, leaping over creek gorges with delicate butterfly bridges. Almost every winter a storm carries a lane of the highway into the sea. Behind this coast road are a few grassy knolls and fields, backed by wilderness. As one passes over it in a flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco, one sees tightly corrugated peaks and gulleys choked with trees and brush—no roads, no lights, no water, no signs of life. This is wilderness in an almost mystic sense, a place to correspond to the empty places in the soul. One need not visit it; it was comforting to Jeffers just to know it was there and that it would never be humanized, subdivided, asphalted and fitted with sewer systems.

Very conscious of writing as a westerner, Jeffers perceived his land and his conscience as scarred with the vestiges of westward expansion. All around him were the ghosts of Indians who were too easy a victim to the white man's ambitions and diseases. San Carlos Mission, a few blocks from Tor House, presided over the death of local tribes. A spade on his knoll may turn over the remains of a tribal feast, abalone and clam shells and charcoal from their fires. Jeffers is conscious that his Carmel River mouth is the center of a line which marks the final coast of migrations which began millennia ago, first crossing Europe, then the Atlantic, and finally the American continent ("Tamar," Section V, makes use of this, as do "The Loving Shepherdess" and "Continent's End"). Somehow this coast sums up all migrations and all that men have done for good or evil in their "progress." Jeffers's Doppelgänger, the self-stigmatizing hermit in "A Redeemer," summed it up: "Not as a people takes a land to love it and be fed, / A little according to need and love and again a little; sparing the country tribes, mixing / Their blood with theirs, their minds with all the rocks and rivers, their flesh with the soil . . . Oh, as a rich man eats a forest for profit and a field for vanity,

So you came west and raped / The continent and brushed its people to death. Without need the weak skirmishing hunters and without mercy.”

Jeffers is not a regionalist in the usual sense of the word—one who writes knowingly of his geographic section, reflecting its genius and foibles, relating its topographic and climatic peculiarities, reciting its idiom and its philosophy. The California coast for him is not a region; it is a final statement, a philosophical, metaphysical study. There are neither enough people nor customs in his mountains for regionalism, and the landscape is unearthly, not picturesque. The final frontier is an ontological statement, not a geographic or cultural one. It is final as the coast is final—to all of mankind’s hopes and illusions and indirections. America’s violence, its rape of the land, its betrayal of the Indians, its pillaging of resources—all of these must ultimately be faced here.

Before concluding a discussion of Jeffers’s themes and aesthetics, it is important to confront some of the objections to his writing—not in order to excuse his faults but to clarify his intent and identify his genre so that judgments may be better focused. With regard to his narratives, one can merely repeat what has been said above: Jeffers is a tragedian; he cannot write comedy for he saw comedy as an unfinished story. His stories are grotesque and usually end in blood. Whether he succeeded or not, his intent is to write parables, to instruct and to move his readers beyond their limits. His genre is, at an important level, ritualistic: that is, the story represents a Dionysian process, illustrating the cycles of life and death. His central characters, he says (in “My Loved Subject”), are the landscape: “Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees/ Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters.” His human characters therefore are not primarily psychological or humanistic studies. Actually Jeffers chooses a sort of stereotyping (he has consistently called his characters “puppets”): his men tend to be Apollonian, stoic, cerebral, presumptuous that their power and plans will carry the day; his women tend to be Dionysian, sudden, intuitive, destructive; they are divine agents. Stories tend to follow the pattern of Pentheus’s destruction by Agave in *The Bacchae* (Jeffers’s version: “Humanist’s tragedy”). The reader must be cautious: Jeffers should never be identified with his characters; their attitudes and statements are rarely or never his. He has no heroes or heroines, only maimed, floundering “idols.” At some points Tamar, Orestes, and Fayne Frazer might be exceptions.

With regard to the short poems several additional precautions should be noted. Jeffers has many voices, the most prominent of which is, by far, that of prophet, a voice which may have been familiar to him out of the Old Testament literature of his childhood. The prophet primarily proclaims the truth, no matter how bitter the consequences. The prophet is a man obsessed and desperate to communicate. He has a vision of holiness which he

sees desecrated usually by a middle- or upper-class "establishment" who live by idolatry, injustice, and dishonesty. The prophet deals in exaggeration, overstatement, hyperbole. As Flannery O'Connor notes: For those who are almost blind, the prophet must write in huge caricatures; for those who are marginally deaf, he must shout. A prophet by definition must shock to communicate. But just as Isaiah did not rant and excoriate all of the time but also cajoled, admonished, comforted, and extolled, so Jeffers has other intonations and messages. At times he is pure mystic, praying to his God in the solitude of his tower as in "Night." At other times he is a teacher, reasoning and unfolding, suggesting how to live, as in "Signpost," "The Answer," or "Return." He can be a discerning philosopher as in "Theory of Truth." He can even be autobiographic as in "To His Father" or "The Bed by the Window." He could assume a sort of priesthood over the rituals of nature and celebrate their holiness and rhythms as in "Salmon-Fishing" and "To the House." He could turn himself inward to purify his art and sharpen his focus, always questioning the validity of his message and examining his poetic talents from the perspective of eternity as in "Self-Criticism in February" or "Soliloquy." Often his tones take on the gravity of the ecologist, lamenting the imbalance and guilts perpetrated by his own nation, or the apocalypticist, judging cities the ultimate idolatry and forecasting global purgation.

By this it should be clear that Jeffers should be approached with some patience and informed understanding. He cannot be summed up in one poem nor is he heard well until he has been listened to in several voices. He has often been dismissed by critics and the general reader as a misanthropist, pessimist, or nihilist. Isaiah might fall under the same charges. As one rightly balances the vitriolic rhetoric of the Old Testament prophet's first chapters with his Book of Comfort (Isaiah, chapters 40ff.) or his suffering servant songs, so one needs to balance Jeffers's heavier poems ("Summer Holiday," "November Surf," "What Are Cities For?," "Original Sin," for example) with the lighter, more positive statements: "The Excesses of God" or the final lines of "The Beginning and the End."

A final word on Jeffers's role as western writer. When one reviews the spectrum of themes from the literature of the West, one sees that Jeffers came to grips with all of them. He dealt with agrarian and pastoral types, the epic sweep of migrations, hero archetypes, violence, search for Eden, the disaster of the American Dream, Indian extermination, land and landscape, the mysticism of wilderness, immersion in nature, the folly of progress, the moral dilemmas of ownership, land-development, law, power, and greed. Grandson of an early pioneer of Ohio, he was inextricably involved in the nation's historical progress and in judgment upon it.

There is in his poetry a deep-seated ambivalence, arising from the clash

between mystic and prophet. On the one hand he espouses an Eastern, Buddhist type of passivity and inner peace, assuming that nothing can be done. War, betrayal, moral and political corruption are variations of a natural process of decay that inevitably follows the cresting of a nation's vitality and idealism. He can pronounce this process "not blameworthy" as in "Shine, Perishing Republic." On the other hand he can, and more often does, deal with it with a heavy prophetic hand. Though he rejected the savior syndrome, he acted in many ways the redeemer whom he pictured in the short narrative by that title, "here on the mountain making/Antitoxin for all the happy towns and farms, the lovely blameless children, the terrible/Arrogant cities." He tried to base his peace in the philosophy of inhumanism. At times he seemed to reject not only American life but the life of the race as well. Yet he is ever conscious of his roots, ever ready to pay his "birth-dues," to discover new meanings for his people. The westering experience was for him the exemplar of all journeys. Western motifs gave him vehicles for a larger philosophizing. The continent's end provided a yardstick to measure the divine cosmos. The western shore was full of life, yet inhospitable, ancient and yet young, violent yet serene, a platform above the Pacific set for tragedy.

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