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## Reality and Nature in Robinson Jeffers

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REALITY AND NATURE IN ROBINSON JEFFERS

By

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A doctoral project submitted in partial fulfillment  
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## **Dissertation Approval**

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## Abstract

Synonyms are the key to understanding Robinson Jeffers's poetry and his philosophy of inhumanism. Reality, nature, and God are words Jeffers uses to communicate monistic feelings. These words are difficult to define on their own. When used interchangeably by the poet, a sense of oneness with the universe is generated in the reader. This is how Jeffers gives value to the natural world, and his environmental ethic is inextricably tangled up with the numinous as much as the real. A belief in immanence, or that God is present in the material world, guides Jeffers's philosophy of inhumanism. Reality becomes the ultimate, obvious, and undeniable proof not only of God, but the sanctity of nature. His poetry, when read alongside the *Meditations* of Roman Stoic philosopher and emperor Marcus Aurelius, takes on an even richer Classical tone in thought and ethos. His first three narrative poems—*Tamar*, *Roan Stallion* and *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*—reveal a poet who is considering that most of the big words in English—nature, reality, God, beauty, truth—might mean the same thing. It is this reductionism of language, both mythopoetic and naturalistic, that makes his work the strange chimera of religio-scientific poetics that it is. The poetry is ecological, but it is also cosmological, and with this equation Jeffers created some of the most profoundly wild and spiritual language of the Modernist era.

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# Dedication

Dedicated to my parents, David and Brenda Bartee.

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# Chapter One

## Ecological Vision

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In 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature, the source and foundation for the ecopoetic tradition can be located in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Yet to study him as an ecopoet is to study him in contemporary terms. Christ was not necessarily a Christian, as those who were inspired by him were to be called afterwards, but the originator of Christianity. Jeffers was the originator and only champion, apart from one noted disciple (William Everson) and some devout readers, of a philosophy he called “inhumanism,” or the worship of the not-man. It is, among many things, a critique of religion as narcissistic. It is an approach to the problem of meaning as mostly symbolic, made tragic by our insistence on looking beyond the actual for the most remotely possible. Inhumanism rejects the idea of the savior as an artifact of older, anthropocentric attitudes about man’s place in the cosmos, as explored in “Point Pinos and Point Lobos” (CP 1:92) and “Meditation on Saviors” (CP 1:396). Jeffers was not an ecopoet, as seminal and as sacred his poetry turned out to be to the construction of a modern natural aesthetic—an ecological aesthetic—in American letters. George Sterling, in *Robinson Jeffers: The Man and the Artist*, places Jeffers inside the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. Sterling considers Jeffers a new American tragedian in the legacy of the Ancient Greeks. Consider this, by Sterling:

Such derivative touches as may appear in the work of Robinson Jeffers are from the phantom styluses of the great Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles. No other influences greatly intervene, unless they be a breath from the winter woods of Emerson, and occasional gleams from the iris-ink of Keats. It will perhaps become the fashion, what

of the long sweep and surge of his lines, the reach of his imagination, to claim that he stems from Whitman. Such would be the most obvious criterion. But their dissimilarities are too great to imply any close relationship. (3-4)

Jeffers expressed the most unique ecological vision in Modernist poetry. He was an inhumanist, a philosophy grounded in ecocentrism, one where interdependence and continuity are considered not only natural facts but the very definition of contingent, as opposed to the cultural constructions of individualism and teleology. His poetry arraigned nature to be in the ascendancy for a future that would struggle with a postindustrial landscape. Jeffers's poetry resonates at a time when society is grossly over-interested in its own reflection in the curated mirrors of virtual identity. His work provides a foundation for a critique of anthropocentric attitudes in the world and in the humanities. And that world, in Jeffers, becomes a stage for startling tragic poetry. The landscape is more than simply a witness to human presence or victim of its desires, even as humans alter the landscape—but those pigmy transmogrifications have little lasting impact on a world in flux. Landscape lives a long time and changes as a matter of course. Jeffers enshrines the beauty of places, places that are real for a geological moment. His ecological vision makes clear an intimate and outward consideration of deep time, as good as any Modernist at revealing the implications of science and technology on the human understanding of time. He considers place sacrosanct; we are observers in an ancient universe changing at breakneck speed. And nowhere in his poetry is place more important than the long narratives.

Inhumanism is a philosophy that does not reject humanism but extrapolates its values to include all things, human and nonhuman. The philosophy rejects the aggrandizement of the human figure, in reality and in literature. Inhumanism is really All-Otherism. Humanism is All-But-Otherism, even in its accounting and cataloguing of the natural world. Jeffers defines the term in

the original 1947 preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. He states that this “new attitude” of his,

Is based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe... An infant feels himself to be central and of primary importance; an adult knows better; it seems time that the human race attained to an adult habit of thought in this regard. The attitude is neither misanthropic nor pessimist nor irreligious, though two or three people have said so, and may again; but it involves a certain detachment. (CP 4:418).

It is a postromantic philosophy, one in which man is not simply imagined in nature, but placed there, in reality, as a part of it. The atheism of Percy Bysshe Shelley was a furtherance of humanism, and led to the sanctification of poetry and poetic personality. Inhumanism rejects the individual personality as well as the sacredness of poetry. Jeffers once remarked in a lyric that “The pallid / pursuit of the world’s beauty on paper, / Unless a tall angel comes to require it, is a pitiful pastime” (“Second-Best,” CP 2:132). It is a philosophy that conflates beauty with nature, and requires a certain fatalistic, but mature, sensibility to consider. It is about “the beauty of things and their living wholeness”—in other words, it is about the ecology of the universe.

The skein-like quality of ecopoetry, its characteristic mark of naming and listing according to Linnaean or folk taxonomy, does not entirely mesh with the philosophy of inhumanism, which asserts that everything human (from language to our physical presence) disfigures nature, as in the lyric “The Place for No Story”: “This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen. No imaginable / Human presence here could do anything / But dilute the lonely self-watchful passion” (CP 1:157); and in “An Extinct Vertebrate,” one of his last lyrics: “Whatever we do to a landscape—even to look—damages it,” a poem that ends on the word “tragedy” (CP 3:438). It is in the narratives

where this sentiment is played out, because plot is central to mythologizing, and story itself is a kind of ritualizing of humans in nature. Without a narrative unfolding of description and action it becomes difficult to imagine ourselves situated in time and place. As Northrop Frye argues in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, “The verbal imitation of ritual is myth, and the typical action of poetry is the plot” (53). With Jeffers, the lyrics often function as brief worksheets for the ideas given expansion in those long poems, and the plot is what drives his ecopoetical apparatus. In *Give Your Heart to the Hawks*, one of Jeffers’s great narratives of place, the tragic figure Fayne demonstrates the poet’s derivation of inhumanism from place:

Where you and I  
Have come to, is a dizzy and lonely place on a height: we have to peel off  
Some humanness here or it will be hard to live. If you could think that all human feelings,  
repentance  
And blood-thirst too, are not very important in so vast a world; nor anyone’s life;  
Nor love either, the unlucky angel  
That has led me so far. (CP 2:404)

Jeffers inverted tragedy: the stage was the star, and the actors were there to pour libations and die. His theater was not the earth but the universe. The earth, on that stage, was an actor as well. This problematizes the term ‘eco-,’ generally assumed to mean something about our own planet. But ecology in Jeffers means a consideration of all systems, large and small: the stars and bacteria, oceans and men. It means a consideration of forces on the same level of importance as things in the structure of the universal whole. It means a consideration of all things, which are, regardless of size or form, part of a whole. Jeffers fondly believes that the universe, rather than simply the earth alone, is his dwelling place. This requires a casting of the imagination into the world of objects unseen, both large and small, the deep-searching gaze of astronomy and microscopy. His ecological vision truly is visionary; the imagination is stretched, expanded and left slack. He attempts a sublime rhythm, contracting and expanding like the heart when it beats.

Place is essential not only to Jeffers but to an ecological aesthetic. This aesthetic can accurately be gathered under the umbrella of *ecopoetry*. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate defines eco-poetics thusly:

Eco-poetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place—the prefix eco- is derived from Greek *oikos*, ‘the home or place of dwelling’. According to this definition, poetry will not necessarily be synonymous with verse: the poem-ing of the dwelling is not inherently dependent on metrical form. However, the rhythmic, syntactic and linguistic intensifications that are characteristic of verse-writing frequently give a peculiar force to the *poiesis*: it could be that *poiesis* in the sense of verse-making is language’s most direct path of return to the *oikos*, the place of dwelling, because metre[sic] itself—a quiet but persistent music, a recurring cycle, a heartbeat—is an answering to nature’s own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth itself. (76)

Jeffers’s poetry is certainly constructed with an irrational sensitivity to the wilderness, but it is also greatly informed by astronomy. He takes the reader into the cosmos to show humans how alienated we are from the places in which we live and conduct our lives, as the poet states in “The Answer”, his most eco-poetic lyric, either “for contemplation or in fact” (CP 2:536). Bate’s emphasis upon rhythm and the heart as essential to eco-poetry brings to mind one of Jeffers’s last poems, “The Great Explosion”: “The universe expands and contracts like a great heart” (CP 3:471). It is this rhythm of return, the sacred motion of recurrence as creation, that resonates throughout the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. He tells us that the universe beats like a heart, an organ that suffuses the body with blood and the blood is the life. His knowledge of astronomy and medicine make this simple, thirteen-syllable simile sublime, a rubberbanding between vastness and closeness, of the intimate

and the strange, in a universe in which we find ourselves incredibly estranged from everything but the things we own. We are still estranged from ourselves.

The implications of Jeffers's poetry go beyond the rather blithe definition of the ecopoet offered by Bate: "Reverie, solitude, walking: to turn these experiences into language is to be an ecopoet. Ecopoetry is not a description of dwelling with the earth, not a disengaged thinking about it, but an experiencing of it" (42). I would like to expand this description. An ecopoet must be informed by, not inhumanism necessarily, but at the least a knowledge of humans as interdependent that leads to the construction of, as a matter of course, an environmental ethic. The poet must be familiar with the principles of ecology. Interestingly, though, this sort of walk is suggested by Jeffers (again in the 1947 preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems*) as an answer to curing our confusions and self-interest:

But we have all this excess energy: what should we do with it? We could take a walk, for instance, and admire landscape: that is better than killing one's brother in war or trying to be superior to one's neighbor in time of peace... Well: do I really believe that people will be content to take a walk and admire the beauty of things? Certainly not. (CP 4:419)

But while Jeffers does not prescribe reverie, Bate establishes a definition of ecopoetry as writing about nature as a place we entertain as an idea and use to entertain ourselves. What is problematic is that Bate's description of an ecopoet primes the ground for a fashionable revision of all literature, a pillaging of the past for the confirmation of new thought, or at least effigies to wear the clothes. Bate's book does not mention Jeffers once. It focuses on the Romantics and other canonical poets. Ecopoetry suffers from the prefix which, after years of being a buzzword, indicates greenwashing, or an attempt to capitalize on the commercialization and exploitation of the earth. It allows for the presentation of literature as environmentally friendly. And greenwashed products are designed to

make us feel like activists while avoiding our responsibilities to perpetuating a culture of waste. Inhumanism can generate guilt. Eco-poetry and greenwashing are incompatible, and the critic must be careful how they define the term eco-poet. Literature has not always been informed by eco-poetics. This is a new thing. It is historical, civic and moral. In *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Eco-poetry*, J. Scott Bryson addresses this. He believes that eco-poems,

Have been written by many poets who precede the modern environmental movement yet still demonstrate the general characteristics associated with eco-poetry...It is not the case, of course, that for the first time in modern history poems are being produced that recognize reciprocity within nature and seek to interact humbly with all of the natural world...Eco-poets are aiming at a poetics that presents the world community as just that, a *community*, rather than a world of creatures and natural beings with whom the privileged self interacts. (3)

And while Bryson is convincing, examining old poems for ecological messages is disingenuous if we consider eco-poetry an aesthetic phenomenon activated by the works of Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin and Ernst Haeckel. That any poetry written before their scientific research revealed a greater complexity and interdependency to life is certainly proto-eco-poetic. But that sort of terminology is unnecessary. Anything before those authors' revelations took hold is mostly pastoral. Glen Love argues in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, an awareness of science is essential to an ecological aesthetic:

Literature involves interrelationships, and ecological awareness enhances and expands our sense of interrelationships to encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts. Ecological

thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture. (47)

That this sounds like the core message of inhumanism is no surprise. Inhumanism anticipates the shift toward posthuman and postromantic attitudes that would usher in the literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a literature informed by the knowledge of our place on the earth and in the community of life, immersed in biotic and cultural environments, always.

Before the industrial revolution, the consequences of man's effect on his environment were either too small or too far-flung, such as the extinction of the Dodos of Mauritius in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or the ecological collapse of the Mayan civilization. Heavy industry revealed man's impact on his environment, and the Romantics made a moral case for the sacramentality of nature. An awareness of mechanization is one way ecopoetry finds its roots in the past, in the pastorals and antipastorals of Romanticism, in a radical philosophy of visionary transformation. But Romantic poetry is not ecopoetry. Ecopoetry, with each passing day, becomes more relevant and finds more practitioners and methods of presenting a new naturalistic aesthetic. Ecopoetry is exceptionally ethical in that it considers the moral position of humans in the community of life. With his philosophy of inhumanism Jeffers attempted to abolish moralism altogether, even though some critics have seen his admonitory tone as representing a "new vision of temperance" (Monjian 86). So to be an ecopoet means more than taking a walk and writing about where you have been. It means to write about the universe as our home, and to consider the problematic relationship we have with the earth. And it means to take seriously the task of praising the sacred values rediscovered in the natural world in a literature informed by ecology.

George Hart, in *Inventing the Language to Tell It: Robinson Jeffers and the Biology of Consciousness*, situates Jeffers "in the broad-mainstream of a literary-cultural tradition that is best



called sacramental,” which he describes as “spirit and matter, mediated by and discovered in language” (3-4). An ecological sacramentality consists of ritual in nature; it is not just about language—the mediation occurs through the action as well as the utterance. In Jeffers’s longest narrative, *The Women at Point Sur*, April, the daughter of Arthur and Audis Barclay, handles a gun, the one that she will later use to commit suicide, firing two shots to kill herself and thus symbolically release the spirit of her dead brother, Edward, who inhabited her body. Jeffers writes “She held it bare in her hand, the sacramental / Exhibition, the awful witness of power” (CP 1:353). An act is only a momentary phenomenon; it is later rendered into language and becomes something more. Poetry is the chiasm of thought and action. According to Frye, “Poetry faces, in one direction, the world of *praxis* or action, a world of events occurring in time. In the opposite direction, it faces the world of *theoria*, of images and ideas, the conceptual or visualizable world spread out in space, or mental space” (55). Narrative action provides the material for reflection and meditation in Jeffers’s poems. And human action is a part of that process, tragic and beautiful because we participate in the wholeness of life but are only alive for a short time. Jeffers, in the lyric “The World’s Wonders” from *Hungerfield*, provides a direct explanation of the *via negativa* that is inhumanism: “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. / I have hardened my heart only a little” (CP 3:371). The poet believes his philosophy is simple to practice, that we are drawn to the beauty of nature, and loving it is easy. But to love humanity requires a distance, a hardening of the target, for its beauty lies in the ones we love and the tragedy that they must die. Consider that the titular narrative *Hungerfield* was written to his wife Una, who had recently passed. It was written by a man suffering the greatest loss of his life, and he found himself facing the final years of his life alone.

Lawrence Buell, in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, contends that inhumanism is a difficult philosophy to practice, that “you have to keep reminding yourself to grit your teeth and bear it” (155). Inhumanism is a difficult philosophy because it requires we distance ourselves from the disease of emphasizing the importance of the human figure, of measuring ourselves against all things, and in so doing make a mortal object of the beloved—and our own egos. Intense passion and love thread the final dramatic words of Jeffers in *Hungerfield*. We see the artist as the one most greatly in need of the inhumanist perspective—the pious man struggling with faith—for his heart, in that narrative, appears as achingly raw and sincere as any confessional poet’s, Jeffers’s stoic mask having fallen:

If time is only another dimension, then all that dies  
Remains alive; not annulled, but removed  
Out of our sight. Una is still alive

...

It is possible that all these conditions of us  
Are fixed points on the returning orbit of time and exist eternally...  
It is no good. Una has died, and I  
Am left waiting for death, like a leafless tree  
Waiting for the roots to rot and the trunk to fall. (CP 3:376)

Jeffers does not lack the essentials for human love, nor a sensitivity to the importance of human feeling. Man is, like a tree, nurtured to health by love, an apt metaphor for a man trained in forestry, one who handled, with a certain sacramentality, the seedlings of some 2,000 trees he planted on the Monterey peninsula (Karman 50). He goes on to contemplate the natural aspect of death: “It is a common thing: / We die, we cease to exist.” It is a narrative in which the title character physically fights the literal figure of Death:

In this black year  
I have thought often of Hungerfield, the man at Horse Creek,  
Who fought with Death—bodily, said the witnesses, throat for throat,  
Fury against fury in the dark—

And conquered him. If I had had the courage and the hope—  
Or the pure rage—  
I should be now Death's captive no doubt, not conqueror.  
I should be with my dearest, in the hollow darkness  
Where nothing hurts. (CP 3:377)

Buell is right: inhumanism is a philosophy that demands the reader maintain a certain degree of grit, stoicism, and endurance. It does not require courage or conviction, but indicates the necessity of attacking one's own vulnerabilities by exposing oneself to the hurt, suffering, pain and loss of human existence. It is a kind of slow callousing of human frailty, not a rejection of feeling. It is a philosophy of incredible sensitivity to the beauty of things. But death is too much to bear, so Jeffers fictionalizes it. The belief in the annihilation of the personality—for Jeffers did not believe in an afterlife, only cycles—crushes the poet, and he says to Una,

Never fear: I shall not forget you—  
Until I am with you. The dead indeed forget all things.  
And when I speak to you it is only play-acting  
And self-indulgence, you cannot hear me, you do not exist. Dearest...  
The story: (CP 3:378)

And the story happens in a place: Horse Creek. He transitions quickly from the eulogistic opening to a description of it:

Horse Creek drives blithely down its rock bed  
High on the thin-turfed mountain as we have seen it, but at the sea-mouth  
Turns dark and fierce; black lava cliffs oppress it and it bites through them, the redwood  
trees in the gorge-throat  
Are tortured dwarfs deformed by centuries of storm, broad trunks ancient as Caesar, and  
tattered heads  
Hardly higher than the house. There is an angry concentration of power here, rock, storm  
and ocean;  
The skies are dark, and darkness comes up like smoke  
Out of the ground.

This darker aspect of power, of something inseparable from God, is described here as fierce, destructive, enduring and adversarial, and it appears this way, in an almost Manichaeian sense, to foreshadow the tragedy—but also to reflect the poet's state of heart and mind. Jeffers's ecological

vision is so thoroughly ingrained in his poetics—and perhaps in the poet’s personality itself—that it rises to the surface even as he memorializes his late wife. At the height of his emotional ecstasy the poet turns to contemplate the natural world as a way of inuring himself to the real emotional pain, the fear of death that haunted Jeffers into an inhumanist contemplation of the thing, Death—a thing that at the last he would personify, in one final attempt to subordinate the reality of death to the prevailing cyclic nature of the universe—in his final narrative poem.

Regarding Jeffers’s *ars poetica*, I believe he has one for his lyrics and another for his narratives. Zaller locates the lyrical *ars poetica* in the lyric “Apology for Bad Dreams.” He argues, in *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*, that the poet’s artistic project is, ultimately, “resistant to the pieties of contemporary environmentalism and ecology. Jeffers poses a radical challenge to post-Romantic, post-Darwinian, and post-theistic views of the natural world as a passive and domesticated object of aesthetic appreciation, responsible stewardship, and enlightened conservation” (30). While Jeffers’s poetry can be read as making a case for caring about what we unsentimentally consider our home, he in various poems rejects a conservationist’s imperative. As Bate asserts, “Ecopoetry is not synonymous with writing that is pragmatically green: a manifesto for ecological correctness will not be poetic because its language is bound to be instrumental, to address questions of doing rather than to ‘present’ the experience of dwelling” (42). Jeffers understands that the “dwelling” dies in various degrees and is reborn in other, but remains the dwelling, only altered, extinction being a part of creation. In the late lyric “De Rerum Virtute,” a poem that has drawn an incredible amount of commentary and criticism as essential to Jeffers’s poetic project, he envisions the death of the ultramundane, thus affirming, in a way, the feckless task of conservation: “Do you think the blithe sun / Is ignorant that black waste and beggarly blindness trail him like hounds, / And will have him at last? He will be strangled / Among

his dead satellites, remembering magnificence” (CP 3:402). And consider the first twenty words of “Metamorphosis,” from the same perspective of ecological value: “The beauty of the earth is a resilient wonderful thing, / It dies and lives, it is capable of many resurrections” (CP 3:417). Jeffers, a pantheist, displays the strongest of faith in his beliefs: everything dies, lives, and returns. Extinction is in the run of things, and makes possible creation and systemic renewal. This is how Jeffers finds his connection to the father of American nature writing, Henry David Thoreau, in whom we can see the nascent ideas of Jeffers’s inhumanism, particularly regarding both authors’ embrace of extinction.

George Sterling did not address Thoreau in his reading of Jeffers’s poetic legacy, only Emerson (quite accurately), though both Thoreau and Jeffers share the Stoic embrace of death as an exultation of life. They share deep affinities in their veneration of place. Jeffers seems to be a true heir to Thoreau’s ecological legacy of place in American literature. However, as mentioned in a letter from Jeffers to an admirer, he never read anything by Thoreau. The letter, addressed to a Mr. Carpenter, is dated December 18th, 1933:

You ask what I think of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville. I am ashamed to say that I never read anything of Thoreau's; I like to think of his life, though it was rather specialist.

Emerson was a youthful enthusiasm, if you like, but not outgrown by any means, only read so thoroughly that I have not returned to him for a long time. (CL 2:269).

It would seem that transcendentalism had gotten into Jeffers through Emerson. They both have an incredibly supple style and darting intellects. They are difficult to keep pace with. But to affirm what Sterling had gathered from his friend, Jeffers wrote in a letter to Jeremy Ingalls that “Emerson interested me; Whitman never did” (CL 2:141). In another letter he writes that Robert Frost is “a worthy successor of Emerson and Thoreau,—to name my most admired New Englanders” (CL

3:447). The importance of transcendentalist ideas to Jeffers cannot be understated. As Zaller asserts, “Jeffers took elements of style and substance from both Emerson and Thoreau in his own construction of solitude and labor” (85); and “The influence of Emerson on the early Jeffers can be further detected in the latter’s figuration of the moral and aesthetic dimension of the cosmos” (70). Thoreau triumphs as his life, rather than his work, influenced Jeffers, a poet whose appreciation and veneration of place rivals that of Thoreau. These dimensions—of sacramentalizing and enlarging the importance of nature—would grow in size and eclipse the sensual, traditional lyrics imitative of Yeats that marked Jeffers’s early poetry. As Robert Brophy writes in *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems*, the poet “was ever impressed by the science of the galaxies, his love of the stars being a measure of the dimensions of his vision” (6). That vision is too large to be contained in his lyric poems; thus, the flashpoint for his ecological vision is his narratives. Those poems exalt places, where the lyrics often provide moralistic sketches or direct commentary or didactic or apostrophic address.

What makes Thoreau and Jeffers most alike is their common understanding of the difference between extinction and annihilation, and this fundamental aspect of ecology informs their work from beginning to end. This is essential to ecopoetics—a consideration of death and return, of decay and disintegration. It is a consideration of creation, of the community of life and the reduced position humankind at which Jeffers considered it in relation to the whole. Extinction—the death of something that no longer has adaptive advantage, or that can no longer live with the conditions of life—makes eternity possible because it recycles material back into the creation. Extinction is a kind of transformation. Annihilation is the idea that a life is utterly destroyed by death, an assumption that what once lived never will again. Annihilation is a closed system, teleological and complete. But no individual life can be put outside the integrated

wholeness of the universe—all life is merely repurposed. In the narrative poem “At the Birth of an Age,” Jeffers considers the idea of annihilation as the death of God. This section in particular is often called “The Hanged God,” and anthologized as a lyric poem. “The Young Man,” Christ, states,

If I were quiet and emptied myself of pain, breaking these bonds,  
Healing these wounds: without strain there is nothing. Without pressure, without  
conditions, without pain,  
Is peace; that's nothing, not-being; the pure night, the perfect freedom, the black crystal.  
(CP 2:482)

The narrative character Arthur Barclay explores the terrible implications of annihilation after his daughter April commits suicide in the “The Women at Point Sur”:

The dead have ears but no mouths, one's like another.  
They are grains of sand on the sand; the living are grains of sand on the wind; the wind  
crying “I want nothing,”  
Neither hot nor cold, raging across the sands, not shifting a point,  
Wanting *nothing*: annihilation's impossible, the dead have none: it wants, actively,  
*nothing*:  
Annihilation's impossible, the dead have none.” (CP 1:363)

Annihilation, according to Jeffers, is something God desires but cannot have, and through death desire ourselves to rest, but must be forced into the cycles of recurrence, the ecology of the universe. The biological principal of extinction provides Jeffers with a metaphor for what it must be like to share God's eternal being, to have a sensational existence forever. Again from “At the Birth of an Age”:

SINGERS: The long river  
Dreams in the sunset fire  
Shuddering and shining.  
All the drops of his blood are torches.  
I am one with him, I will share his being. (CP 2:484)

This being is the nature of extinction, of creation continued. Annihilation is impossible because all that is can never not be, but only suffer transformation into other modes of being. Ecology

urges us to consider that relationships are constantly in flux, and that relationships are the fundamental and permanent fixture of the universe.

In *Walden*, Thoreau writes “Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation” (52). He sardonically casts aside the notion that the universe is in peril, that annihilation is a possibility at all, while commenting on the obligations artists have, or don’t have, to society. Underneath this dismissal of society’s yoke is the real nugget of Thoreau’s wisdom: “In dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident” (73). We find here the ultimate opponent of annihilation: Eternity. Immortality is objective, self-evident and commonsensical, because, as we can see in the landscapes before us, the transformation of past things into new forms of being is apparent. Such an idea rejects the dominion of perspective. There is no subjective vantage, only rays from the same prism that, turning back, find they observe the same thing. Objective immortality is a coming together of reality and dream in the wilderness of the chaos of the universe. What the divine instinct indicated to us all along is evident in the material world that substantiates reality. Annihilation, in the light of this revelation, seems a shadow cast by the large body of solipsism, not a truth. Like Thoreau, Jeffers had little interest in saving the world from annihilation—it was hubristic to think so—for the nature of God is destructive, extinctive, irresistible power:

Who fights him eats his own flesh and perishes of hunger; who hides in the grave  
To escape him is dead; who enters the Indian  
Recession to escape him is dead; who falls in love with the God is washed clean  
Of death desired and of death dreaded. (“Birth-Dues,” CP 1:371)

God is a torturer because he is forever tortured by recurrence, unable to die, his suffering proof that annihilation is impossible. We share God’s immortality, returning forever, which is a fire that cannot be extinguished like consciousness. It grows with the spirit, the word, the breath, because



time goes on and God continues his experience. It goes to fail and thrives on hidden coals, because form is simply appearance. It meets the waters of life without clashing, because all form is a variation on the one thing—an absolute monism. Though the personality is extinguished, the animated substances are recycled.

A passage of *The Maine Woods* can be read as a metaphor for the eternal quality of the spirit: “I discovered a fire still glowing beneath its ashes, where somebody had breakfasted, and a bed of twigs prepared for the following night. So I knew not only that they had just left, but that they designed to return” (231). The radiance of the fire, the coals, are evidence of return after extinction. Thoreau is terribly moved by ashes in *Walden*: “As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day” (119). Even ashes do not represent annihilation; they are only the historical evidence of transformation, like the vibhuti in Hinduism, or sacred ash, consecrated for rituals and often smeared on the forehead. Jeffers would later write in “Inscription for a Gravestone” of his desire to be cremated (which he eventually was), his remains to be a “light precipitate of ashes” left “to earth / For a love-token” (CP 2:125). Ashes are a significant symbol in both Thoreau and Jeffers. The latter writer nearly batters and bullies his readers into a confrontation with that thing called annihilation, the ultimate and only desire of God. Leo Marx called *Walden* an American fable, “a native blend of myth and reality” (244-45). There lives in Jeffers’s work the undeniable existence of the magical fable, but in the narratives discussed later—*Tamar*, *Roan Stallion* and *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*—the tales have heroines constantly threatened by the harsh masculinity of manicured barbarism.

In “The Loving Shepherdess,” an underappreciated narrative from *Dear Judas*, Jeffers describes the inescapable immortality of the spirit as a kind of terror, or terrible beauty, in which God pumps “into our arteries his terrible life” (“The Great Explosion,” CP 3:471). But back to “The Loving Shepherdess,” a poem filled with the prophetic visions of one of Jeffers’s recurring narrative characters, Onorio Vasquez, a kind of inverted Falstaff whose sober vision drowns humor in reverence, awe and worship. Jeffers says, “[The] earth was a grain of dust circling the fire, / And the fire itself but a spark, among innumerable sparks” (CP 2:97). Life sparks into being, never dies, and finds itself tortured into and out of flame eternally. Jeffers goes on, in one of his most powerful ecological statements. The following passage illustrates the poet’s sublime vision of the universe, of life and death, of cycles, connections and inescapable return.

The swarm of the points of light drifting  
No path down darkness merged its pin-prick eyelets into one misty glimmer, a mill-stone  
in shape,  
A coin in shape, a mere coin, a flipped-luck penny  
...who was the spendthrift sowed them all over the sky, indistinguishable  
innumerable  
Fish-scales of light?  
They drew together as they drifted away no path down the wild darkness; he saw  
The webs of their rays made them one tissue, their rays that were their very substance and  
power filled wholly  
The space they were in, so that each one touched all, there was no division between them,  
no emptiness, and each  
Changed substance with all the others and became the others.

It was dreadful to see.

Here Jeffers finds what he elsewhere calls “the vastness here, the horror, the mathematical unreason, the cold awful glory” of infinite or nearly-infinite space, the terror of no annihilation, of living on as dust in space for billions of years (“Pleasures,” CP 3:454). The unendurable reawakening. The extinction, and return. And the stars, there was,

No space between them, no cave of peace nor no night of quietness, no blind spot nor no  
deaf heart, but the tides

Of power and substance flood every cranny; no annihilation, no escape but change: it  
must endure itself  
Forever. It has the strength to endure itself. We others, being faintly made of the dust of a  
grain of dust  
Have been permitted to fool our patience asleep by inventing  
death. (CP 2:97)

Death is a human invention to refuse the painful knowledge of immortality, the real horror of eternal existence, the terrible and overwhelming nature of God's existence. Nothing awaits us but change, transformation and reunification. A belief in death requires a kind of teleological outlook; it is not hooped along the circle of extinction, but linear, having a beginning and end. Death is a disingenuous denial of time and eternity. Our concept of death is exactly what we mean by annihilation: a making of something into nothing, irredeemable, eradicate. Evolution reveals death to be an illusion. Form drops away, new forms appear. The matter gets repurposed by the industry of time. But this is not annihilation—it is a reconfiguration of the existing materials. And wherever the soul or spirit reside, perhaps as Schopenhauer's will, or in the pineal gland as certain Buddhists hold, it, too, is a part of material reality, however often we apply the term "abstraction" to consciousness. We struggle to see the mind as a physical thing, a projector running on hormones and brainwaves, and insist it is separate from the ecology of the universe. Jeffers makes one of his strongest arguments for intertwining ecology and eternity in the dramatic poem "Margrave":

For often I have heard the hard rocks I handled  
Groan, because lichen and time and water dissolve them,  
And they have to travel down the strange falling scale  
Of soil and plants and the flesh of beasts to become  
The bodies of men; they murmur at their fate  
In the hollows of windless nights, they'd rather be anything  
Than human flesh played on by pain and joy,  
They pray for annihilation sooner, but annihilation's  
Not in the book yet. (CP 2:161)

Annihilation is not part of the creation; it is "not in the book [of Life] yet," because it cannot be. It is at odds with immortality. Eternity hammers death into a ring. The overpowering deluge of

eternity is borne away by the undying spirit, on the flood of the heart, the efflorescence of God's presence in the cycles of destruction and renewal on an astronomical scale.

Jeffers, particularly in his narratives, evokes a powerful sense of landscape, of overwhelming largeness and the expansiveness of creation. Where Keats "broadens how we typically perceive the concept of interior space" (Gamelgaard 577) in his narrative poems, Jeffers broadens our awareness of exterior space by exposing the distal qualities inhering in time and size, from macroscopic to microscopic. Jeffers telescopes the reader through external space, rarely going inside to look for God, but reminding the reader that the invisible world contains the same startling beauty we find in ourselves and the world we come to know. Jeffers's interest in cellular metaphors was growing even as his *Last Poems* was published. They appear nascent in his earliest narrative, "Tamar": "I have made idols for God to enter / And tiny cells to hold your honey," taking the man to symbolize the atom in the body of God. Arthur Barclay, the tragic agonist of *The Women at Point Sur*, utters a furtherance of this idea:

"I am God: but I am secret": and he said  
"You are atoms of humanity and all humanity  
A cell of my body: listen. I have turned all my lightnings of consciousness  
On the one cell: I have turned to love men. I lift a handful from the ocean." (CP 1:347)

This metaphor, that the universe is a series of parallels on the model of structures that can be seen in both the very small and the very large, reaches its apex in "The Double Axe, pt. II: The Inhumanist," from *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. The main character, "the Inhumanist," an unnamed old man, contemplates God and attempts to approach him using the *via negativa*: he attempts to define God by what God is not. In the opening pages of that poem, Jeffers articulates, appropriately in a narrative that can provide the space and grandeur necessary to a contemplation of the sublime vision of incomprehensible sizes, both macro- and microscopic, the most exact iteration of his ecological vision:

“Does God exist?—No doubt of that,” the old man says. “The cells of my old camel of a  
 body,  
 Because they feel each other and are fitted together,—through nerves and blood feel each  
 other,—all the little animals  
 Are the one man; there is not an atom in all the universes  
 But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, light, heat, and the other  
 Flamings, the nerves in the night’s black flesh, flow them together; the stars, the winds and  
 the people: one energy,  
 One existence, one music, one organism, one life, one God: star-fire and rock-strength, the  
 sea’s cold flow  
 And man’s dark soul.” (CP 3:256-7)

There is no more complete eco-poetical statement in literature. Jeffers was exploring the metaphor  
 of the cell in the pieces collected for his *Last Poems*. Consider the exteriorized, microscopic space  
 carved out in these lines from two poems published in *Last Poems*, and used as a structural parallel  
 for cosmic organization:

I believe the first living cell  
 Had echoes of the future in it, and felt  
 Direction and the great animals, the deep green forest...  
 And whale’s-track sea; I believe this globed earth  
 Not all by chance and fortune brings forth her broods,  
 But feels and chooses. And the Galaxy, the firewheel  
 On which we are pinned, the whirlwind of stars in which our sun is one dust-grain, one  
 electron, this giant atom of the universe  
 Is not blind force, but fulfils its life and intends its courses. (“De Rerum Virtute,” CP 3:402)

And in the untitled poem, whose first line is “The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing,” in  
 which Jeffers considers the origins of life:

Time and the world changed,  
 The proteins were no longer created, the ammoniac atmosphere  
 And the great storms no more. This virus now  
 Must labor to maintain itself. It clung together  
 Into bundles of life, which we call cells,  
 With microscopic walls enclosing themselves.  
 Against the world. (CP 3:430-1).

The cellular walls bring to mind the walls of flame around Eden, set there to keep man from ever  
 entering the Garden again. It is from this constant parallelism of systems of organization Jeffers

constructs a monistic ecopoetic ethic—all that matters is the one thing, and that thing is the substance of all other things. All systems are organized on the principal of interdependency, regardless of size. The organization of all systems from top to bottom on the same model is the primary thrust of Jeffers’s ecological vision. He continues:

For after a time the cells of life  
Bound themselves into clans, a multitude of cells  
To make one being—as the molecules before  
Had made of many one cell. (CP 3:431)

And finally, from the same poem:

...all things have their own awareness,  
As the cells of a man have; they feel and feed and influence each other, each unto all,  
Like the cells of a man’s body making one being,  
They make one being, one consciousness, one life, one God. (CP 3:432)

The phrase “each unto all” is reminiscent of the famous line “not man apart” from “The Answer,” used by the Sierra Club in 1965, the second appearance of the poet’s work in the *Sierra Club Bulletin* (Karman 200). This is the most public and direct association of Jeffers’s poetry with the environmental movement. But the implications of inhumanism look rather clear—there is no separation, and to think that mankind is exempt from this series of relationships is the farthest we can get to escaping annihilation. Relationships are real, and the mind simply tricks itself into a kind of solipsism that constitutes an ego defense mechanism.

The aim of this dissertation is to consider Jeffers’s first three major narrative poems—*Tamar*, *Roan Stallion* and *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, as the best place to explore and be exposed as a reader to the poet’s place-oriented ecological vision. Though the lyrics provide excellent sketches of ideas given fuller treatment in the narrative poems, they do not provide the same expansive sense of space and place that, while providing the setting for the stories, are indeed

foregrounded ahead of the characters and human tropes. The characters are “puppets” and “idols,” as he writes in the definitive *ars poetica* of his narrative poems, in *Tamar*:

I have given you bodies, I have made you puppets,  
I have made idols for God to enter  
And tiny cells to hold your honey.  
...  
You that make the signs of sins and choose the lame for angels,  
Enter and possess. Being light you have chosen the dark lamps,  
A hawk the sluggish bodies: therefore God you chose  
Me; and therefore I have made you idols like these idols  
To enter and possess. (CP 1:32-3).

Jeffers revises, or at least writes a new version, of his narrative *ars poetica* in the 1927 volume *The Women At Point Sur*. He maintains the puppets metaphor for his characters. They are now, as ever, dialogic spaces for him to come to and address God indirectly, using a mask, or a kind of camera obscura wherein the poet can see a projection of, but not be blinded by, God (who is understood as interdependency, the crux of all relationships). To carry the metaphor further, Jeffers’s characters are this pinhole projector, and his narratives the intimate space within which he can see and address God. His poetry is really quite insoluble, divinity constantly conflated with ecology. It is deeply spiritual poetry, incorporating most religious figures in Western civilizations, most importantly the Prometheus of Ancient Greece (particularly in *At the Birth of an Age*). But Jeffers gives a final formulation of the function of his narrative characters in the idea of an *ecopoetic roman à clef*:

Here were new idols again to praise him;  
I made them alive; but when they looked up at the face before they had seen it they were  
drunken and fell down.  
I have seen and not fallen, I am stronger than the idols,  
But my tongue is stone how could I speak him? My blood in my veins is sea-water how  
could it catch fire?

...  
There is nothing but shines though it shine darkness; nothing but answers; they are caught  
in the net of their voices  
Though the voices be silence; they are woven in the nerve-warp.

One people, the stars and the people, one structure; the voids between stars, the voids  
     between atoms, and the vacancy  
 In the atom in the rings of the spinning demons,  
 Are full of that weaving; one emptiness, one presence: who had watched all his splendor  
 Had known but a little; all his night, but a little.  
 I made glass puppets to speak of him, they splintered in my hand and have cut me, they  
     are heavy with my blood.  
 ...  
     ... I sometime  
 Shall fashion images great enough to face him  
 A moment and speak while they die. These here have gone mad: but stammer the tragedy  
     you cracked vessels. ("The Women at Point Sur," CP 1:288-9)

This interjection of an ecological *ars poetica* is not so strange: It in itself, the common structures and relationships of big and small, in which scientific observation provides direct proof of the interrelated nature of all things. A realized ecological vision is his only way to speak of God. He incorporates it, but he knows God only through the beauty of nature, which is interdependency, or "organic wholeness" ("The Answer," CP 2:536). This is a bit of rhetoric, because, as we see in the passage above, even the spaces between things, the emptinesses, are a part of the ecology of the universe. This enlarges the ecopoetic vision to include nonliving as well as quantum nature. And we see that his characters have ultimately failed as dialogic instruments for coming to know God, but simply become sacrifices to the beauty of nature. Jeffers discards them—not as unnecessary, but *unworthy* mediators between the poet and his creator, between divine creation and the poet that apes it. It is wholeness that matters, which Hart tells us "is etymologically connected to health—the Indo-European root *kailo-*, from which derive *whole*, *wholesome*, *health*, *heal*, *holy*, and *hallow*. So Jeffers's answer is associated with health and wholeness, and integrity implies being able to stay in *touch* with these values" (93). It is this integrity that Jeffers equates with "divine beauty" in "The Answer," a recurring trope in his poetry.

In Jeffers's narratives, his characters inhabit a space wherein the author can stabilize and direct his wild, unruly spirit. He would deliver his most complete ecological expressions of



divinity in those poems. His characters, according to Zaller, serve to depict humanity, too: “When tragedy befalls them...they respond with stoic endurance, acknowledging no appeal beyond themselves whether for judgment or surcease” (*Uses*, 35). After the poem is written one imagines Jeffers sitting with his dead puppets, seeing them slain before the beauty of God, contemplating what imaginary figure’s sacrifice would come next, because they were only constructed to live, as in “The Women at Point Sur,” for “A moment and speak while they die” (CP 1:299). This constant cycle of sacrifice for small glimpses of God’s integral nature is the dynamo that kept Jeffers writing narratives, and is the central pivot of his ecological vision. That is why he has been branded a repetitious poet. That is why he has been said to have not grown artistically over his career (though Judith Anderson won a Tony award for best actress for her performance in 1948 in Jeffers’s version of the *Medea* ). His ecological vision is mediated by characters acting their parts out through a plot: glass puppets, like humans, like prophets themselves, made to live a little while and speak the beauty “while they die.” It is not difficult to see the connection between Jeffers’s many sacrificial narratives and his belief that “Recurrence, the tidal force that flowed through all phenomena, was the sole meaning of events, weaving humanity into the huge pattern that rocked the oceans and lit the heavens” (Zaller, *Uses*, 40).

Tim Hunt edited and published Jeffers’s five-volume *Collected Poetry* for Stanford University Press across the turn of this last century. In his article “Jeffers’s ‘Roan Stallion’ and the Narrative of Nature,” Hunt explores the narrative poem and provides some insight into the devotional nature of Jeffers’s characters. We have the word from the horse’s mouth, in two instances, originally posited in 1924’s *Tamar* (which included *Roan Stallion*) and later revised in *The Women At Point Sur* (1927), on what he meant. But the critics have added a good deal. For instance, take Hunt’s analysis of allegory and Jeffers’s characters:

The allegorical is a capacity the narrator uses to begin to bring nature's terms into consciousness... The allegory, that is, exists to be outstripped, and it must be if the poem is to imitate nature's process and enable narrator/poet/reader to approach God's simultaneity of being and knowing. This means that the poet must refuse the temptation to use the poem to enact meanings in the usual sense and instead use it to enact himself through the figures he creates. (77)

Hunt states what Jeffers could not: He is making poetic meaning in an ecocentric, eco-poetic sense. Jeffers cannot create a space that is *not* integrated into everything else. Nature, and thus God, is all in all. Consider again these lines from "The Double Axe pt. II: The Inhumanist:" "there is not an atom in all the universes / But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, light, heat, and the other / Flamings, the nerves in the night's black flesh, flow them together" (CP 3:256-7). This would necessitate the discovery or creation of a private space, thus contradicting God's omnipresence, annihilating Jeffers's pantheistic philosophy. He knows that God is all there is to report on, and God is all there is to hear his words—through the instruments of human sense. Jeffers believed, like Jung, that humans were sources of experience for God. In an untitled piece from 1962's *Last Poems*, the poet writes,

The human race is one of God's sense-organs,  
Immoderately alerted to feel good and evil  
And pain and pleasure. It is a nerve-ending,  
Like eye, ear, taste-buds...  
... it is a sensory organ of God's.  
As Titan-mooded Lear or Prometheus reveal to their audience  
Extremes of pain and passion they will never find  
In their own lives but through the poems as sense-organs  
They feel and know them: so the exultations and agonies of beasts and men  
Are sense-organs of God: and on other globes  
Throughout the universe much greater nerve-endings  
Enrich the consciousness of the one being  
Who is all that exists. This is man's mission:  
To find and feel. ("The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing," CP 3:693)

It is not through his characters that Jeffers necessarily “finds and feels”; that is what God does by way of the creation. Jeffers’s characters function as the poet himself said: Idols, sacrifices, to be broken and streaked with the poet’s blood, whose sole purpose is to stand before the beauty of nature and perform ritualistic functions. This is how Jeffers viewed his vocation as a poet. And his narrative poems are vast, terrifying and tortured explorations of a God that is neither benign nor malignant, but integrated and non-privileging, like the universe itself: “The vastness here, the horror, the mathematical unreason.” The only reasonable outcome to death is not annihilation but extinction, whose function is to make room for the new, for creation to continue, for systems to stay in balance. The tragic apparatus of Jeffers’s narratives allows for the exaltation of place above not only the characters in the story but of Jeffers’s personality, boldly present in his lyric poems. Hunt goes on to say that “If [the narratives] are the main impediment to establishing Jeffers as one of the major poets of his generation, they are, at the same time, the best means to make that case” (64). This paradoxical quality of Jeffers’s narratives makes those poems worth investigating as the most complete expressions of his philosophy and poetics. Hunt continues,

Narrative was for Jeffers...a way to probe the limits of our ability to experience nature’s reality and our capacity to become conscious of it. It was a strategy for using the figures of the poem to imitate and enter nature’s process and thereby draw both poet and reader into moments that might temporarily approximate nature’s simultaneity of being and knowing. As such, his narratives are not, as most narratives are, stories about characters but rather ‘stories’ about nature. (67)

For the sake of this dissertation I will read Jeffers’s first three narrative poems for expressions of his ecological vision. Place is of particular importance in the long poems. As Hunt asserts, characters serve a function; their stories are not the story Jeffers is really telling. By using fictional

characters, Jeffers highlights the tragic quality of the human figure by putting it in a place where nature is so grand that a sublime vision of interdependence is enacted and revealed to be essential to human existence. From there the reader gets to witness, in a safe Apollonian sense, the revelation of God's overwhelming power and presence. Because of this orientation of dialogic characters to the sublime, Jeffers's narratives become the canvas of his ecological vision, which is to equate nature's cycles with God's eternal being and suffering. This is the essence of his eco-poetics, that the universe is monistic; that one thing make all things, creating a web of relationships that is unbreakable and whose extensions of life are mixed and in flux like the waters of a river.

## Chapter Two

### Reality, Nature, and God

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Central to Jeffers's ecological vision is his positive valuation of the real. Reality, nature, and God are interchangeable terms in the poet's mind. When he uses one of those words it is expected of a reader familiar with Jeffers's epistemic vocabulary to know that the other two are implied. They are synonyms. They function as ways of talking about the same general principle in different contexts. He is not conflating terms but reassembling the fractured monism of rationalized multiplicity. That is to say, because the world seems to be made of different things, we have come to talk about master concepts—like God, nature, reality, and so on—as essentially different things with their own governing rules. In Western rationalistic terms, God is an entity from which all things emanate, nature is his creation, and reality is the subjective (beginning with Plato and reinscribed by Kant) experience of truth which we know through our senses (in Locke) and can think about. William Everson describes Jeffers's understanding of God “not as Jehovah but as Nature, but he saw that, Nature or Jehovah, the outcome is the same. He saw that only a humanity which contemplates unremittingly the divine Otherness can be whole, can maintain wholeness; that a humanity turned from contemplation inevitably becomes obsessed with itself” (*Fragments*, 60). By thinking, we know ourselves to be a part of that reality, as formulated by Descartes. That we theorize the mind and body as separate is because of Descartes. Eliding a great deal of philosophical debate on the way to discussing our poet, I draw attention to Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed that science would put mind and body back together, and thus make mankind capable of arriving at a more accurate formulation of reality. “With perfect tranquility

the question of how our conception of the world could differ so sharply from the actual world as it is manifest to us,” he writes in *Human, All Too Human*, “Will be relegated to the physiological sciences and to the history of the evolution of ideas and organisms” (Loc 246-52). According to Max Hallman, Nietzsche located the source of this duality in Christianity: “Not only are human beings radically divorced from the natural world, but one aspect of human existence, the body or flesh, is radically divorced from another aspect of human existence, the soul or spirit” (104). Metaphysics, as Nietzsche made clear again and again in his work, was dead: science now had all the power to explain the nature of reality. Science, an intense scrutiny of observation, would prove by committee what the non-intellectual person always knew: common sense is true. Jeffers is the most common sense poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His poetry seems crude, almost not like poetry at all in its insistence on the obvious, non-symbolic, actuality of things. Anybody can understand what he is saying because he relies on the self-evident definition of reality. He has a great deal in common with the ethos of Wordsworth, who believed that the language of the common man was the true language of poetry. Jeffers believed that the feelings and thoughts of the common person provided a truer definition of reality than any philosopher could muster.

Jeffers admired the common, working man. In the clownish vignette of “The Wind-Struck Music,” a lyric from *Such Counsels You Gave to Me*, a man named Tom Birnam, an old cattle rancher who does not have “an ounce of poetry in all [his] body,” falls from his horse. Tom reflects on his life, “thinking o’ my four sons... / And why the devil I keep working” while his companion, Ed Stiles, laughs with relief that the rancher is all right—not just in body, apparently, but in mind, too. Jeffers writes, admiringly, that

This old man died last winter, having lived eighty-one years under open sky  
Concerned with cattle, horses and hunting, no thought nor emotion that all his ancestors  
since the ice age  
Could not have comprehended. I call that a good life; narrow, but vastly better than most

Men's lives, and beyond comparison more beautiful; the wind-struck music man's bones were moulded to be the harp for. (CP 2:520-21).

This “wind-struck music” is the reality of nature, meant to sing through our lives should they be lived well. Whether or not a life is good seems to be, to Jeffers, one that is in accord with man's nature—that is, in no way that would be alien to men under any conditions. The poem is meant to help us understand human purpose, and human nature, by explaining that a good life should not produce thoughts beyond those necessary for simple survival. Birnam's mind is occupied by work, his family, and the reality of nature, whose sunrises Ed Stiles swears the man loves. His is an ice-age, a Pleistocene, mind. It is what Nietzsche would call primordial. Birnam is practical, common, rational. As far as that specific character is concerned, Jeffers defies charges of misanthropy. Birnam is an uncommon character for Jeffers to write about, or admire. His life is not tragic, but exemplary because it is unpretentious. There is a heavy strain of anti-intellectualism in Jeffers's poems. Being well-educated, Jeffers offers an interesting perspective on knowledge, that it may in fact be inimical to integrity. Beauty is witnessed, not understood. It is felt, not thought. It is irrational, but it is real.

Nietzsche writes, “The poet, the artist, ascribes to his sentimental and emotional states causes which are not the true ones. To that extent he is a reminder of early mankind and can aid us in its comprehension” (Loc 315-16). In other words the poet writes irrationally; what he feels he does not understand. This makes sense historically, as Nietzsche would have been thinking primarily of the Romantic artist who believed his emotional state came from an apprehension of truth, rather than an apprehension of reality, in fact that his emotional state was the only indicator of truth. Truth is that which confirms what we believe; what strikes us as true is what we think is true already. Nature, or reality, exists regardless of what we believe. Jeffers, writing after Darwin, attributes, I believe, his poetic impetus to the apprehension of reality as a thinking animal. Poetry,

for Jeffers, is a kind of reportage of nature. The best poetic language creates, but does not necessarily communicate, feelings in the reader. There is no way to tell whether what the writer felt when writing is what the reader feels when reading. Percy Shelley thought that was the nature of poetry, a facsimile of emotion. Shelley, in "A Defence of Poetry," says

Language, color, form, and religious and civil habits of action, are all the instruments and materials of poetry; they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonym of the cause. But poetry in a more restricted sense expresses those arrangements of language, and especially metrical language, which are created by that imperial faculty, whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man. (1)

This "invisible nature" is what Nietzsche believed to be the actual cause of poetry. Human nature created the poem, not individual personality. Like superstitious, primordial man, the poet is a priest in that he misinterprets the natural as an indicator of the supernatural. False thinking, reasoning itself, is the source of art. Rationalizing the irrational is the great, endless fountain from which we drink religion, poetry, and philosophy. Shelley locates poetry in language; Nietzsche locates it in ignorance, which is then communicated with language. Nietzsche writes, "[Man] really supposed that in language he possessed a knowledge of the cosmos. The language builder was not so modest as to believe that he was only giving names to things" (Loc 258-59). That is to say, language is not a tool used primarily to construct information, but to convey it. This is perhaps what one might call the method of all fine art, the misuse of a tool. The poet, or priest in Nietzsche, synonymous with superstitious, primordial man, writes only about his misapprehensions of nature and reality, and thus, God. But the "imperial faculty" of man produces poetry by relying on the contingencies of existence and his interpretations of reality, not reality itself, says Shelley. Jeffers is a poet who shows that the common man is the actual poet of reality. Birnam, not Jeffers, reminds



us of early mankind, but Jeffers tells his story. Jeffers is a poet who has essentially gotten outside of the constraints of all preceding poetics, the poetics that Nietzsche criticizes for having its ultimate cause in the folly of misprision. He is the anti-poet, and for a poet, Jeffers possesses an unparalleled understanding of science. Because of that, he is not a reminder of early mankind, but a spoiler of that poetry Nietzsche believes results from the confused ecstasy of the mystic, the fool who guesses at causation without the aid of reason.

The simple, unprepossessing language of Jeffers's lyrics demonstrates his disdain for obfuscation; his poetry is about clarity and understanding, not conviction in ignorance, not a cloud of unknowing. In this sense his poetry is not designed to communicate the irrational, but to reveal the obvious. He wishes to live forever "Spying the wild loveliness" (CP 2:484). The language of his poetry is beautiful, but that is not what is beautiful about his poetry. It points to God, reality, and nature, the actual beauty that is in the world, not in the subjective interpretation of emotion. His poetry is shockingly inhuman because it achieves, at least to some degree, the objectivity of the scientist looking on nature. "Mankind loves to put by the questions of its origin and beginning," writes Nietzsche: "Must one not be almost inhuman in order to follow the opposite course?" (Loc 164-65). This is precisely what makes Jeffers unique as a Modern poet: He fanatically pursues an accurate understanding of human origins, and so pursues cosmology like the ancient tragedians. Inhumanism is a kind of rationalism, a philosophy concerned with cosmology—it engages with the ultimate philosophical problem: the irrationality of existence. And in this sense Jeffers has more in common with Nietzsche as a philosopher than Shelley as a poet. Karl Popper says that the ultimate goal of philosophy is to engage with questions of origination: "Philosophy must return to cosmology and to a simple theory of knowledge. There is at least one philosophical problem in which all thinking men are interested: the problem of

understanding the world in which we live; and thus ourselves (who are a part of that world) and our knowledge of it. All science is cosmology” (25). Popper sees philosophy and science as having the same goal. Robert Zaller, in *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*, says of Jeffers’s cosmology that it

Took the conspectus of a post-Darwinian cosmos both as the epistemological starting-point of his verse and its principal challenge. That cosmos, as we have seen, was one in which all phenomena, mechanical and biological, were inscribed within a praxis of material necessity that seemed to render all questions of purpose and intention otiose, and left human morality ungrounded. (148)

With Popper’s words in mind, Zaller’s determination of Jeffers’s cosmological vision as ultimately materialistic, and Nietzsche’s discussion of the poet or artist as an irrational, primordial priest of the self, I quote from Jeffers’s poem “Birth-Dues” below as further proof that Jeffers is redefining the poet’s traditional role as a mystic:

The world's God is treacherous and full of  
unreason; a torturer, but also  
The only foundation and the only fountain.  
Who fights him eats his own flesh and perishes  
of hunger; who hides in the grave  
To escape him is dead; who enters the Indian  
Recession to escape him is dead; who falls in  
love with the God is washed clean  
Of death desired and of death dreaded. (CP 1:371)

Jeffers’s poetry is designed to expose mankind to the abyss of meaninglessness; God becomes the all-devouring reality of nature. But it is not at all absurd: the poetry is sincere and heroically ambitious. Jeffers is not communicating irrationally or emotionally, but rationally communicating the irrationality of God and existence. He tries to dethrone man by urging him to throw off the shackles of narcissism, investing his poetry with the absolute reality of an inhuman God, derived

from a rational, scientific understanding of mankind as a product of environment and evolution. Jeffers's knowledge of science gives him a truer understanding of human nature than any poet before, and that is what makes him, in the words of Nietzsche, "inhuman."

According to E.O. Wilson, science and art are similar in that they provide "analogies that map the gateways to unexplored terrain" (67). Jeffers utilizes science to inform his art, creating a powerful, analogic poetics that takes nature to be the absolute reality of God. His poetry combines Enlightenment rationalism and the Romanticism that was a response to it. If to be modern is to embody this tension, then Jeffers is a Modernist poet par excellence. This tension forced him to turn outward, where both inherited traditions turned inward: The Enlightenment to the faculty of reason, and Romanticism to the emotions. Shelley saw the external world as an impediment to poetry, which was a play between language and the imagination, which he called the "imperial faculty." The imagination

springs from the nature itself of language, which is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations, than color, form, or motion, and is more plastic and obedient to the control of that faculty of which it is the creation. For language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination, and has relation to thoughts alone; but all other materials, instruments, and conditions of art have relations among each other, which limit and interpose between conception and expression.

The imagination primarily springs not from "the nature itself of language," but human nature, which is rooted in the physical self. Language and the imagination live in the brain, and are made possible by it. The brain constructs reality by processing sensory perceptions. All imaginative thinking relies on the environment within which man has taken his knowledge of reality.

Language, as Nietzsche said, is a tool for naming things, not in itself a possession of “a knowledge of the cosmos” (Loc 258-59). That knowledge comes from the irrationality of experience, which we then, using a rational system precipitated by generative grammar, name. Wilson says, “Since the mind recreates reality from the abstractions of sense impressions, it can equally well simulate reality by recall and fantasy” (75). The imagination, rather than being the product of language, is itself only a simulation of the actual world, encountered and known through the body.

Concerning great poetry, Jeffers writes, “It is the distinction of all the higher sort of poetry that it deals in the manner of reality with real things; not with abstract qualities; but not either with fantasies nor pretences [sic], nor with things actual indeed, but so temporary and exceptional that they are not to be counted among realities” (CP 4:381). Shelley’s poetry is essentially metaphysical in that it is the product of the imagination, the dream of reality; it is concerned with “abstract qualities.” Nietzsche, who called metaphysics “claptrap,” connects Romantic poetics, again, to the primordial ignorance of ancient man: “In the dream, mankind, in epochs of crude primitive civilization, thought they were introduced to a second, substantial world: here we have the source of all metaphysic” (Loc 203-04). For Jeffers, there is only one world, one nature, one reality, and one God. This monism obviates such Romantic discussions as the interplay between the imagination and language. It seems to make pointless both rational argumentation and irrational reaction. In that sense Jeffers is an anti-intellectual. His poetry is not about dialectic: it is about reality. “As presenting the universal beauty,” writes Jeffers, “poetry is an incitement to life” (CP 4:379). Poetry does not exist “among unrealities.” Rather, “It is the distinction of all the higher sort of poetry that it deals in the manner of reality with real things” (CP 4:380). Thus the imagination, as a simulation of reality, cannot produce great poetry. By association, language cannot produce great poetry, either. This is why a linguistic fetishist like Mallarme, though

immeasurably influential, essential to Symbolism, and therefore genetically a forebear of Modernism, will not be remembered as a great poet, but a babbling priest trapped in a hall of mirrors. Robert Zaller says, “Jeffers’ project was nothing less than to renovate the poetic idiom of his time, which, under the influence of the Symbolists and the Imagists, had become in his view so attenuated that it was no longer capable of performing its critical and distinctive function, the expression of natural reality” (*American Sublime* 89). In a 1924 letter to his friend George Sterling, Jeffers writes, “What is good in the ‘modern movement in poetry,’ as in most earlier ‘modern movements,’ is a return to reality I think” (CP 1:465). Jeffers seems to contradict Zaller here.

John Elder compares T.S. Eliot and Jeffers as poets who wrote about, on the one hand, urban realism, and on the other, wilderness, both of which point to a desire for renewal in a decaying world. Elder writes,

T.S. Eliot is the poet who speaks most directly to Jeffers’s disillusionment with his own humanity...[They] are...driven to reject urban, technological culture. But even in their revulsion and anger, they become involved in the inevitable paradoxes of cultural despair. As human beings and as poets, they have nowhere to stand that is not encompassed by the humanity and the culture which they would reject. (13-14).

There is nothing at all paradoxical about critique. Elder believes that it is paradoxical, in fact that it undermines the poetry of both Eliot and Jeffers, that they critique a system within which they would have no voice to critique, without the culture they are critiquing. This is tautological, and preempts critical theory at all levels. Take criticism of psychoanalysis: how can any critique of it not be a paradox if it relies on the existence of psychoanalysis as a discipline of knowledge in order to criticize it? What Elder seems to be doing here is criticizing cultural criticism itself. Holding to the belief that no practitioner can critique their own practice, their own culture, because

it is paradoxical and, thus, disingenuous, amounts to nothing more than the criticism of criticism. This is a dangerous line of reasoning, but perfectly acceptable if one is to consider, like I believe Elder does, rationality to be outside the purview of poetic statement. Both Eliot and Jeffers are making philosophical statements; this requires an engagement, by the poet, with philosophy on the grounds that propositions can be refuted. The two poets are not, as Elder thinks, dismissing urbanity outright. They, perhaps with greater authority than the outsider, possessing the imaginative element of human discourse, and thus prophecy in a sense, are more equipped and better suited, perhaps are the only ones suited, to criticize the death of the imaginative life of civilization. If cultural despair is a paradox, and not simply a state of mind, then something at the root of their beliefs must be hypocritical. This makes a paradox of life itself—how can the organic exist within the milieu of the inorganic? Elder's words read as little more than a frustrating salvo for humanism in the face of man's diminishing importance. Besides, a critical attitude is not a sign of despair, but hope.

As Jeffers said, a poet must speak of real things, else who would hear him? His narratives have been criticized for their unimaginative characters, and the settings are drawn from real places, real ranches and people, near Carmel. His language is descriptive—at times, particularly in his lyrics, bluntly, crudely actual—rather than abstract, or symbolic. His imagination is a kind of playroom where he makes familiar scenes from the surrounding landscape. Richard Hughey says, of the cycle of poems known as *Descent to the Dead*, written in England and Ireland, that “Jeffers took landscape to a new level. No longer was landscape a background setting for a story or an actor in a narrative. Landscape *was* the story; it was the matrix into which Jeffers placed the dead kings and warriors with whom he wished to commune in what was for him possibly the most practical application of his philosophy of inhumanism in his poetry” (2). While landscape is

always important to Jeffers, the hallmark of his narrative poems is that they are unmistakably Californian, wild, natural, and, according to Jeffers's interpretation of the rocky Carmel coast as reminiscently Grecian, ancient in drama and sparse, somewhat eldritch, human settlements. The poems are concrete. One gets the sense, in many of his lyric poems, of handling big stones and tumbling in the power of great waters. His style is edged, his subject matter hard and heavy, and his philosophical judgments biting. No other American poet gets into the actual body of his readers as much as Jeffers. He takes possession of our senses. And in his most ecstatic, sublime, and beautiful verse, the reader apprehends a kind of Pleistocene numen.

Elder, in that same essay on Jeffers in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, puts forward a rough definition of ecopoetry as representing the imaginative, or visionary, space between human beings and the natural world. Elder believes this kind of poetry allows us to go beyond social constructions of nature to a prehistoric, primeval nature, if we can get past our great, schismatic error in thinking of nature as the "other." He says,

Poetry is in ecological terms the *edge* between mankind and nonhuman nature, providing an access for culture into a world beyond its preconceptions. A similar sense of poetry's mediating role informs Robinson Jeffers's attempt at a vision of "inhumanism." Jeffers's hope was to locate his poems beyond the narrow circle of human understanding, to speak past his own humanity. (210)

This description of Jeffers is reminiscent of Nietzsche's Übermensch, the man who overcomes his own spiritual weakness to find liberation and strength in undeniable human nature, and a revolutionary freedom from morality. I discuss this concept in a later chapter, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, where the hero, Orestes, achieves self-overcoming by violating ancient Greek moral codes. But where Elder thinks Jeffers's poetry has practical implications for conservation and

environmentalist politics, the poet is better described by words he used himself in one of his last poems. “The human people are only symbolic interpreters—So let them live or die” (CP 3:484). We are unnecessary, we do not fit into a plan, and, ultimately, all we do is interpret nature. Conservation is no less noble because inhumanism makes it seem frivolous.

This has a bearing on Jeffers’s conception of reality. We interpret the world by putting reality into language. In other words, reality is a language, all things speak of their place in the universe. What we do is interpret reality, put it into our language, thus come to know it. But interpretations are imprecise, especially across such a distance as those two languages make clear. These interpretations have led to an abuse of nature, among other things. Man is at fault for this: he often does not understand the language of the natural world. And this language is best interpreted by the tools of science, best understood by rational thinking, but most felt and most joined to by irrational feelings. Nietzsche writes that science

recognizes no considerations of ultimate goals or ends any more than nature does; but as the latter duly matures things of the highest fitness for certain ends without any intention of doing it, so will true science, doing with ideas what nature does with matter, promote the purposes and the welfare of humanity, (as occasion may afford, and in many ways) and attain fitness [to ends]—but likewise without having intended it. (Loc 668-71)

Elder argues that Jeffers “called for a protective separation between man and nature, rather than striving like Wordsworth for a balance” (9-10). This is incorrect. He goes on to say that “Jeffers’s hope...rests in a world *devoid* of men, and in that way protected from them” (10). Jeffers wrote in “Calm and Full the Ocean,” in talking of tragedy, that our “griefs and rages, are not what they seem to man, not great and shattering, but really // Too small to produce any disturbance” (3:124). Man’s impotence was a “sanity,” and a “mercy,” indicating the absolute and inexhaustible beauty



of nature, the indifference of God to the puny frivolity of civilization's progress, while at the same time reducing man's importance to that of an insect, incapable of permanently changing anything. For if all is in flux in that Heraclitean fire, nothing can be changed "permanently." Elder misreads Jeffers as a voice for conservation, when in fact Jeffers did not believe anything could be conserved—time would change all things through extinction into new things, in the longest journey of time, geologic time—for all was constantly renegotiating its place in the biosphere. In this way Jeffers is more in agreement with pre-Socratic philosophers and Nietzschean existentialism than 20<sup>th</sup> century environmental activists. "It is true," Jeffers continues, "that the murdered / Cities leave marks in the earth for a certain time, like fossil rain-prints in shale, equally beautiful."

By historicizing civilization, by looking into the future and seeing our geologic footprint, Jeffers objectifies human values, reducing them to cosmic insignificance. In time, deep time, we would find our place in the great march of extinction as another bygone animal, curious tool-makers who manipulated the raw materials of the earth with an exaggerated yet still beaver-like capacity, or chimpanzees prodding termite mounds with sticks. Airplanes "are as natural as horse-flies," Jeffers says, and so we can know, objectively, they, too, will go the way of those little, helpless bugs we rarely stop to consider. The great buildings and artworks and machines of man are destined for the deep, dark, forgetful strata of the earth whence they were drawn and tooled into a useful strangeness. The culture-producing animal is what Jeffers meant when he said "symbolic interpreters"—language, society, laws, morals: all are misinterpretations of human nature and nature at large of which we are a part. So as far as Jeffers being a poet that can legitimately be used as a conservation writer for political, poetic, or critical aims, it is best to now consider these words from his poem "End of the World:"

When I was young in school in Switzerland, about the time of the Boer War,  
We used to take it for known that the human race would last the earth out, not dying till the  
planet died...  
But now I don't think so. They'll die faceless in flocks,  
And the earth flourish long after mankind is out. (CP 4:441).

The inhumanist does not love civilization—he loves and values nature, the entirety of creation as an integrated whole, reality, for itself and for its realness—he is a pantheist, not an ecologist—all the way out to the far, far stars, and to the farther darkness beyond them. It takes a humanist to want to conserve life, to hold fiercely to environmental principles, to recycle and buy electric cars. Science tells us we might destroy ourselves if we do not take better care of the earth. Very well, it will “flourish long after mankind is out,” into a time so far away we are free to imagine a dying sun, and a familiar planet on the altar of that original god, his light life-giving, in a hazy heat his heart sending scrolls of plasma across the simmering waters of earth, turning them into moments of smoke that hang in sadness, if sadness still lives, over the blackened valleys and ridges of the original mother. And the final consolation? Beauty is unquenchable. Reality, nature, and God are indestructible; as if massive, exploding stars could threaten this—they themselves being real, natural, beautiful—not to mention the smallness of our shouts and slings. An acceptance and embracing of reality provides the cosmic “sanity,” the “mercy,” the foil to man’s arrogance and our many “scuttled futilities” (“Hellenistics,” CP 2:528).

Glen A. Love, in *Practical Ecocriticism*, emphasizes the importance of realism in the study of literature. This realism cannot forego the reality that human beings have nature that functions within a range of possibilities. “The unfashionable study of literary realism is,” he writes, “ripe for reconsideration, at a time when reality is increasingly demonstrating that not paying it critical attention does not make it go away” (35). Writing “in the shadow of September 11, 2001,” he predicts that, in the international struggle between secular and traditional societies, “The end of

American innocence may this time be accompanied by a more radical sense of realism regarding the potentialities within our human heritage for more totalizing ‘ends.’ If there were any doubt about its destructive potentialities, ‘human nature’ shoulders its way to the head of the line of our most serious concerns” (164). This is true as we see the clash between the East and the West in an impasse, whether the conflict is about religion or culture, or if the two can even be separated in thought or practice once a society secularizes. Complete secularization is not a realistic possibility considering the adaptive advantages—that is to say the permanent, unchangeable reality—of religion as the reigning indicator of group identity.

As some critics, like Joseph Carroll in his pioneering works on literary Darwinism, suggest, fashions in literary criticism perish once they come under scrutiny by the larger community, after those ideas have reached their greatest point of saturation. Where God was once the common denominator of reality and existence, it is now, according to critical theory, language. It will be the reality of human nature that undergirds the explanation of 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitical conflicts—culture is inextricably tied to environments. A new interest in realism in literary studies is more productive for approaching and possibly solving actual real-world problems. Carroll, in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, uses typical ecocritical language when he says that “Human beings living in a real physical world and interacting both with their physical environment and with other human beings form the central topic of all literary representation” (108). Although, I do not agree with him that “literature is intrinsically no less susceptible to scientific understanding than life itself” (51). I think the mind, like Lorenz suggests, is a new *kind* of life, formed from increasing biological complexity, just as biological organisms formed from an increase in chemical or material complexity. Realism is allied with science, and literary realism

will find itself ever more dependent on science to help explain it as we come to understand literature in the light of the revelations of evolutionary psychology.

Where postmodernism made a gross confusion of knowledge through a not-so-subtle revival of Sophistic thinking, its prophets taking large paychecks and enjoying great celebrity (for instance, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, among others) by arguing that language and history create impenetrable barriers to knowledge, Darwinian literary studies promises to steer literary interpretation back to the reality within which the texts exist. Postmodern arguments are subverted by their own logic, that rational discourse cannot exist, yet pretend to make arguments that somehow do not depend on rational thinking. As philosopher John Searle writes, “You cannot coherently deny realism and engage in ordinary linguistic practices, because realism is a condition of the normal intelligibility of those practices” (81). If a return to reality is the goal of the next generation of great artists, let it be known, then, that postmodernism’s dictates on the powers of language have no real power over the creation instinct.

For Karl Popper, “Denying realism amounts to megalomania (the most widespread occupational disease of the professional philosopher)” (223). Science provides us with the greatest means of understanding reality from a rational point of view. But reality is essentially just as well understood as the point of contact between things and forces: the irrational nature of experience itself. After all, the irrationality of experience presupposes and is made possible by the existence of a real world in which actions can be taken, and where cause and effect can function. Popper says, “Almost all, if not all, physical, chemical, or biological theories imply realism, in the sense that if they are true, realism must also be true” (222). Realism, according to Searle, “Is the foundational principle of the Western Rationalistic Tradition. The idea is that though we have mental and linguistic representations of the world in the form of beliefs, experiences, statements,

and theories, there is a world ‘out there’ that is totally independent of these representations” (60). Postmodernism is a kind of idealism; this is one explanation for why Jeffers cannot find purchase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century academy outside of nascent ecocritical theories of literature posited by critics of nature writing, which take into account, more than anything, the influence that the environment has on the creation, transmission, and reception of literary texts. His poetry identifies the real world as the only world worth considering, and that the internal world, while made of very real brain processes, was too often a narcissistic distortion of the nature it tried to understand. Joseph Carroll writes, in *Evolution and Literary Theory*,

The relation between the organism and its environment is a matrix concept that provides an alternative to the matrix concepts available in other critical, philosophical, and ideological schools, such as phenomenology, Marxism, Freudianism, deconstruction, and New Historicism. As a matrix concept, that relationship is the necessary presupposition for the principles of personal psychology, sexual and family relations, social organization, cognition, and linguistic representation. (2)

Realism finds its greatest opponent in the idealism of contemporary critical theory in literature. Even though Marxism is essentially materialistic, it is a kind of idealism in that it denies the existence of reality outside of the social construction of reality. At the heart of Marxism is the idealistic teleology of an exactly just society. This makes it a fine companion to deconstruction, both of which posit teleological aims for reshaping society, and thus, conceptions of reality—for idealists, as a matter of course, it would reshape reality itself. Searle provides the best attack on the linguistic hang-ups of postmodern literary criticism:

For the most part the world exists independently of language and one of the functions of language is to represent how things are in the world. One crucial point at which reality and

language make contact is marked by the notion of truth. In general, statements are true to the extent that they accurately represent some feature of reality that exists independently of the statement. (65)

Even for Nietzsche, idealism was too far from reality—it denied the existence of the outside world. He believed that our knowledge of nature was not at all idealized, however irrational: “Even the most rational man needs nature again, from time to time, that is, his illogical fundamental relation (Grundstellung) to all things” (Loc 548-49). But like Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, scientific explanations of the real world might be too great a light to look upon for the Romantic idealist: “Science! Curse thee, thou vain toy; and cursed be all the things that cast man’s eyes aloft to that heaven, whose live vividness but scorches him, as these old eyes are even now scorched with thy light, O sun!” (443). This brightness of the sun is the symbolic inversion of the abyss that many idealists cannot look into. That is why postmodernism is essentially inimical to a realistic poetics because it focuses on linguistic deconstruction rather than the communicative powers of the imagination coupled with the descriptive powers of language.

“The whole view of the poet,” writes Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, “is nothing but that projected image which healing nature holds before us after a glance into the abyss” (54). This is why Ahab is not a poet: He does not look into an abyss, but into the eyes of nemesis embodied—he has an incredibly clear purpose, and his journey is of the greatest meaning. But, as Leo Marx argues in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America*, in *Moby-Dick*, “Melville’s theme, which he had introduced at the very beginning of the book—shortly after Ishmael’s query, ‘are the green fields gone?’—is that the romantic attitude toward external nature is finally narcissistic” (290-91). Looking into the abyss of meaninglessness revealed by reasoning toward a fuller understanding of nature—and, by logical extension, human nature—forced the

postmodernists to construct a monster incapable of standing up to the abyss: not art, as Nietzsche would have preferred, but a philosophy—deconstruction. Unfortunately, they did not look deeply enough into that abyss, wherein it is revealed that human nature, not language as a separate phenomenon, creates a multitude of considerations through a misapprehension of reality. Misunderstanding reality does not change it, but it does obscure it. Thus language does not construct our sense of reality: it communicates it obliquely. These communications are always measured against the phenomenal world we know through irrational experience. As Joseph Carroll notes, “Arguments that deny the reality of the world outside of language or that suspend the principle of contradiction do not go beyond common sense; they merely violate common sense” (102). This comparison should not mislead us into thinking that reality is constructed by language, but that language is a tool—a primitive tool, at least hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years old—that needs improvement to more accurately communicate the reality we, and all life, experience. This, I believe, is the actual mechanism by which language changes and evolves. Literary realism is the art of checking language against irrational experience. Realism is not a philosophy; it has no truck with metaphysics the way postmodernism does. The real world is the matrix within which things exist and happen. The postmodern rebuke of realism is an attempt to convert objects into essences in the very foundation of thinking about the world. It is the swan song of metaphysics. This is an apt metaphor not because it is particularly germane, but because swans and their singing are real. To say they are not is to play an obscurant language game.

It is a kind of narcissism, a love of our own ideas. We could not love our thoughts so much if we did not love ourselves even more. Narcissism is one of the human illnesses Jeffers tried courageously to diagnose and treat. This is very difficult for an artist to do, to try and break the mirror of reflection. Humanism, cosmopolitanism, only work if when we look in the mirror we

see in our face the face of the species. But this is not what Jeffers saw, and certainly not what he praised in his poetry. It was the product of narcissism—humanism—that had gotten us so far away from a loving relationship with nature. In 1941's *Themes in My Poems*, he draws attention to Orestes's statement "I have fallen in love outward," in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*:

These verses express a mystical experience; they also express a protest against human narcissism. Narcissus, you know, fell in love with himself. If a person spends all his emotion on his own body and states of mind, he is mentally diseased, and the disease is called narcissism. It seems to me, analogously, that the whole human race spends too much emotion on itself. The happiest and freest man is the scientist investigating nature, or the artist admiring it; the person who is interested in things that are not human. Or if he is interested in human things, let him regard them objectively, as a very small part of the great music. Certainly humanity has claims, on all of us; we can best fulfil them by keeping our emotional sanity; and this by seeing beyond and around the human race. This is far from humanism; but it is, in fact, the Christian attitude:—to love God with all one's heart and soul, and one's neighbor as one's self:—as much as that, but as *little* as that. (CP 4:412)

The myth of Narcissus is about self-reflection, on looking too deeply into one's own mind, reflection that leads only to a greater knowledge of one's appearance, giving too much credence to one's ideas, that they can be dangerous to the individual or, by association, the species. Konrad Lorenz, in *Behind the Mirror*, writes, "Reflection, man's greatest discovery in the history of the human mind, was immediately followed by the greatest and gravest mistake—that of doubting the reality of the external world" (15). Narcissism is the enemy of realism because self-reflection creates a feedback loop wherein the entire world, slow and rather passive to the human eye, could appear as a projection of ourselves, much like our face is our own projection. We fall in love with



representations, not things themselves, and come to love ourselves from the basis that we know what we are seeing is endorsed by our thoughts. If our thoughts affirm realities, then all things are subject to human interpretation to the point that they do not exist, at least to the narcissist, as anything more than a reflection of inwardness. What is out there, a narcissist says, is only a reflection of what is inside. Orestes, the hero of realism, we recall, triumphs when he “falls in love outward”—that is, with things, not interpretations of things. He has come to distrust the mind, the inner states that convinced him his life was so powerful its soul was ascendant over the entire world “out there.” Lorenz goes on:

The realist persists in looking outwards only, unaware that he is a mirror. The idealist persists in only looking into this mirror, averting his eyes from the external world. Thus, both are inhibited from seeing that there is an obverse to every mirror. But the obverse does not reflect, and to this extent the mirror is in the same category as the objects that it reflects. The physiological mechanism whose function is to understand the real world is no less real than the world itself (19).

Consider these words of Ahab: “O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies; not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind” (280). What is key here is Ahab’s use of “beyond all utterance” in his revelation that the human soul, not the intellect, mirrors nature, placing the analogous state of man to nature—and thus, as Lorenz would have it, both very real, the mind a part of that natural world it reflects upon—above language. To Ahab, words do not have primacy; even so, the imagination is distorted in the process of transmutation, thus the “cunning duplicate” that takes shape in the mind. The shape bears the make of its marker, a golem of human craftsmanship.

For E.O. Wilson, “As knowledge grows science must increasingly become the stimulus to imagination” (*Human Nature* 205). One of the greatest stimulators to Jeffers’s artistic imagination was science, and that it validated, for him, the existence of God by proving that all reality is connected in a cosmic ecosystem of things and forces. But he was deeply critical of science; he believed its practitioners, being human as they were, were still narcissistic, and that objectivity to results did not mitigate the ego drive and self-aggrandizing misapplications of knowledge. Nietzsche praised science over philosophy because for the former “mere knowledge is sought and nothing else—whatever else be incidentally obtained,” and the latter “aims, as art aims, at imparting to life and conduct the utmost depth of significance” (Loc 213-16). Jeffers’s poetry is nothing less than the combination of these two aims.

Inhumanism is a philosophy undergirded by sound scientific reasoning, informed by astronomy, evolutionary theory, geology, bacteriology, and forestry. The proper conduct for an inhumanist is provided in “The Answer,” to love “the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe” (CP 2:536). Monism is an exalted term for the fetish of reductionism. Thomas Huxley writes that “The acts of all living things are fundamentally one” (98). Yes, for the scientist, but to the poet who communicates beauty this is a rather bland statement. This oneness, or, for Jeffers, pantheism, is what is meant by beauty. This beauty is not subjective, but entirely objective: one’s ability to appreciate it is subjective, but a palette well-seasoned by science and philosophy can see it for the real beauty that it is. And the beauty is right there for Tom Birnam, simple cattle rancher that he was, because his mind was not ruined by ideas, and his eyes were drunk on the natural scenery and his body physically engaged with the reality of ranch work, birthing calves, decapitating sick cows, and gelding horses. Jeffers says, in the unpublished poem

“Not Solid Earth,” that peace—the kind Birnam knew in his simple, unassuming life—and beauty are essentially the same thing. Death is an initiation into total human knowledge.

There is one way of peace: to know all  
That men know or discover, and make it vital in the mind, the enormous and terrible  
beauty of things.  
—Never fear that: it will be beautiful: whatever we know or discover  
Is as beautiful as fire. Reality, all considered is all one reality, it is all beautiful. (CP  
4:539-40)

But the modern, postmetaphysical search for beauty comes with a caveat. In “Science,” Jeffers writes that “Man, introverted man... / cannot manage his hybrids,” and that “His mind forebodes his own destruction” (CP 1:113). As in later poems, Jeffers sees science as something to be wary of, not to embrace entirely, because it is only a system of symbols for working with the raw materials and forces of nature, and reality. “A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle, / A drop from the oceans: who would have dreamed this infinitely little too much?” And this is the absolute expression of his notion of the sublime: that too much knowledge, too much beauty, the creations of science, are too much for man to contain, either physically or mentally, and these sizeless, gargantuan things will perhaps destroy us—that, thinks Jeffers, is beyond beautiful. As when watching a forest fire and the deer driven before it, under the hungry eyes of the hawks, Jeffers reconciles the beauty of indifferent nature with human hope: “I thought, painfully, but the whole mind, / The destruction that brings an eagle from heaven is better than mercy” (CP 2:173). The Jeffersian sublime is very Greek in its veneration of pain, destruction, and suffering. It is a tragic vision of the sublime.

Science was not precise enough to reveal beauty in its entirety; an understanding of beauty required, for Jeffers, more than anything, irrational experience. “Science and mathematics,” he writes in “The Silent Shepherds,” “Run parallel to reality, they symbolize it, they squint at it, / They never touch it” (CP 3:472). Loren Eiseley, the 20<sup>th</sup> century paleontologist who was himself

compared to Thoreau (Christianson 70), writes in *The Unexpected Universe*, “Science is human; it is of human devising and manufacture. It has not prevented war; it has perfected it... Science is a solver of problems” (43). But it cannot produce truth, writes Jeffers in “The Silent Shepherds.” That is because science “symbolizes” reality, interprets it for human ends (as Eiseley notes), is not reality itself but a method for approximating reality. Reality, for Jeffers, is everything for the taking. Reality, nature, and God are the interchangeable trinity of terms Jeffers uses when he is writing about the universe as monistic, indivisible, in flux like the Heraclitean fire, forms taking shape in a flowing river that disperse as soon as they are thrown up in a mist to be visible for a moment. The cosmos is a series of alivenesses, from the atom to the oceans to interstellar radiation, ordered by the interconnected relationships of all things in the universe, regardless of the perceived nothingness that spans the distances between other stars and other worlds. Science works on our imagination, surely, and it produces things that work according to reality as we understand it. Wilson explains that “scientific materialism is the only mythology that can manufacture great goals from the sustained pursuit of pure knowledge” (*Human Nature* 207). He believes that “the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have. It can be adjusted until it comes as close to truth as the human mind is constructed to judge the truth. And if that is the case, the mythopoeic requirements of the mind must somehow be met by scientific materialism so as to reinvest our superb energies” (201). This is a dignified hope, that the story of human evolution—inarguably longer, deeper, and more glorious, because of the many gulfs over which our species leapt, than superstitious accounts of gods and monsters—could become the guiding myth for our species. That is because, according to Wilson, scientific mythology comes closest to the truth: that is to say, reality, the world as it is.

In an untitled piece from *Last Poems*, Jeffers writes about science and mathematics—he never lost interest, his love of knowledge too intense—as a kind of mythical formula, or magic, in that material science and logic attempt to explain the nature of reality.

The mathematicians and physics men  
Have their mythology; they work alongside the truth,  
Never touching it; their equations are false  
But the things *work*. (CP 3:459)

What bothers Jeffers is the insight that things can work without working with the truth, but through a kind of deconstruction of the elements that make the truth, or reality. Each step in scientific advancement does not seem to take us any closer to the truth, or an understanding of it, but is a step in its own direction, in the footsteps of its own creeds and faiths. It is historical. Their equations are “false” because they are symbols of reality, rather than being real themselves. This bothers Jeffers because it seems to indicate the powers of the universe can be playfully assigned to symbols, rational ideas, systems of thought and speculation. For Jeffers, reality, or truth, was divine immanence: God is here—what are we looking for? But somehow the formulae can control various aspects of the natural world, upsetting Jeffers’s belief that myths are not true, but indicate something abstract, about *how* humans understand the world. Science does not simply purport to understand the world, reality, but to put the creative materials of the universe to work. Finally, man seems to have gained control of the machines that iterate reality. He goes on:

Or, when gross error appears,  
They invent new ones; they drop the theory of waves  
In universal ether and imagine curved space.  
Nevertheless their equations bombed Hiroshima.  
The terrible thing *worked*.

Far from being misanthropic, Jeffers criticizes the methods of science because they produce horrors. Man seems capable of revealing even darker aspects of nature, the power of the stars, the primordial forces that were once out of reach. The mythology of science seems something of

another age, a coming age. In “Moments of Glory,” from *The Double Axe*, he critiques Harry S. Truman, who, after Potsdam, was “Rejoicing, running about the ship, telling all and sundry / That the awful power that feeds the life of the stars has been tricked down / Into the common stews and shambles” (CP 3:198).

Scientific mythology seemed more than the old Christian and primordial myths, those reaching back far, and finding themselves, according to C.G. Jung, expressed in our dreams as if across time. Jung developed the idea of the collective unconscious from Nietzsche’s theories on dreams and the poet. Dreams, for Nietzsche, were the source of all metaphysical thought—that when we slept we were exposed to a virtual reality that seemed to indicate the existence of parallel realities or multiple dimensions, or the spaciousness of the mind. The distortions of thought and imagery that make up dreams lead us to believe and express mystical ideations. How could a world so similar to our own be full of ghosts, visions of ourselves, insights, deep recollections, and intense feeling? In other words, all metaphysic is dream. Nietzsche writes,

The absolute distinctness of all dream-images, due to implicit faith in their substantial reality, recalls the conditions in which earlier mankind were placed, for whom hallucinations had extraordinary vividness, entire communities and even entire nations laboring simultaneously under them. Therefore: in sleep and in dream we make the pilgrimage of early mankind over again. (Loc 278-79)

In the narrative *Dear Judas*, Jesus says, reflecting on the nature of having a “dream mind”, “Children, remember always that dreams are deceivers. No one’s exempt from dreaming, / Not even I. But all’s fraud: fragments of thought / Fitting themselves together without a mind” (CP 2:14). This wide-ranging talk of dreams in the context of science can best be brought to a close with a quote from E.O. Wilson’s *Biophilia*:

Humanity's concrete experience with poisonous snakes gave rise to the Freudian phenomena after it was assimilated by genetic evolution into the brain's structure. The mind has to create symbols and fantasies from something. It leans toward the most powerful preexistent images or at least follows the learning rules that create the images, including that of the serpent. For most of this century, perhaps overly enchanted by psychoanalysis, we have confused the dream with the reality and its psychic effect with the ultimate cause rooted in nature.

Symbols are not necessarily meaningless but, sadly perhaps to some, simply distant and distorted memories of the real world. The snake becomes a symbol to the mind of waking man because his dreams are filled with the memories of the collective unconscious, of snakes as actual, poisonous things. His mind, then, in dream, makes of it a standard of both the real and unreal, for the elements in the external world and charms for his own inner states. From the real world come symbols; the symbols cannot be reverse engineered to accurately explain an inner state. They can only be understood as pointing to real things in the real world. Symbols, in other words, are dreams from the metaphysical world. And the metaphysical world is, according to Nietzsche, a misunderstanding of the natural effect of the dream state. "According to Nietzsche," writes Max Hallman in *Nietzsche's Environmental Ethics*,

the belief in the existence of an immortal self or soul is simply a means by which an individual may realize a sense of disproportionate self-importance and, in accordance with orthodox Christian thinking that only human beings have immortal souls, it has traditionally served as a justification for attributing such disproportionate importance to the entire human species. (105)

The belief in a metaphysical world gives man greater importance, proves the divine structure of his complexity, than the other animals, because humans walk in both worlds. But all thoughts, dreams, symbols, totems, and bogeymen, can only contain referents to reality. And by reality I mean nature, the matrix of experience comprised of discrete objects and forces observed and clandestine. And for Jeffers, this is what he means by God—beauty in the creation, in the complete honesty of things as real. The ultimate message is to turn outward, like Orestes, and so discover that the inner dream, the other world where we have come to believe contains the numen, is only a jagged impression made upon us by the actual world.

C.G. Jung speaks of two realities, in *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, as “the tangible and apparent world,” and the power of fantasy (296). “So long as we leave the God outside us apparent and tangible,” he writes, “he is unbearable and hopeless. But if we turn the God into fantasy, he is in us and is easy to bear. The God outside us increases the weight of everything heavy, while the God within us lightens everything heavy” (296-97). This is germane to the discussion of dreams and realities, of Nietzsche’s origin of metaphysics in dream, and the importance of dreams to the poet. As well, Jung is relevant to Jeffers, who acts like Nietzsche’s anti-poet, one who can look directly into the abyss and not simply speak in primordial symbolic utterances, but speak of nature without idealism, and so explain a single reality in which all things are interrelated. This external world is the locus of Jeffers’s God, and for Jung that makes God “unbearable and hopeless”—that God is real, has laws, borders and edges, and by knowing reality, know him. Jung describes a God of the knowable, material world as “apparent and tangible,” which, for Jung, is horrifying, because that God is subject to the same processes of the natural world rather than simply being the author of them, whereupon he remains in a parallel, metaphysical world. The God outside is “heavy,” weighty, actual. And this is the God Jeffers says is the only God. This



accords with Nietzsche's statement that the physiological sciences would one day be the only legitimate discipline for explaining how the mind works. Dreams, for him, are not another kind of reality: "Dreams carry us back to the earlier stages of human culture and afford us a means of understanding it more clearly" (Loc 299-300). Where Jung saw the metaphysical, inward God as benevolent and forgiving, both Nietzsche and Jeffers knew that the "external" God Jung talks about is really the only God; the fantasy of dream might be a reality in that it is encompassed by the total reality of being. Jeffers's monism is staunchly opposed to Jung, and it has much in common with Nietzsche's environmental philosophy.

Martin Drenthen, in "Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration," says "Much of Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen as an attempt to come up with an account of nature that explains how all aspects of human nature are just elements of an all-embracing nature. For that purpose, Nietzsche brings forward the concept of will to power" (322). I explore the concept of the will to power later in the chapter on *Tamar* as a series of interlinked, ecologically responsive relationships between not just things but forces as well as absences. As an idea it is essentially akin to ecological thinking: things near each other interact and compete, and are shaped by that give-and-take, over large areas of space and time. Drenthen explains:

Having an interior, mental, quality is not something exclusively human, but is an aspect of everything that exists in nature. In this respect, one could call Nietzsche's natural philosophy 'pan-psychist.' With this pan-psychism, Nietzsche tries to escape from the metaphysical separation between humanity and the rest of nature.

Jeffers makes a statement regarding this metaphysical separation of man from reality, man from nature, and ultimately, man from God. In "Flight of Swans," he praises the real and shames the

ideal, or metaphysical. “One who sees giant Orion,” he says, “And knows that exactly this and not another is the world, / The ideal is phantoms for bait, the spirit is a flicker on a grave” (CP 2:419). Consider these words by Drenthen:

Nature is conceived as a never-ending struggle of different, competing, interpretations, which all try to overpower the others; human beings are mere parts of that ongoing process in nature. The mutual ratio of forces or wills-to-powers continuously generates hierarchical organisations in nature, but all these organisations are themselves deeply contingent: they are but the temporary result of an ongoing struggle. Therefore, there will always be some ordered structure in nature, but no one single structure is eternal. The hierarchical structures can be found on all levels: from the realm of the physics and physiology, to the realm of culture. Nietzsche’s views on morality, culture, body and mind are mere elaborations of his cosmological theory of will to power (323).

This ‘pan-psychism’ is what I call “aliveness” in Jeffers. The Old Man of *The Double Axe pt. II: The Inhumanist* says ““And nothing,” he thought, “Is not alive.” ... // “I see that all things have souls. But only God’s is immortal” (CP 3:257-58). In “The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing,” Jeffers explains his idea of what amounts to pan-psychism:

What is this thing called life?—But I believe  
That the earth and stars too, and the whole glittering universe, and rocks on  
the mountain have life,  
Only we do not call it so—I speak of the life  
That oxydizes fats and proteins and carbo-  
Hydrates to live on, and from that chemical energy  
Makes pleasure and pain, wonder, love, adoration, hatred and terror: how do  
these things grow  
From a chemical reaction? (CP 3:431)

Jeffers is marveling, almost ecstatic, at the miracle of life, how everything we see and feel, and how those things we see and feel with, is made from chemical reactions, from raw processes in a

once-lifeless universe of crude matter. Like Nietzsche, Jeffers is breaking away from metaphysics. Consciousness lives in the outer world, is in fact a part of that outer world—in other words, there is no inner self, only an ideological demarcation between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other.’

Jeffers continues his exploration of pan-psychism. “Pleasure and pain, wonder, love, adoration, hatred and terror...” he wrote above,

I think they were here already. I think the rocks  
And the earth and the other planets, and the stars and galaxies  
Have their various consciousness, all things are conscious; (CP 3:432)

Shockingly, Jeffers locates love, hatred, terror, etc.—the emotional world—in the actual, physical world, as forces, or essences, that either precede conscious life or come into being with it. It is hard to say which, considering Jeffers states that everything in the universe is conscious, is alive.

Human aliveness is of a greater intensity:

But the nerves of an animal, the nerves and brain  
Bring it to focus; the nerves and brain are like a burning-glass  
To concentrate the heat and make it catch fire:  
It seems to us martyrs hotter than the blazing hearth  
From which it came.

The uniqueness of human physiology, particularly the human brain, interprets the world from the outside in with a violent exaggeration, a “burning-glass” of consciousness. So while consciousness might exist across the universe, and be in all things, in the human, our being flares into a roaring intensification of the raw materials of the universe. The last two lines here attribute this intensity of experience and feeling to anthropocentrism—surely this power we feel is God’s presence and ultimate approval of our existence. It is evidence that we are especially important to God. And so the soul, or spirit, comes into existence. He continues:

So we scream and laugh, clamorous animals  
Born howling to die groaning: the old stones in the dooryard  
Prefer silence: but those and all things have their own awareness,  
As the cells of a man have; they feel and feed and influence each other, each unto all,

Like the cells of a man's body making one being,  
They make one being, one consciousness, one life, one God.

Humans are noisy, but this is not a prerequisite for consciousness or being. We howl in ignorance and groan in total unacceptance of our own mortality. And the universe is, in fact, like an organism, connected by its various parts, its identity and purpose that of the God all cultures have dreamt. The “old stones in the dooryard”—not of Tor House, but of the palace of Mycenae—make an interesting appearance in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. According to William Everson, “For Jeffers, rocks are almost as alive as hawks” (115).

In *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, Agamemnon is murdered at the palace of Mycenae after he returns home from the Trojan War. Jeffers writes the stones of the palace's stairs as speaking characters. Having witnessed the murder of Agamemnon, the stones talk amongst themselves. They discuss the “seasons”—the weather as they know it, of being covered with spilled blood, then sand, then water to wash it all away. In the dialogue we see the folly of arrogance, human unimportance, and vanity. Jeffers vocalizes the stones to attempt a literal objectivity:

They carried the dead down the great stair; the slaves with pails of water and sand  
scoured the dark stains.  
The people meeting in another place to settle the troubled city the stair was left vacant,  
The porch untrampled, and about twilight one of the great stones: The world is younger  
than we are,  
Yet now drawing to an end, now that the seasons falter. Then another, that had been  
spared the blood-bath:  
What way do they falter?—There fell warm rain, the first answered, in the midst of  
summer. A little afterward  
Cold rain came down; and sand was rubbed over me as when the winds blow. This in the  
midst of summer.  
—I did not feel it, said the second sleepily. And a third: The noisy and very mobile  
creatures  
Will be quieted long before the world's end.—What creatures?—The active ones, that  
have two ends let downward,  
A mongrel race, mixed of soft stone with fugitive water. The night deepened, the dull old  
stones  
Droned at each other, the summer stars wheeled over above them. (CP 1:166)

Jeffers spares no pathos in this passage. The deaths of Agamemnon and Orestes's matricide of Clytemnestra mean nothing to the stones. They are events that have merely disrupted the weather that the stones have come to know the turn of the seasons by. Jeffers emphasizes that Orestes's deed means nothing to the one, the universal, consciousness, that is here expressed in the voices of the stones, objects that have lived a very long time; they criticize humans as "active," stone or earth mixed impurely with water. Jeffers here draws attention to the miracle of life he spoke of in "The unformed volcanic earth": how does life come from chemical processes? Here are the stones, simply stone; and here are the humans, simply stone and water. But as we understand them they are totally different—we are infinitely more complex, mobile, active, thoughtful, conscious. But to Jeffers all things are conscious. Human life, our life, is only one with the life of the stars, run at a different rate, more or less sensitive to things other conscious beings take little notice of. In this sense, inhumanism is an exceptionally cosmopolitan philosophy, like Stoicism was before it. It is monist philosophy uniting nature, God, and reality, refusing the possibility that any aspect of any of those things can be reduced to a more pure essence. Jeffers's ecology extends into the cosmos, the relationships of planets to their stars, emptiness and light, the visible among the invisible.

In Jeffers, everything in the universe is elemental in the ultimate body of God. Thomas Mann, in *The Magic Mountain*, gives a beautiful prose description of cosmic interrelatedness: "The atom was an energy-laden cosmic system, in which planets rotated frantically around a sunlike center, while comets raced through its ether at the speed of light, held in their eccentric orbits by the gravity of the core" (279). In *The Double Axe, pt. II: The Inhumanist*, the main character, known simply as the Old Man, has a long monologue in which he contemplates the existence of God, meaning, the nature of reality, the reality of nature, and the purpose or meaning of the

universe. He looks for models, patterns, in the natural world. In the 22<sup>nd</sup> stanza of the poem, the old man is given these words, as he “looked up / At a black eyelet in the white of the Milky Way...he thought with wonder:”

“There—or thereabout—  
Cloaked in thick darkness in his power’s dust-cloud,  
There is the hub and heavy nucleus, the ringmaster  
Of all this million-shining whirlwind of dancers, the stars of this end of Heaven. It is  
strange, truly  
That great and small, the atoms of a grain of sand and the suns with planets, and all the  
galactic universes  
Are organized on one pattern, the eternal roundabout, the heavy nucleus and whirling  
electrons, the leashed  
And panting runners going nowhere; frustrated flight, unrelieved strain, endless return—  
all—all—  
The eternal firewheel.” (CP 3:269-70)

Both Jeffers and Mann were trying to put large historical forces into perspective to attempt to understand the rise of nationalism and political violence. Mann was interested in exposing the ideological divide in Europe between idealists and humanists, personified by Naphtha and Settimbrini. Naphtha, the irrationalist, commits suicide over a trivial offense. Settimbrini dies a slow death, sick as he is, while tutoring and guiding the moral development of the novel’s protagonist, the young Hans Castorp, gradually shaping his character as a thinker. While Mann was concerned about the fate of Europe, Jeffers, as an American, thought we had been wrong “To meddle in the fever-dreams of decaying Europe,” and that “it was not our business to meddle in the feuds of ghosts and brigands in historical graveyards” (CP 3:122; CP 3:121). Jeffers’s poetry was an attempt to move beyond both the Enlightenment and Romanticism by melding them into a poetry of the real, where nature is as real as the machines of the industrial revolution, and God has not died, though Nietzsche, the real nail in the coffin of Romanticism, thought so. Mann continues in *The Magic Mountain*, arguing against symbolism in favor of actualism, or things as they are.

That was not merely a metaphor—any more than it would be a metaphor to call the body of a multicelled creature a ‘city of cells.’ A city, a state, a social community organized around the division of labor was not merely comparable to organic life, it repeated it. And in the same way, the innermost recesses of nature were repeated, mirrored on a vast scale, in the macrocosmic world of stars, whose swarms, clusters, groupings, and constellations, pale against the moon, hovered above the valley glistening with frost and above the head of this master of muffled masquerade. (279)

The words remind one of the Romanticism of Coleridge in “Frost at Midnight,” wherein the poet celebrates the very real event of his child’s birth, while drifting into the imagination and the world of signifiers. The hearth is the warmth of the ever-replicating seat of the soul, the imaginative faculty, or what Shelley called the imperial faculty. The frost of the outside world represents the troubles encountered in society that the Romantics sought in many ways to escape from. Jeffers, and Mann, know this to be feckless—reality must be faced. What we read as symbols in nature are not symbols at all, but things themselves, repeated on innumerable scales, all connected by a kind of gossamer of being, of aliveness. Robert Zaller says that for Jeffers “God inhered equally in all matter, the entire cosmos represented a single continuum of being in which no element could be valorized over any other” (*American Sublime*, 124). This is because things are only different in size and function; they all work on the same pattern, keeping the whole thing together.

The influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy on Jeffers the thinker is obvious. The influence of scientific materialism, or realism, on his poetry is, too. But people are too quick to read his poetry for symbols because it is, at first glance, rather direct and resistant to exegesis. How can a poet speak if not in riddles, abstractions, wild longings? Because, for Jeffers, the world was not a riddle if nature and reality are seen as interchangeable terms. Things were, in the Stoic sense, not

surprising at all. This is important for the final term Jeffers collates with nature and reality: God. Zaller writes, “Evolution’s ultimate significance might...be seen as reinstating the divine presence in the natural world” (*American Sublime*, 100). Jeffers engaged with evolutionary theory as a topic of poetic meditation more than any poet of his day. He saw, in his own mythologizing of scientific knowledge, the explanatory power it had over reality. This, for Jeffers, had little to do with faith, but the actual existence of God as things.

In constant awe Jeffers stood before the beauty of this God. Often he was speechless, and gave his devotional praises to be sung and spoken by a mixture of odd and tragic characters in his vast and unruly narrative poems. These figures were the puppets he speaks of in *Tamar*. Jeffers, in his lyrics, is unable to face God directly. The poet is in a suspended state of worship, stunned. As Everson said of Jeffers, the poet “is brought to his knees, as it were, before the recognition of a God so vast, so overwhelming, so infinitely beyond all the discernible manifestations of the concrete, that every syllable he utters suggests, above the voice by which he speaks them, the implications of his awe: ‘I am nothing’” (*Fragments of an Older Fury* 17). Much of his poetry is an attempt to construct a devotional space for Jeffers the man to address God. This is because his poetry always takes the natural world for its exact reality, “Wilderness in an almost mystic sense, a place to correspond to the empty spaces in the soul” (*Dimensions of a Poet*, Brophy 13). But God is difficult to pin down when you define God in the sense Jeffers is comfortable with: Everything. Like his narratives, Jeffers’s God was unruly, unable to be contained in a poetic or private space. God was not private—God penetrated all things. The complexity of Jeffers’s religious vision makes it difficult to both find and not find examples of a devotional mode as we know it in the English-speaking Christian tradition. His oeuvre is a monument to his God. At the same time, his audience is rarely God. He speaks to his audience directly—which is almost always



the future generations—much like his father, a Calvinist preacher, extolling the various beauties of God in the form of ocean, rock, animal, chemical and non-chemic life; the forces of gravity; the speed of light; destruction, power and force; love and hate. The list cannot be exhausted. For Jeffers, God, reality, and nature are always the same thing.

Zaller says as much in *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime* when he says that for the poet “Nothing exists that is not God” (41). This is the unmistakable mark of Jeffers’s verse, the tangled bank of his pantheistic vision, in which God is truly omnipresent; divine immanence is undeniable, and divinity is best understood by humans as a kind of vast reality in the endless materials of nature and deep, or geologic, time. God penetrates all aspects of material description—the numinous suffuses the real. In his narratives his characters are dialogic figures manipulated in order to address God, to avoid the awe of his terrible face, of the penetrating eyes depicted by Jungian painters like the visionary Peter Birkhäuser’s “The Wound in the World:” a solitary man, scarecrow-like, peeks out from behind a door, his face split in two and stitched together, representing the physical and metaphysical duality of human existence.

The religious mystic or visionary is traditionally defined by either sustained or punctuated contact with God in moments of ecstasy, or dissociation. The poet cannot address him directly. Jeffers the man risks spiritual annihilation. In the previous chapter, I quoted a section in *Tamar* that tells us something of what we need to know to understand him as a devotional poet: “Being light you have chosen the dark lamps, / A hawk the sluggish bodies: therefore God you chose / Me; and therefore I have made you idols like these idols / To enter and possess. (CP 1:32-3). It is no wonder Czeslaw Milosz called Jeffers “an idolater of nature” (95). Nevertheless, the reader has a clue from Jeffers himself, as he breaks the fourth wall of the narrative to speak directly to God, informing the audience of his intentions as a writer. He infuriated the New Critics and even

newer ones, not the least of which was Helen Vendler (see *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry by Helen Vendler*, pp. 53-61 for a reprint of her scathing criticism). He has no secrets. He comes to a poem, as to his God, without guile. For poetry to be good it has to come unmediated.

Inhumanism is about treating the problem of human solipsism; that our minds have gone mad from being turned upon our own nature, instead of the nature of God. We have attempted to accommodate too many paradoxes: we have come, through both religion and science, to worship ourselves; however, both branches of knowledge consider arrogance taboo—in religion, we must be humble before God, the creator of all things; with science, we must follow the steps so we do not blow ourselves up. Even so, at the heart of both lie the common structural-functional purpose of making it easier for human beings to live better and to live with peace of mind. Jeffers, because of the controversial nature of inhumanism, strains to explain the nuances of his new philosophy in the original, 1947 preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems*:

A man whose mental processes continually distort and prevent each other, so that his energy is devoted to introversion and the civil wars of the mind, is an insane man, and we pity him. But the human race is similarly insane. More than half its energy, and at the present civilized level nine-tenths of its energy, are devoted to self-interference, self-frustration, self-incitement, self-tickling, self-worship. The waste is enormous; we are able to commit and endure it because we are so firmly established on the planet; life is actually so easy, that it required only a slight fraction of our common energies. The rest we discharge onto each other—in conflict and charity, love, jealousy, hatred, competition, government, vanity and cruelty...This is a kind of collective onanism, pathetic and ridiculous, or at noblest a tragic incest.. (418-9)

The character of the Old Man appears in the second half of *The Double Axe, pt. II: The Inhumanist* with these ideas dominating his mind. I understand that character to be the most clear, most transparent representation of the poet himself. The book was his masterpiece; the poet was at the full height of his powers. The glass puppet was, at least, too transparent, too light and airy, or like a sock-puppet decorated to look like the poet himself.

Jeffers clearly believes in divine immanence, that God is accessible, available, and present in the creation. But in his pantheism—that the creation and God are not different—he parts, rather fiercely, with the Abrahamic religions. God is not human in any way, says the Old Man—and Jeffers, too—much like the Ancient poet Xenophanes, known for his satirical critique of the anthropomorphic qualities of the Greek gods.

“...Not a tribal nor an anthropoid God.

Not a ridiculous projection of human fears, needs, dreams, justice and love-lust” (257).

Jeffers regularly attempts to redefine Western definitions of *aliveness*. George Hart, in his book *Inventing the Language to Tell It: Robinson Jeffers and the Biology of Consciousness*, explores Jeffers’s ground-breaking possibility of a return to animism after Christianity, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and most of the major other civilizing influences. It has much in common with what anthropologists now call *neotribalism*, which echoes Claude Levy-Strauss’s famous statement that when an animal is taken out of the environment in which it evolved it will become pathological, or sick, and mankind’s first layer is animality.

Jeffers believed that mankind was suffering from a social sickness, one made worse by refusing the *aliveness* of all things:

...“And nothing,” he thought,  
“Is not alive”... (257).

And for Jeffers, as for the Old Man, there would be no afterlife or eternity waiting for mankind; no heaven, no reward, no return. In his 1929 poem "Meditation on Saviors," he says as much: "They need no savior; salvation comes and takes them by force, / It gathers them into the great kingdoms of dust and stone, the blown storms, the stream's-end ocean" (CP 1:401). Peace would come with death, at least.

... "I see that all things have souls.  
But only God's is immortal"... (CP 3:258).

And, not being human, God is not concerned with understanding human figurations; they can be deconstructed, and language is not absolute. Nothing civilization produces is of interest or use to God. Not Manichean, but certainly not positivistic, Jeffers's God is the Old Testament God, the Calvinist God, of damnation and fatalism.

There's nothing necessarily *un-Christian* about his poetry, even though it is untraditional and includes much of what is contentious, in science, to religion.

"I see he despises happiness; and as for goodness  
he says What is it? And of evil, What is it?  
And of love and hate, They are equal; they are two spurs,  
For the horse has two flanks..." (259).

Science has given mankind, like religion before it, a tool to contemplate God. It is unnecessary, man neither needing his life improved nor prolonged (according to Jeffers), though both provide ways of understanding a kind of monism of origins and composition.

"Or as mathematics, a human invention  
That parallels but never touches reality, gives the astronomer  
Metaphors through which he may comprehend  
The powers and the flow of things: so the human sense  
Of beauty is our metaphor of their excellence, their divine nature: -- like dust in a whirlwind,  
making  
The wind wind visible" (260).

His figuration of God is new but syncretic, Miltonic in its individuality, familiar in its honesty at using the symbols of his own culture to communicate and illustrate his beliefs, beliefs that, in their strangeness and modernity, transcended the traditional beliefs about creation that antedated George Lyell and Charles Darwin, and their complete refiguring of the nature of time and the scope of human existence and development.

Jeffers was a modern Goethe, a Renaissance man trained as a physician, counseled in adulthood by his brother (an astronomer), and raised by a professor of Biblical languages. His knowledge was vast, and his poetry is difficult enough without the syncretic themes. It is truly something else. And, strangely enough, it is Modernist poetry. It qualifies. The only possible disqualifier is the ever-presence of God addressed within a stately sense of the real, which is nonsense. He is the consummate Modernist because his work is ultimately an experiment in reviving ancient Greek interest in natural history with rhetorical poetry. Jeffers is one of the few lights of American Modernism who went to God—absolutely, crucially depended on nature, the most evident aspect of divinity accessible to man as identified time and again by the poet himself—for inspiration and as a synonym for reality. And without God there is no Jeffers-as-poet, and for the poet—no Jeffers, no nature, no reality. Nothing.

Jeffers's knowledge of science provided a way for him to describe God in more contemporary terms. This additional source of cosmological significance further complicates what anthologies might consider devotional poems. Jeffers's God is destructive, mimicking, rather appropriately, the way the burgeoning military-industrial complex was using science for destructive ends. His poetry reminds his audience of the destructive, rather immediate, threat of nuclear annihilation. Science was a new fiber of God discovered by man, a *way* of knowing, but not a source of perfect knowledge. Everson says that in Jeffers's poetry science,

...finds its gifts restored...[He] reconstitutes, in the unifying symbols of his metaphors, the vast context of the cosmos that science has opened to the eyes of man. Loving it, he unifies it; fearing it, he reveals its wrath and its awe; worshipping it, he establishes it as the very throne of that unspeakable God who transcends it in excess even as He sustains it in being. It is in the celebration of the divine excess that Jeffers tacitly acknowledges the limitation of his avowed pantheism and places himself among the vast company of mystics and prophets and poets of all ages and all faiths—those who have seen to the plenitude beyond the registration of power, the vast and abstract reality that lies beyond nature, to the verifiable face of HIM WHO IS. (*The Excesses of God*, 169)

The unique blend of Jeffers's scientific and religious knowledge gives, I think, his poetry the quality that Everson calls "primitive religious values" (67). It could be argued that to primordial man God was an everyday reality because of the nature-centric qualities of their religions. In that sense the poet does have primitive religious values. God suffuses all things; what is perceived as divine cannot be separated out from creation itself. James Karman, in his biography *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, accurately describes an aspect of Jeffers's religious beliefs, that God "could choose to end his life...but insofar as he chooses to live, he lives through all the forms of being that comprise him" (92). Jeffers's poetry expresses and records the beginning of a new religious age for Western man, one influenced by anthropology and the works of C.G. Jung, of the transcendence of the visionary over the priest, the seer over the mediator, of the imagination over—not nature, but the world of men. It marks a return to an ancient sense of devotion, one couched in the primitive symbols of fire and blood, of prayer and sacrifice—of things common in all systems of religious belief. As Zaller notes, "The intelligence that pervades natural process can be none other than a divine one, just as the world itself is a direct projection of the divine essence—

‘All things are full of God,’ as Heraclitus says, or, as Jeffers might amend him, ‘all things are God’” (*American Sublime*, 341). No honest reader can ignore God in a Jeffers poem, nor its conflation with the other parts of Jeffers’s trinity—nature and reality.

Most Jeffers criticism spends time discussing the poet’s concept of God. In “Robinson Jeffers and the Uses of History,” Zaller says that “In Jeffers’s fiercely monistic universe God cannot be dissevered from any of his manifestations in the phenomenal world—even from humanity” (33). This is good to register, because many of Jeffers detractors critiqued him for being a misanthrope. He wasn’t; he was, instead, more devoted to the integrity of God than human continuation (though he had two children). His deep religiosity is misunderstood. Humans were only a very small part of the God Everson was so keen to point out had expanded, in concept, in Jeffers’s poetry because of what science had revealed through astronomy, human evolution, biology, chemistry, medicine, geology, and psychology. But what Zaller goes on to mention is far more important than this: “The tragic protagonist thus functions in Jeffers as a kind of lightning rod for the divine” (34). Critical commentary on the devotional nature of Jeffers’s poems is more useful in the case of looking at his characters, plucked from the narratives, as Jeffers’s mysticism is constantly bounding between natural phenomena and the vaguely numinous experiences he had of reality in the wilderness. I am reminded of Thoreau’s essay “Ktaadn,” as well as Jeffers’s poem “Oh, Lovely Rock.” In both instances the speakers have a phenomenological experience touching a rock, wherein the most dead of material things draws their spiritual essences to the *mysterium tremendum*, or an overwhelmingly terrifying awareness of God, as explained by Everson (*The Excesses of God*, 23-36). Jeffers had a religious passion for nature as intense as Thoreau’s, a sensitivity to the silent divinity of things.

Of all the poems Jeffers ever wrote, "Noon," from *The Women at Point Sur*, another volume that includes a devotional titular figure in Arthur Barclay, is his only lyric poem that comes across as a prayer (CP 1:203). In it, he calls out to his creator, "O pitiless God," believing the nature surrounding him to be "the altars...Pale agonists" of the drama of God's creation. Jeffers sees himself as a prophet who has more than *visions* of God, but actual, material apprehension in the world he experiences: "On the domed skull of every hill / Who stand blazing with spread vans, / The arms uplifted, the eyes in ecstasy?" Jeffers's God is passionate and violent because, when observing the Pacific coast, or any part of nature closely enough I suppose, nature is both passionate and violent. Reality includes emotion: it is irrational. God is phenomena: "The light that is over / Light, the terror of noon, the eyes / That the eagles die at, have thrown down / Me and my pride, here I lie naked / In a hollow of the shadowless rocks, / Full of the God, having drunk fire". God is "Very beautiful and too secure to want worshippers," and "He includes the flaming stars and pitiable flesh, / And what we call things and what we call nothing" ("Intellectuals," CP 2:283). As the man is an organism and nothing that makes him up can live without him, so God is all that is. But like the neurons communicate to the whole man through his brain and body, man, through experience, communicates at God, "Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity" ("Still the Mind Smiles," CP 2:309). Jeffers's pantheism, though out of place in the Modern west, finds a corollary in a combination of pre-Socratic philosophy, ancient Greek natural science. and the 3<sup>rd</sup> century philosophy of Stoicism. "Nature is the nature of Existence itself; and existence connotes the kinship of all created beings," writes the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman Stoic-Emperor Marcus Aurelius. "Truth is but another name for this Nature, the original creator of all true things" (107). But that Jeffers was influenced by the Classics is no surprise.



## Chapter Three

### Inhumanism and the *Meditations*

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“How ludicrous and outlandish is astonishment at anything that happens in life,” says Marcus Aurelius in his 2<sup>nd</sup> century Stoic text, the *Meditations*. The book is dedicated to giving advice about how one should live life, be happy, and not be moved too much by the drama of human existence. This might seem arrogant, but history, I think, proved the Emperor right: people carried on loving and eating and killing each other like always. Likewise, many of Jeffers’s poems can seem condescending. Both authors emphasized the importance of morality as a means of preserving individuality and inner balance. In a letter to Louis Adamic, Jeffers writes,

It seems to me that in a degenerating society the individual has got to isolate himself morally to a certain extent or else degenerate too. He *can* keep his own morals; he cannot save society’s, not even though he himself should happen to be Caesar, like Marcus Aurelius. (Who did all his civic duty and more, but remained isolated in his philosophy, apart from decaying Rome.) (CL 1:436)

Prescriptive, sermon-like injunctions to live a certain way are not easy to swallow. What could a man who lived in a tower possibly have to say to those who spend their days with their feet forcefully held to the ground? Adults demand a certain respect for the choices they make. Tough love is an unusual tone for a poet to take, but it is indicative of the thrust of inhumanism, a nonsense diagnosis of the sicknesses that plagued the race. In that way Jeffers is most like a doctor, delivering the harsh news that things are not going quite as well as they seem. That changes in behavior need to be made, as a physician would tell a man suffering from cancer to stop smoking.

His poetry is difficult medicine to take, what he called “bitter counsel, but required and convenient,” in “Invasion,” a poem written on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944 (CP 3:132). In that poem Jeffers, in the fervor of World War II, wore what the British call a stiff upper-lip in considering the American invasion of Europe, which had “Run its course, and whether to fall by its own sickness or ours is not / Extremely important.” Jeffers was committed to the heritage of the Western tradition as much as any American poet. Even so, he saw it as part of historical process rather than a grand achievement: “It was a whittled forepeak and condensation of profuse Asia, which presently / Will absorb it again.” His stance in the poem, as often elsewhere, is staunch and austere, and dreadfully serious. Everything, even grand destruction, is beautiful, because it evinces a healthy universe engaged in constant creation. “Beauty is not always lovely,” he writes, in “Fire on the Hills” (CP 2:173). He was right in the belief that for one to be objective about human events, emotions had to be subordinated to reason.

Jeffers, in “Invasion,” was critical of the American government, not himself entirely emotionless as he thought of those who would die: “We have blood enough, but not for this folly; / Let no one believe that children a hundred years from now in the future of America will not be sick / For what our fools and unconscious criminals are doing today.” His anger is palpable. Even so, he is able, despite his disgust, to communicate a poetic sensibility that can be described as posthuman: he does not want people to die, but he does not have hope that we can overcome our flawed nature because civilization, the ultimate problem, is, itself, a part of human nature. This is something Jeffers himself believed: “Even the P-38s and the Flying Fortresses are as natural as horse-flies” (“Calm and Full the Ocean,” 3:124). Culture is a unique expression of the human brain: advanced tool making, art, symbol use, government—these things set us apart from other

species. It is really only a matter of complexity and familiarity with ourselves that makes a bird's nest seem natural, and a house unnatural.

In "Invasion," Jeffers casts his vision into the future and sees that nothing will change—we will regret the violence—because nothing has changed. We are still constrained by a range of behaviors. Violence and control seem to be a part of man's makeup. He builds civilizations and destroys them. Jeffers, though enraged, is not so angry that he falls back on idealism. Instead, he looks reality in the eyes, as Seneca took comfort in the fact that all things die when he contemplated the horrors of Pompeii. The Roman Stoic was at ease, considering the case an ordinary example of death by natural forces. "Knowing what the rules of the game really are," writes Brad Inwood in *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*, "Would humble those who precipitately entrust themselves to confidence, only to fall victims when the unexpected occurs" (179). Likewise, Jeffers was not surprised by the horrors of the greatest war in Western history. This is the kind of Stoicism Marcus advocates in his *Meditations*: "Nobody is surprised when a fig-tree brings forth figs. Similarly, we ought to be ashamed of our surprise when the world produces its normal crop of happenings" (94). Like Marcus, Jeffers did not feel shock or surprise over the obvious processes of nature, and he did not try to palliate his good sense of rationality with hopeful desires. Disappointment and even despair result from unrealistic expectations.

Jeffers believed in the cycles of history, and felt that if one were to get upset by disaster they should also, as the title of one of his most famous poem says, "Be Angry at the Sun."

That public men publish falsehoods  
Is nothing new. That America must accept  
Like the historical republics corruption and empire  
Has been known for years.

Be angry at the sun for setting  
If these things anger you. Watch the wheel slope and turn,  
They are all bound on the wheel, these people, those warriors,

This republic, Europe, Asia. (CP 3:24)

The most identifiable feature of his work is the stark realism, not just in subject matter, but in the way he speaks directly to the reader. Jeffers's attitude was one of subtle submission to what might be called destiny, fate, or, in the case of World War II, doom. It is a rational acceptance of human nature. This is what many people found repugnant about his poems from the 1940s. His confidence in the predictability of human nature was often mistaken for arrogance, a kind of I-told-you-so playground taunting. As Helen Vendler writes of Jeffers's patron saint, the prophetess Cassandra, "He places himself, as prophet, above both gods and men, who equally connive against 'the truth' (a phrase, dear to ideologues, that comes easily to Jeffers' lips)" (59). He did not claim to actually possess the mythical powers of Cassandra, a fictional character, but he clearly believed he understood "the truth," in his poem "Cassandra." "Truly men hate the truth," he writes, and of the Trojan prophetess's captivity, "you'll still mumble in a corner a crust of truth, / And gods disgusting—you and I, Cassandra" (CP 3:121). Rather he, like Seneca, knew "the rules of the game"—the rules of human nature. And he, like Seneca again, believed gods and men to be the same in their relationship to the cosmos. "It is a great consolation," says Seneca, "that our rapid course is one with the universe's. Whatever it is that has ordained the mode of our life and the mode of our death has bound the gods, too, by the same necessity" (42). Though Jeffers was decidedly pantheistic, not believing in any "gods," he writes in "Soliloquy" that writers of the past had "shown men Gods like racial dreams," but this anthropocentrism did not make him happy (CP 1:215). Theism could not provide an adequate explanation of reality—gods were invented by people, so even they were subject to scientific inquiry.

In "Invasion," Jeffers accurately predicted he would be called "heartless and blind" because, speaking in the second person, "nothing / Human is happy at the feet of yours." That is

to say happiness was not to be found in a traditional humanist aesthetic. Rather, inhumanism considers real happiness to be a kind of freedom from worldly attachments. He believed that war could be beautiful because it is natural to the human species. There is nothing alien about it. War belongs in the universe because it is in it. Human nature is a product of evolution; it is, in essence, the truth. Marcus writes of nature, which includes human nature, that it is “the nature of Existence itself; and existence connotes the kinship of all created beings. Truth is but another name for this Nature, the original creator of all true things” (107). Jeffers, though devoted to the realistic philosophy of inhumanism, found human behavior not very admirable in the way it worked itself out. We are constrained by a range of behaviors that history shows is mostly a spectrum stained throughout with violence and cruelty. The coming invasion of Europe, in 1944, was not shocking to Jeffers, but ugly, destructive and foolish,

But also

it is ghastly beautiful. Look:  
The enormous weight is poised, primed and will slide. Enormous and doomed weight will  
reply. It is possible  
That here are the very focus and violent peak of all human effort. (No doubt, alas, that  
more wasting  
Wars will bleed the long future: the sky more crammed with death, the victims worse  
crushed: but perhaps never  
Again the like weights and prepared clash.) (“Invasion”)

Jeffers’s ability to recognize beauty in destruction is his sublime vision. Man will, like a rockslide, fall, naturally, and crush everything in its path. It is a natural process. To separate human behavior out from the rest of the universe is anthropocentric. To consider anything that humans do, or anything that happens to us, to be of special significance is completely subjective. Jeffers believes in an objective truth. He applies the Newtonian laws of motion to human actions. Even though we supposedly act from the cultural realm the result is something like the movement of stones against each other. Though history is a mound, it is not historical circumstances that cause the

great shifts in civilization: it is human nature. And like one can fairly accurately predict the behavior of any animal after a good amount of study, we can predict human behavior expertly: “Look back over the past, with its changing empires that rose and fell,” writes Marcus, “and you can foresee the future too. Its pattern will be the same, down to the last detail; for it cannot break step with the steady march of creation. To view the lives of men for forty years or forty thousand is therefore all one; for what more will there be for you to see” (85). By this he means that human nature will always be the same—we are working with limited ingredients. Civilization will not change man, only amplify and repress various aspects of his nature.

If, like Marcus suggests, one pays attention to history and the arc of civilizations, the animal behavior of the human species, one can know the future. Thus, there is no reason for surprise. “Human effort” reaches its “violent peak” like a mountain whose altitude is determined by colliding plates. These collisions will continue in human history, “the sky more crammed with death” in the future, Jeffers writes, carving the air with struggle, war and destruction. That Jeffers believed World War II was the ultimate expression of human violence is short-sighted, but that he considered it as such indicates the intensity of his emotion. It could very well be the apocalypse, but it is not the end. Culture, a systemic excrescence of the natural world, is like geology; we stand on a mound of countless have-beens. Jeffers’s poetry is most impressive when it engages with stone, the hardened sediment that is the most clear visual symbol of time. Take these lines, again from “Invasion:”

I know a narrow beach, a thin tide-line  
Of fallen rocks under the foot of the coast-range; the mountain is always sliding; the  
mountain goes up  
Steep as the face of a breaking wave, knuckles of rock, slide-scars, rock-ribs, brush-fur,  
blue height,  
To the hood of cloud. (CP 3:132)

The “fallen rocks” on the beach indicate the Sisyphean destiny of civilization. There by the shore the stones are ready to be reabsorbed by the ocean, the void of chaos where all things are recirculated and made anew. The mountains have a “foot,” and it is “Steep as the face of a breaking wave” with “knuckles of rock”, scars and ribs. The anthropomorphic language further clarifies the point that war, like a rock-slide, is a known and predictable reality, that it has nobility because it is natural. War is dreadful. But to love God is to accept the reality of all things, and culture is just another one of those things. It is not outside nature.

Jeffers flatly rejects dualism, embracing, instead, the idea of perpetual change and mutation suffered by a unity, a single thing. Alfred North Whitehead says in his first “category of explanation” that “the actual world is a process, and...the process is the becoming of actual entities” (22). Looking from the foot of the range to the peak of the mountain is to see the entire process of becoming from formation to disintegration. This is a pattern that all things in the universe follow. At the tide-line of history, which is the matrix of material from which all evidential processes arise, Jeffers understands the arc of human destiny: it is to build high, like the mountain, slipping upon its own worn foundations back into nothingness. The cloud is like a hood because it obscures the possible existence of the gods; it covers the head, shading any hope of something that “lies beyond” nature. “You stand there at the base,” says Jeffers, speaking to himself in 3<sup>rd</sup> person,

perched like a gull on a tilted slab, and feel  
The enormous opposed presences; the huge mass of the mountain high overhanging, and  
the immense  
Mass of the deep and somber Pacific.—That scene, stationary,  
Is what our invasion will be in action. Then admire the vast battle. Observe and marvel.  
Give it the emotion  
That you give to a landscape.

Jeffers is at his most stoic here.

Marcus, in his *Meditations*, provides a good deal of Stoic commentary on the processes that constitute nature. “What follows is ever closely linked to what precedes, it is not a procession of isolated events, merely obeying the laws of sequence, but a rational continuity. Moreover,” he continues, “just as the things already in existence are all harmoniously coordinated, things in the act of coming into existence exhibit the same marvel of concatenation, rather than simply the bare fact of succession” (40). That human suffering, destruction, and conceivable annihilation should be admired with the same serene objectivity that one admires a mountain, and the process that brought it into being, is to embrace reality with humility and acceptance, sans judgment. His poems are art objects that hover in the void of total helplessness, in a space where we, as individuals, can do nothing but “observe and marvel.” This, according to John Elder, is Jeffers’s most impressive poetic accomplishment. He says,

In completing the long descent toward despair, a writer may also achieve a certain openness: when all possibilities of affirmation or forward motion seem to be exhausted, there is nothing left but to wait and watch. In such quiet moments, Jeffers experiences a unity beyond the human-natural antithesis, and he finds himself replenished by participation in it. These passages through despair, to a natural attentiveness beyond all isolating dualisms, are Jeffers’s great achievement, and the gift he has offered to the poetry of nature following him. (16)

Jeffers, seeing a process from beginning to end by the mere evidence of its existence—and thus its nature—he reads the human figure not as a symbol for divinity but as an actual animal in the world, born and raised in the environment of the Earth, subject to its own origins, unchangeable in its raw substance, and understandable, even predictable, in its destiny. Rocks will always return their sediment to the waters, and those waters will bring forth the land, by cooling lava that comes from



vents on the ocean floor to form new ground. Plates will shift, push against one another, and bring about mountains again. The process of becoming is what determines what a thing will always be. Jeffers's insight into what Whitehead called the creation of "actual entities" is revelatory because human beings are, suddenly, the product of space and time as much as substance and form. The shocking insight is this: culture is nature. There is not, after all, a real wall between wilderness and civilization.

We return to the phrase "bitter counsel" in the last stanza of the poem. It is best understood now that we have established Jeffers's philosophical viewpoint in the context of cosmic processes, monistic reality, and human nature:

And this is bitter counsel, but required and  
convenient; for, beyond the horror  
When the imbecility, betrayals and disappointments become apparent,—what will you  
have, but to have  
Admired the beauty?

This void, this vacuum created by the impossibility of permanent form, is made by interrupting the process of contemplation. It is sublime, because the thing—the resolution—cannot come into being, because there are no resolutions. Logic is vexed. Like Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the listener—or here, in the poem, the reader—is left tossing in the waves of absolute tumult. Nothing resolves. When no answer can be given, one must, according to Jeffers, "observe and marvel." Unlike that German opera, Jeffers never achieves a resolution. He explains the nuance of his position in "Going to Horse Flats," a lyric from *Such Counsels You Gave to Me*: "Man's world is a tragic music and is not played for man's happiness, / Its discords are not resolved but by other discords" (CP 2:543). Then what is the prescription? "But for each man / There is real solution," he continues: "Let him turn from himself and man to love God." Returning to "Invasion," it becomes clear that Jeffers means God when he says beauty:

I believe that the beauty and nothing else is  
what things are formed for. Certainly the world  
Was not constructed for happiness nor love nor wisdom. No, nor for pain, hatred and folly.  
All these  
Have their seasons; and in the long year they balance each other, they cancel out. But the  
beauty stands.

God, beauty, reality—these are all synonymous with eternity, too. There is no cosmic scoreboard because there is only the one thing, and in its negative and positive aspects—creation and destruction, life and death, the diploid nature of reality—zeroes out in the end. Processes create things, and these things fall. New things rise in their place. Man’s life has no resolution; it is only a series of discords going on and on. Resolution comes only as the absolute destruction of the universe, the final quench of reality.

Jeffers’s vision is one that could be metaphorically described as smoke, evanescence, the clash of fire and water. If the universe was not made for any reason then reason will not explain existence. One can only live, and live well, admiring the beauty they see, loving God in a cosmic sense, and withholding all judgment, shock and surprise. Everything is the result of natural processes. To take issue with nature is to suffer the arrogant mistake of Charles Baudelaire’s “Heautontimoroumenos,” the self-tormentor: “I am at war, my dear, / With the whole universe. I know / There is no medicine for my woe. / Believe me, it is called Despair” (29). Though Elder believed that Jeffers gained insight along “the long descent toward despair,” I do not believe the poet ever wrote in the spirit of desperation, but praise, and approval. Jeffers, unlike the classical figure Heautontimoroumenos, is not a self-torturer: he is a Stoic.

Anthony Lioi, in his article “Knocking Our Heads Against the Night: Going Cosmic with Robinson Jeffers,” makes a strong case for the Stoic influence present in Jeffers’s poems, and the similarities it has to inhumanism. Lioi says, “Jeffers is a stoic,” and that “The [classical] Stoics thought of their philosophy as a therapy for what ails the species, and two of its aspects—the

doctrine that the universe is a living, divine whole and that humans must conduct our lives as part of a cosmos—anticipate the claims of Inhumanism by millennia” (118). Stoicism anticipates some of the claims of inhumanism, but not all. For instance, Jeffers and Marcus seem to disagree on the basic humanist belief that people should love one another and, by association, the human race. “One need not pity; certainly one must not love” Jeffers writes in “Meditation on Saviors” (CP 1:398). They differ on the issue of self-love. Self-love, according to W.O. Stephen in “Stoic Naturalism, Rationalism, and Ecology,” was supposed to lead the Stoic to love all others, as “in recognizing this rational justification to preserve one’s self, one comes to understand that this very same rational justification, in fact, applies to *all* individuals” (281). This is at odds with inhumanism by valuation, the latter warning against what the former urges: self-love ultimately leads to a narcissistic love of the human figure, by turns producing anthropocentric attitudes about God, nature, and reality. Helen Karabatzkai explains in “Environmental Issues in Stoic Philosophy,” that “The Stoic definition of the Universe has two complementary aspects, one *systemic* and *holistic*, which includes all material beings, inanimate, and animate alike, and a second *ratiocentric*, in terms of which the universe is defined as the place of accommodation of gods and men with all other beings existing for the sake of men” (36). In Jeffers, things exist only to be beautiful. Inhumanism is in direct opposition to this doctrine of Classical humanism. In the narratives of Jeffers, man is not the measure of anything: he is an unwilling sacrifice.

Jeffers agrees with the Stoics that self-love indeed cultivates a broader love of humanity, and that is exactly what inhumanism is a critique of. But inhumanism, as Lioi notes, does have some things in common with Stoic philosophy. “Stoic ethics,” explains Stephen, “can rightly be described as naturalistic in that the Stoic definition of the *summum bonum* is living *kata physin*, i.e., living in agreement with, or according to nature” (275). Stephen’s article is in response to Jim

Cheney's "The Neo-Stoicism of Radical Environmentalism." Cheney asserts that deep ecology, the environmental philosophy first expounded by Gary Devall and George Sessions in *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, is "neo-stoicism," or a modern version of that old strain of thought. He is right to some degree, if we consider this passage from Marcus's *Meditations* as indicative of Stoic thought, which we should: "Think often of the bond that unites all things in the universe, and their dependence upon one another. All are, as it were, interwoven, and in consequence linked in mutual affection; because their orderly succession is brought about by the operation of the currents of tension, and the unity of all substance" (68). Also indicative of deep ecological thinking is this: "Adapt yourself to the environment in which your lot has been cast, and show true love to the fellow-mortals with whom destiny has surrounded you" (69). Stoicism also focused on the well-being and love of fellow creatures, as well as the ascendancy of human beings over the beasts of the field.

Deep ecology shares ideas with, and was partly inspired by, Jeffers's inhumanism. Both deemphasize the importance of human beings. Where inhumanism is more about the cosmic, and religious, significance of man, deep ecology tends to focus on the social and political aspects. Regarding the connections between Stoicism and deep ecology, Cheney argues that both are a response to the collapse of a central political authority or cultural unity—the Athenian *polis* in the former, and modernism in the latter—and a turning outward to "cosmopolitan" ideals, or universal awareness. The disintegration of those values in both result in an "alienation" from a "world of difference," wherein "otherness could be encountered without risk" (302). In other words, Cheney thinks of Stoicism and deep ecology as defense mechanisms in a changing world, offering, instead of philosophical wisdom, escape from the multitudinous new possibilities of a changing world. While not entirely ingenuous, Cheney makes a good point about the resurgence of naturalism as a

continuation of the Western philosophical tradition. Karabatzkai, commenting on the similarities between Stoicism and ecology, writes,

Stoic philosophy, in its ancient and middle phase, seems to have produced the most fruitful ecological insights both ontologically and ethically, thanks to the influence the Cynic attitude to Nature had exercised upon the founder of the Stoa, Zeno, who was a pupil of the Cynic Crates. Their cosmic view...is quite close to modern theories concerning the interdependence and interconnection of ecosystems, and specifically concerning the relationship of Earth itself to the whole Universe. (36)

Her work provides a good foundation for understanding deep ecology as a spiritual as well as political movement. This might be because Stoicism stresses “The interdependence and unity of one Universe, in which everything depends on something else through the operation of a series of inexorable moving causes” (36).

Stoicism and inhumanism, as Lioi cleverly points out, are “cosmic” ways of thinking. It is sometimes difficult to separate modern environmentalism from the irrationalism of New Age religious doctrine, which interests itself in such pseudoscientific and Victorian things as “holistic health and self-help thinking” (Kuhling 76). But Stoicism seems to have even these things in common with environmental thought. *Mens sana in corpore sana*—“a sound mind in a sound body”—says Juvenal, a debated Stoic, according to Gilbert Highet (“The Philosophy of Juvenal,” 254). Interestingly, Highet, a classical scholar, also argued “in the spring of 1963” that “colleges and universities be encouraged to set up lectures and discussion groups on Robinson Jeffers...and make tape recordings for FM stations in their areas” in the first issue of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*. As inspired by inhumanism deep ecology is centrally concerned with anti-anthropocentrism to the degree that it influences “natural resource polices” and guides ecoactivism

(Devall and Sessions, 2). In this sense deep ecology is more like postmodern interpretations of Marxist idealism, which emphasizes political identity, social justice, and the public sphere. Cheney, I think, is correct in identifying the political overtones that haunt the more philosophical aspects of deep ecology.

From an historicist perspective, deep ecology and Stoicism cannot be the same. To read them both as an attempt to maintain the political status quo is appropriately political and contemporary. It is a particular, convenient battle Cheney fights, and the similarity he sees is not a simple sociopolitical phenomenon, but the result of very different, complex processes. A reinvigorated inquiry into the natural world, heralded by 19<sup>th</sup> century science, can explain the resurgence of Stoicism. Both deep ecology and Stoicism were influenced by the ecological thinking of ancient Greek naturalists, if we are to consider Theophrastus, as J. Donald Hughes argues in “Theophrastus as Ecologist,” as centrally important to our understanding of naturalism in the Western tradition. Neither philosophy, or movement, is a likewise response to the same type of political situation because they are both unique, historically-isolated phenomena, however greatly informed by Classical naturalism. Cheney is decidedly postmodern in his critique, openly hostile to nature as anything other than a socially-constructed escape pod for the timorous. Postmodernism is not an essential truth, or the perennial antistrophe to establishment thinking, that the Alexandrian people, nor people today, were driven before like confused escapists. Stoicism was not about the avoidance of cultural difference, but ultimately the repression, or alleviation of the anxiety of the fear of death.

Deep ecology is about ecological unity and process, the importance of all physical things and properties of the universe, and a vague sense of material reincarnation. Like the irrationalist thinking of postmodernism, it is a repression of the death drive. While the former denies complete

annihilation, positing the possibility of rebirth through the processes of decay and appropriation, the life/death cycle of nature—it is really a reinscription of the eternal return—the latter relies on the indeterminacy of language to tell us what is not real, thus providing a kind of cloud of unknowing in which death is just a linguistic construct, and eternity a suddenly ineffable possibility. Karabatzkai believes Cheney’s understanding of Stoicism is weak, and that his argument was successfully refuted by Stephen “on theoretical and historical grounds” (33). Stephen believes Cheney’s article “is merely undisciplined narrative ill-equipped accurately to ascertain both the real shortcomings and the real merits of Stoic ethics and its ramifications of environmental thought” (275). That postmodern criticism is mere rhetoric in service of personal politics is a common observation. In this sense, deep ecology is a postmodern iteration of environmentalism. As Stephen argues, Cheney’s essay is nothing more than “incoherent, jargon-laden, and diffuse diatribe” (286). Looking at the *Meditations* of Marcus alongside Jeffers’s poetry is useful for dismantling arguments that reinforce doctrinaire *a priori* conclusions about 20<sup>th</sup> century naturalism that come from any ideology or school of criticism.

Jeffers, according to Devall and Sessions, “involves humans in the spiritual quest for freedom in the whole of Nature/God, from galaxies to subatomic particles, but especially in the organic world of his immediate existence” (102). But I disagree with their statement that “his poetry is actually an expression of the psychology of the emotions,” ranging from the “joyous works describing the active emotion of increasing one’s self-realization as part of the greater Self-realization by an identification with the totality of God/Nature” to characters “who are driven to their fiery destruction by overwhelming passions.” Rather, Jeffers’s poetry is a criticism of the emotional nature of literature; that it has made us too empathetic. We are supposed to know that Jeffers’s characters are not real, that they are in fact unreal in their behavior, that they are symbolic

of the problem of having emotions at all. Jeffers's poems, particularly his narratives, allow the reader to relax and not, for once, "feel the pain" of an imaginary being. As mentioned above, the most appropriate emotion for the grand events of human existence are best given "the aesthetic emotion," or "the emotion / That you give to a landscape" ("Invasion"). In "Margrave," Jeffers identifies the emotions as the source of our troubles:

...man is conscious,  
He brings the world to focus in a feeling brain,  
In a net of nerves catches the splendor of things,  
Breaks the somnambulism of nature...His distinction perhaps,  
Hardly his advantage. To slaver for contemptible pleasures  
And scream with pain, are hardly an advantage. (CP 2:160)

In that same section he refers to consciousness as a "contagion...that infects this corner of space." Though an undeniable quality of human nature, it is not desirable or even necessary to indulge in emotions, as literature allows us to do. Rather, one should look on life and death, as Jeffers does in "The Bed by the Window," "With neither dislike nor desire: rather with both, so equaled / That they kill each other and a crystalline interest / Remains alone" (CP 2:131). It is this "crystalline interest," a vision of great clarity and understanding, that Jeffers's poetry is crafted to provoke. This is a decidedly Stoic approach—the triumph of reason.

Stephen, in his examination of the Stoics, says, "As a rational organism...the human being acts in accordance with nature by acting according to *reason*" (277). Reason does not balance the emotional qualities of Jeffers's poems—it focuses them on the importance of living a balanced life. Stephen explains Stoic reason further:

Insofar as reason is what distinguishes human beings from the other animals, the Stoics hold that it is what is most characteristic of human nature; to be more precise, our highest virtue or ideal is found in our rational nature and our wisdom, not in our non-rational animality, and certainly not in our irrational judgments and impulses. (279)



While Jeffers himself is incredibly rational in his understanding of the human species, he does not believe that reason is a strong enough faculty to conquer our emotional side, at least when it comes to group loyalty. “Reason will not decide at last; the sword will decide,” he intones repeatedly in “Contemplation of the Sword” (CP 2:544-45). Even so, the emotional world is a part of God’s life, his universality, “the whole splendor of things and the sacred stars, but also the cruelty and greed, the treacheries / And vileness, insanities and filth and anguish.” Reason might be the answer to avoiding these things, or at least mitigating their consequences, but at times, Jeffers notes, vivid emotion and irrationalism are permanently with us.

Jeffers incorporated Stoicism into his theology which was, based on his upbringing, Calvinist. Christianity and Stoicism have some things in common. In an article from *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, “Jesus the Teacher and Stoic Ethics in the Gospel of Matthew” by Stanley K. Stowers, Stoicism is said to have been,

A combination of theism and pantheism. God is both the active organizing principle of the universe and the mind that is the author and administrator of each recreation of the universe after the dissolution of the former age. Stoicism denied that God had a humanlike form, but it accommodated traditional Greek thought about Zeus and the gods as symbolic...There was enough similarity between Stoic and Judean conceptions...that a Judean thinker could find adapting some Stoic thought to his own purposes possible and congenial. (61)

For Jeffers, God is, in fact, the “author and administrator of each recreation of the universe,” because he believed that God, nature, and reality were all synonymous with eternity. While God is the universe, he is also that which survives destruction, because he will be reborn. In “Explosion,” from *Last Poems*, Jeffers describes God as a beating heart:

We are born of explosion and homesick for  
it; our little blasts  
Echo that huge one. But the whole sum of the energies  
That made and contained the giant atom survives. It will gather again and pile up, the  
power and the glory—  
And no doubt it will burst again: systole and diastole: the whole universe beats like a heart.  
(CP 1:413)

This indicates an understanding of cosmogenesis that would not have been possible in Classical Stoicism. It is mostly the historical product of 19th century science. And this is important to remember, because Jeffers's God is not the forgiving, benevolent God of most Christian traditions. As a people, "We believe," he says, referring to westerners, "in the Christian virtues, universal love, self-abnegation, humility, non-resistance; but we believe also, as individuals and as nations, in the pagan virtues of our ancestors" ("Thoughts Contingent to a Poem," CP 4:398). He writes about "the tension of opposing faiths" being the dynamo for Western civilization ("Themes in My Poems," CP 4:407). The God Jeffers contemplates is much more wild, impossible to be divided by sectarianism because he is actuality itself; that God defies symbolization and contains the pagan elements, the Stoic elements, of cosmic naturalism. In this regard, Jeffers's religious views are more in-line with the Stoics, though they are still deeply Calvinistic in that there seems to be an unavoidable judgment awaiting us in the form of death. Moses Hadas, in his introduction to *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca: Essays and Letters*, explains: "Their physical theory was pantheistic materialism. The whole universe is an embodied spiritual force" (25). Lioi has a very similar understanding. "Though Jeffers's 'pantheism' is sometimes identified with the modern tradition descending from Spinoza," he says, "his notion that the universe is God corresponds more closely to the Stoic notion of a conscious, intelligent divinity that embodies itself cyclically in one cosmos at a time, but survives the destruction of any particular universe" (121). Jeffers has more in common with the Stoics than the Christians because of the emphasis on the indifference of the

gods, the absence of teleology, and a belief in material cosmogony. God is a force in Jeffers, rather than the idol of human virtue as in the Abrahamic religions: “He is no God of love, no justice of a little city like Dante’s Florence, no anthropoid God / Making commandments: This is the God who does not care and will never cease,” he writes in “Explosion” (414). Jeffers is a highly syncretic writer, thoroughly modernist, in his absorption and reconfiguration of the totality of theism in Western thought.

The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, in the tone of the Emperor’s didactic wisdom, is perhaps the best text for illustrating the Stoic qualities of Jeffers’s poems. Marcus has a great deal to say about order, change, human nature, reason, wholeness, monism, linearity (or cosmic narrative), death, the earth, acceptance and indifference, interconnectedness, transformation, disintegration, astronomy, insignificance, materialism, and reality. Frank McLynn, in *Marcus Aurelius: A Life*, calls him “the last major exponent” of Stoicism (252). Like Jeffers, “Marcus exhorts us to stop being puppets pulled by the strings of selfish desires and to stop spinning around like a top” (235). Jeffers locates all of man’s unhappiness in exaggerated and, ultimately, unrealized desires and dreams. In “The Answer” he tells us to “not be duped” by dreams that “will not be fulfilled” (CP 2:536). Modern man, as he writes in “The Torch-Bearer’s Race,” is tortured and confused by a “complication of desires” that did not trouble ancient man, thus were not natural, but a product of the particular circumstances of hypertrophied civilization—the modern world. And of the product of both desire and dream—the imagination, spoken of alongside the two in the first poem to be explicated here, “De Rerum Virtute,”—he urges us to distrust, and “Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly / At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?” (CP 3:403). By denying anthropocentric distortions, the power of the icon to represent a totality is broken. This is what I call *actualism*: a sober recognition, in literature, of what is

written about as the thing it is and an acceptance of the reality of its nature, leading to the subordination of the imagination to experience. That is to say, when Jeffers talks about a hawk, it does not symbolize, but calls to mind, like the Romantics, an image of the thing itself. It is a kind of anti-Imagist image, a rejection of the composition, the *ekphrasis*, a refusal to give things meaning by their association, and a rejection of what objects *mean* when taken together, and a resignation to the unchangeable qualities that constitute the real, the *gestalt*. This is what makes Jeffers's poems seem "obvious," or not given to analysis. They are not difficult to understand, superficially. He speaks in a narrative tone. His great poetic statement is that things written about do not signify, but represent themselves—that is, his images are to be taken as literal iterations of nature. The literature relies on language as a tool to communicate the real, rather than as a cipher that constructs the real. He communicates more clearly than any other Modernist writer, and lays a firm aesthetic foundation, more than any poet of that era, for the actualist poetics of late Modernism, particularly the dry realism of Philip Larkin and Charles Bukowski. Daniel McGuinness, in *Holding Patterns: Temporary Poetics in Contemporary Poetry*, comments on the similarities of Larkin and Jeffers. He says,

Most artists are [humane], but an interesting corollary to such a statement is what is to be done with those poets who refuse to love the world, even in an aesthetic sense, like Weldon Kees or Robinson Jeffers. How about Philip Larkin even, who has been dismissed, I think, by those who dismiss him, as an uncaring conservative rather than a classical and ironic artist. (16)

These poets, particularly Jeffers and Larkin, are united by their dedication to a realistic view of life. McGuinness then sets them against "The seers, Ginsberg, Blake, Olsen" who love the world "only when they don't look it in the eyes." Jeffers and Larkin, without question, look life directly

in the eyes. They face reality, courageously stare it down, and say what they see. Larkin does it through the lens of moribund cynicism; Jeffers, pantheism and the dramatic or narrative idol. Both were intensely influenced by Thomas Hardy. Jeffers was a Stoic and Larkin was a Cynic, inverting the Classical order of Cynicism influencing Stoicism, by way of the Cynic Crates to Zeno, the founder of Stoicism.

In an oft-quoted passage from a letter to Sister Mary James Power, Jeffers describes what might be called his religious beliefs. It is basically a reiteration of the definition of inhumanism he provided in the preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. “It is based,” he explains, “on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things and their living wholeness, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe...The attitude is neither misanthropic nor pessimist nor irreligious” (CP 4:418). He makes clear in that letter to Power, written in 1934, what he means by God. It is not an unusual letter; many addressed to the man, and many he responded to, ask him to give precise definitions of those big themes he took on: wholeness, God, importance, love, and materialism: “I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole” (CL 2:365). He writes, with more than a mild tone of ecological awareness, of the importance of interconnectedness to the system of relations that makes the universe behave like “one being.” It is a Stoic idea, although well-informed by the scientific knowledge of his time. Marcus Aurelius says something similar: “Either a universe that is all in order, or else a farrago thrown together at random yet somehow forming a universe. But can there be some measure of order subsisting in yourself, and at the same time disorder in the greater Whole? And that, too, when oneness of feeling exists between all the

parts of nature, in spite of their divergence and dispersion” (36). Consider also these ecologically-minded excerpts from *Meditations*:

All things are interwoven with one another; a sacred bond unites them; there is scarcely one thing that is isolated from another. Everything is coordinated, everything works together in giving form to the one universe. The world-order is a unity made up of multiplicity: God is one, pervading all things; all being is one, all law is one (namely, the common reason which all thinking creatures possess) and all truth is one—if, as we believe, there can be but one path to perfection for beings that are alike in kind and reason. (77)

And: “Think often of the bond that unites all things in the universe, and their dependence upon one another. All are, as it were, interwoven, and in consequence linked in mutual affection; because their orderly succession is brought about by the operation of the currents of tension, and the unity of all substance” (68). According to McLynn, Marcus “never decides categorically between the idea of gods that we can appeal to and the pantheistic notion of an impersonal deity woven into the very fabric of the universe, and oscillates wildly between the two mutually exclusive conceptions” (233).

To understand what Marcus means by “affection” we can think, in modern ecological terms, of symbiosis and E.O. Wilson’s concept of biophilia—things are drawn to, and come to rely on, each other. But we can also understand it is simple, actual contact. Light is drawn to objects, the ocean draws the rock back to itself, the moon is in an affectionate state with the earth by way of gravity, and the wind blows because gasses in the atmosphere expand or contract based on the temperature. In a very metaphysical sense of the word, all things are affectionate with each other in some way. Every one of these things can be defined as concatenation, or interweaving of things or events or both. Cosmic concatenation, though rational, is still a kind of mysticism that relies

on the extrapolation of patterns from actual phenomena. Modern ecology is the biotic aspect of cosmic relationships. Marcus speaks of concatenation in Books IV (40) and V (47), addressing the idea of the “web” directly: “Always think of the universe as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul...all are moved by its single impulse, and all play their part in the causation of every event that happens. Remark the intricacy of the skein, the complexity of the web” (39). This is a supreme example of Stoic cosmology, one Jeffers’s poetry is in full agreement with. Everything is strung together. Regardless of difference in the gestalt and the essence of things, objects cohere and live, like the organs of a man’s body, or the cells that comprise them, because they are connected to other living things. It is what might be called irreducible complexity, an idea recently and frequently exploited by creationists to argue for the teaching of religion in the science classroom. That is to say, the scaffolding that made the thing become what it is has been removed, creating the illusion of irreducibility. In reality, the structure of a thing changes so that it might fit with the changes in all other things. Complexity is the result of sustained compatibility.

Marcus also draws attention to the idea of sanity, that the individual becomes disordered by falling out of its nature—out of sync with the universe—and apart from the orderliness of the systems of interrelation. That we function as an organism is proof that the universe, too, is ordered. Everything is scalar—systems parallel each other from top to bottom, different in scale—and everything is organized on “the eternal roundabout, the heavy nucleus and whirling electrons, the leashed / And panting runners going nowhere; frustrated flight, unrelieved strain, endless return— all—all— / The eternal firewheel” (CP 3:606). This is order, the materiality and realism of actual relationships in space and time, indicated by the faculty of reason that exists in mankind itself. Though probably informed by the Rutherford-Bohr model of atomic physics where electrons are thought to revolve around the nucleus like planets in a solar system, now considered outdated,

Jeffers is speaking metaphorically to indicate the attractive qualities of things—that they are “leashed” to each other by physical forces acting in proximity. This creates a “whole,” according to what Marcus called “the creative Reason of the universe” (32).

In his letter to Power, Jeffers tries to reconcile the conflicting ideas of 19<sup>th</sup> century science, the epitome of Western rationalism, with traditional religious faith: “(This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.)” Marcus, too, considered the gods to be an excrescence, and proof, of reason.

O soul of mine... When will you be content with your present state, happy in all about you, persuaded that all things are yours, that all comes from the gods, and that all is and shall be well with you, so long as it is their good pleasure and ordained by them for the safety and welfare of that perfect living Whole—so good, so just, so beautiful—which gives life to all things, upholding and enfolding them, and at their dissolution gathering them into Itself so that yet others of their kind may spring forth? (122)

Like Jeffers, Marcus believed that a recognition of what the poet called “organic wholeness” contributed to a healthy mind. Inhumanism, explains Jeffers, “is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times” because “it has objective truth and human value” (CP 4:428). This again echoes the *mens sana in corpore sana* of Juvenal. If the birth of modern psychology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is anything to go by, and the prevalence of anxiety disorders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mankind was and is desperately in need of mental healing. The world, upset by world war, was suddenly made unpredictable, unnerving, and disordered.

If we recall Stoic rationality, human nature is obvious and predictable. “Nothing unprecedented is happening,” Marcus counsels, “so what is it that disturbs you?” (117). Jeffers shares this Stoic approach to the supposed instability in human nature, of novel events and behavior. “There is no reason for amazement,” Jeffers coolly explains in “The Purse-Seine,” a



lyric about the increasing role of civilization in man's life, "surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death" (CP 2:518). It is also a poem about destiny, about falling into the hands of a system that is doomed. This doom, though—that we sacrifice freedom for security until we are no longer able to provide for ourselves as individuals—is perennial, a known consequence of becoming civilized. The irony is that civilization makes us more vulnerable, because civilization is more doomed in the "Disastrous rhythm" of its "heavy and mobile masses" than the unaccompanied rhythm of any one person ("Rearmament," CP 2:514). Jeffers was ultimately being critical of the bellicose nature of contemporary nation-states, as he was in "Invasion," discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Man, so highly organized now, seemed to be, just like it always had been, organized for war. But this level of organization was deadly, "more" and "worse" conflicts set to "bleed the long future" (CP 2:131).

In "Original Sin" he makes one of his boldest statements about suffering and human nature: "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" (CP 3:204). The poet describes, in that lyric, protohumans roasting a mammoth alive to the hoots of celebration in their victory over hunger, famine, nature. Suffering was something to abide because, according to the poet, we are, because of our evolutionary past, responsible for who we are. Jeffers and Marcus were little moved by the strangeness, evil and broad range of our dark potential: it was not surprising. Theirs is not arrogance but a rational acceptance of human nature. For Jeffers, we are a product of violent evolution, as he says in an untitled poem often referred to by its first line, "The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing." He explains the origins of human nature:

But whence came the race of man? I will make a guess.  
A change of climate killed the great northern forests,  
Forcing the manlike apes down from their trees,  
They starved up there. They had been secure up there,

But famine is no security: among the withered branches blue famine: (CP 3:432)

Necessity drives the early hominids into unknown territory, risking, as all species do that travel outside of their niche, certain death.

Tiger and panther and the horrible fumbling bear and endless wolf-packs made life  
A dream of death. Therefore man has those dreams,  
And kills out of pure terror. Therefore man walks erect,  
Forever alerted: as the bear rises to fight  
So man does always. Therefore he invented fire and flint weapons  
In his desperate need. Therefore he is cruel and bloody-handed and quick-witted, having  
survived  
Against all odds.

The poet understands that culture is an outgrowth of human nature, designed to maximize survival and to thrive in new niches, once prohibited by predators and environmental conditions. Civilization is, of course, a more recent product of culture. This may be why we seem so alienated from nature. We rarely handle the artifacts of material culture—in industrialized nations, the source of most postmodern theoretical idealism—that indicate a close give-and-take relationship that constitutes survival in the wilderness, even to the point of denying the existence of nature, let alone human nature. Jeffers is empathetic with *Homo sapiens sapiens*, because they cannot be but who nature made them to be: culture is actually culture-use—it doesn't exist in a vacuum, but is practiced, otherwise it is what we call the archaeological record—and that is an essential part of human nature. He tries to assuage the guilt that dogs us:

Never blame the man: his hard-pressed ancestors formed him: the other anthropoid apes  
were safe  
In the great southern rain-forest and hardly changed  
In a million years: but the race of man was made  
By shock and agony.

Here Jeffers makes the argument that we were formed by both culture and nature, and that early tool-usage, early culture, participated with biological evolution to make human nature.

But never blame them: a wound was made in the brain

When life became too hard, and has never healed.

Jeffers considers the psychological consequences of a nature formed in the bloody crucible of skin-and-nails survival, the constant terror of the darkness and the fear of the unpredictable weather, always menacing in the Pleistocene, early man endured.

It is there that they learned trembling religion and blood-sacrifice,  
It is there that they learned to butcher beasts and to slaughter men,  
And hate the world: the great religions of love and kindness  
May conceal that, not change it. They are not primary but reactions  
Against the hate. (433)

Religion, says Jeffers, is perhaps a necessity for mitigating the guilt of survival, the “slaughter” and “hate” that was necessary “when life became too hard.” Civilization exaggerates both the best and worst qualities of human nature, but that nature is, as we know by the existence of our very bodies, inescapable. The postmodernists are admirable in their desire, however disingenuous in their denial of human nature (and thus, by association, culture), to say that there might be a better way to use culture. Civilization produces poetry and psychology, art, synthetics, computers, sanitation, gene therapy. Empathy, an essential human quality, drives much of our technological innovation. We ought to embrace it—as if we had a choice, a real means of not being human. “Though man may flee as he will,” reflects Marcus, “he is still caught and held fast; Nature is too strong for him” (111).

An undeniable part of existence is death. This is a topic that greatly interested both Jeffers and Marcus. In Book IV, Marcus advises us to use “these fleeting moments on earth as Nature would have you spend them, and then go to your rest with a good grace, as an olive falls in its season, with a blessing for the earth that bore it and a thanksgiving to the tree that gave it life” (41). We feel restricted by nature and invent things like flight, creating the illusion that “facts” can be overturned. But we are ultimately constrained by nature; it allows us a range of motion,

like the arc of a shoulder or the turning of a head, but a body cannot violate its mechanics. The more technologically-focused brand of posthumanism—take Donna Haraway’s postmodern “A Cyborg’s Manifesto,” for instance—is interested in what humans can become if in the future we can greatly alter our nature. She implies, through co-opted scientific terms like “taxonomy” and visions of social categories breaking down like “proteins,” that “fraying identities” constitute an end of categorical definitions of the human (16). This is her argument, which is the Marxist strand of posthumanism: “The theoretical and practical struggle against unity-through-domination or unity-through incorporation ironically undermines the justifications for patriarchy, colonialism, humanism...and other unlamented -isms, but *all* claims for an organic or natural standpoint” (15). She is a socialist feminist. Her intellectual posture, like Cheney’s, is a political and historical phenomenon of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century critical theory. As a Marxist she is an undeniable idealist. Political perspectives do not privilege the organism, but certain political animals in certain historical configurations.

That human nature cannot exist because species evolve is a spurious argument. Identity is constructed by social groups; human nature is not constructed, but represents a group of attributes and behaviors that ethologists—those who study the animal behavior of human beings—are quite capable of documenting in other animals. Marxist posthumanism is exceptionally anthropocentric, oriented around the constantly reshifting ground of the fetishized “Other,” the ultimate victim of white male patriarchy. Humans might find their nature changed by years of genetic engineering, but genetic engineering is still a part of human nature, deeply dependent upon the piling up of humanistic science. It exists within the range of human behavior. Again, postmodernism is often a thinly-veiled attempt to argue for the possibility of a “beyond,” indefinable by language, an outright denial of the existence of human nature, toward the possibility of perpetual existence.

This is the great white hope of genetic engineering—living forever. It is also the hope of those neo-mystics who go by the name postmodernists, the technopriests of 21<sup>st</sup> century material denialism. And it is the foundation of much of cultural posthumanism. Jeffers, on the other hand, is a posthumanist insofar as posthumanism is inhuman: we have to overcome our nature to overcome the deleterious effects of civilization.

For Jeffers, death is, as he says in “Original Sin,” “the only way to be cleansed” of the actual guilt of human nature: anthropocentrism—and thus, arrogance. He, a material realist, and Marcus, a Stoic, embrace death as an insurmountable part not just of life but a necessary element in the perpetuation of the universe—God for Jeffers, and Marcus in his pantheistic moments. Jeffers writes, in “The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing,” that the universe, or God, is not only conscious, but “the one being / Who is all that exists” (CP 3:434). Marcus calls this destiny: “Mutual integration is a universal principle. As a myriad bodies combine into the single Body which is the world, so a myriad causes combine into the single Cause which is destiny” (46). This “destiny” is what Jeffers spoke about in “Be Angry at the Sun:” “Watch the wheel slope and turn, / They are all bound on the wheel” (CP 3:24). Jeffers sees human events as belonging to the single “Cause,” or what he might call God, reality or nature as expressed in his poetry. (These three words are interchangeable in Jeffers’s theology, as I explain in detail in the chapter on *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*.) One ought not be afraid of death, nor surprised, as Jeffers was not in “The Bed by the Window.” His “crystalline interest” in death was a product of the natural animal avoidance of death, the “dislike” of it, and desire, a product of his religious devotion to the “wholeness of life and things” from “The Answer” (CP 2:536).

In one of his last poems, “Birth and Death,” he contemplates the death of the entire human race, its extinction, and thus its transience. It is a process, surely, and part of the larger process of

the universe. “We used to be individuals, not populations. / Perhaps we are now preparing for the great slaughter. No reason to be alarmed; stone-dead is dead; / Breeding like rabbits we hasten to meet the day” (CP 3:440). Death is a part of a healthy ecology, and here Jeffers considers the rapid growth of human beings to be indicative of our coming end. We were, and are, overshooting the environment. Because of this, not only was the species doomed to die, but the individual, as well. Humanism would be an impossibility—we would have to learn to love death, if human extinction were to gradually become a necessity for survival. Those old psychological scars would be opened up. “They’ll die faceless in flocks, / And the earth flourish long after mankind is out,” he says in the facing poem “End of the World” (CP 3:441). He was clearly not a bland environmentalist; he was not interested in “saving the earth”—the earth does not need saving. Nothing does. And that is the great mistake of anthropocentrism: only man needs a savior because of his historically bloody evolution—his psychologically cries out for redemption.

Jeffers writes in “Meditation on Saviors,” that death is, in fact, a gift, the ultimate gift for the most dangerous species on the planet:

Yet look: are they not pitiable? No: if they lived forever they would be pitiable:  
But a huge gift reserved quite overwhelms them at the end; they are able then to be still  
and not cry. (CP 1:400)

Empathy and sympathy are natural to us; we feel because we imagine ourselves feeling what the other person feels—but it is not necessarily dignified, holy, or even useful. We think nature barbaric because it has no feeling for us. But mankind deserves no pity, for all pity is anthropocentric—we pity ourselves by pitying others. We mourn at funerals to mourn our own certain deaths. Why is man not to be pitied? Because death will “cleanse” him of his life, putting him back into the harmless process of the universe. Like the Sibyl of Cumae who must watch herself age but not die, the great gift of death allows life to go on. Marcus says, “All things are in

process of change. You yourself are ceaselessly undergoing transformation, and the decay of some of your parts, and so is the whole universe” (113). Such a perspective necessitates Stoicism, inhumanism, else how could we understand death as a possible friend, rather than an enemy, not only to us, but to the universe as well? Death is the angel of ecology. It hurries nature onward to more creation, to further process, to more life. Marcus advises us to “Realize the nature of all things material, observing how each of them is even now undergoing dissolution and change, and is already in process of decay, or dispersion, or whatever other natural fate may be in store for it” (129). Returning to “Meditation on Saviors,” we find a similar sentiment expressed. Humans are blessed to live,

And having touched a little of the beauty and seen a little of the beauty of things, magically  
grow  
Across the funeral fire or the hidden stench of burial themselves into the beauty they  
admired.

The transformation of life into life by the process of death astonishes Jeffers; it is “magical,” and it is a kind of “growth” rather than decay, a jump across the “stench” of the body “into the beauty they admired.” His knowledge of science gives him the language to communicate to us the strange miracle of life as seen under the microscope. He elides the ugliness of decay because it, too, is a process. Once decay begins, we enter the universe, as gas, water, or flesh, growing

Themselves into the God, themselves into the sacred steep unconsciousness they used to  
mimic  
Asleep between lamp’s death and dawn, while the last drunkard stumbled homeward down  
the dark street.

They are not to be pitied but very fortunate; they need no savior, salvation comes and takes  
them by force,  
It gathers them into the great kingdoms of dust and stone, the blown storms, the stream’s-  
end ocean.

Death is a “fortunate” occurrence in the lives of men, because it is fortuitous to creation, to the perpetuation of the universe. Death is the great savior of man’s soul; it ferries him through the

body of the universe. There is nothing especially mystical about this; it is a physical process, occurring in nature, no different than microbes dying in a tidepool. That “salvation comes and takes [us] by force” is a slap in the face that somehow comforts, hardly sadistic on Jeffers’s part, but perhaps masochistic on ours. The reader of Jeffers, though constantly encouraged by the poet to look outward, is always looking inward for the roots of that humiliating desire.



## Chapter Four

### *Tamar*: A Close Reading

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*Tamar* is a poem about contact: about things and forces meeting, touching, interacting, and influencing each other. Masculine and feminine forces—activity and passivity—provide a model for looking at expression and repression in *Tamar's* characters. This simple opposition is the dynamo of the poem, driving forward the primary theme of contact. The ocean wears on the land; rain makes the earth fresh and fertile, and sunlight, a thing Jeffers identifies as a powerfully masculine force, saps the earth of its life-giving substances, replacing them with the fecundity of insects and the stagnated slime of once freely-flowing waters and freshets. What makes this binary especially interesting is the aliveness with which all of nature is presented in this poem, and the diametric opposition within which these disparate forces come into contact. Whether human or non-human, the idea that nothing is *not* alive is the lynchpin in Jeffers's complex ecopoetics. No space exists between anything, buttressed as things are by an invisible world of microscopic presences and natural forces—and all things reach into and across each other in an unbridled exploration of sensation and surrounding. The poem is very much concerned with the idea of aliveness, a characteristic possessed by animate, and inanimate, objects—like the sun and the ocean—alike, and evinced by the interaction of things regardless of their level of consciousness. What all things do is act according to an innate desire for contact, a quality possessed by tree roots, the ocean, light, and men and women, to name a few. Jeffers's universe is a system of sensuous encounter, even if the source of that outward movement—for instance, the rays of the sun—has no identifiable being in the traditional sense of being alive. *Tamar* is an exceptionally important

poem if we consider the words of Joseph Carroll, the creator of a kind of literary criticism known as Literary Darwinism, a school that relies more on the discoveries of evolutionary psychology than the moribund mysticism of postmodern commentary to understand literature as a real, actual work of the evolved mind. He says, in *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature*, “Human beings living in a real physical world and interacting both with their physical environment and with other human beings form the central topic of all literary representation” (108). Jeffers is important because he embraces this “central topic”—contact—and extrapolates it into theories of God, reality, and nature.

In *The Double Axe pt. II: The Inhumanist*, the character called the Old Man—really a mask for Jeffers’s own voice—explains that aliveness is a universal quality:

...there is not an atom in all the universes  
But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, light, heat, and the other  
Flamings, the nerves in the night’s black flesh, flow them together; the stars, the winds and  
the people: one energy,  
One existence, one music, one organism, one life, one God: star-fire and rock-strength, the  
sea’s cold flow  
And man’s dark soul. (CP 3:256-7)

This fundamental belief that there is no such thing as space or emptiness between things is the ultimate assertion of an ecological reality. If there are no boundaries between what we call something and what we call nothing then man cannot live outside of a system of relationships. In other words, ecology is about the state of the universe, not the earth. The earth works as a model within which we see the universal principle of contact up close. Astronomy has allowed us to see deeper and, for Jeffers, has showed us that the intimate relations between matter and forces are inescapable. Even distance and space are qualities that determine the nature of a relationship. Take, for instance, the distance the earth is from the sun, and that because of this space the earth is habitable. But light, radiation and gravitation fill the gap between the two and link them.

Integrity, of which Jeffers talks so much, is quite literally the truth, because the myth of isolation—or, in cultural terms, individuality, as well as the cordoning off of the mind from the body, a hallmark of humanism—breaks the rule that creates all reality: contact. Thus in the passage above nothing discrete exists, but only a flow of things that are what they are only because they are constituted not by a limited amount of intimate relationships, but all relationships. Wholeness, integrity and truth are the same thing in Jeffers’s poetic vision. If a piece goes missing, the universe is not itself, and reality ceases to be understandable. This is the horror Jeffers warns against, a delusion created and perpetuated by the mind, a sickness of exceptionalism.

In the poetry of Jeffers, aliveness can be understood as that which reaches and touches, but also that which is touched: light pours from the sun and plays over the verdure and stone of nature. The greatest example of the “touched” is the idiot Jinny Cauldwell—ironically touched in the mental sense as well—for whom the sun is the most pure and easily understood source of sensation for her. She is stunted in her relationships with other people, particularly the family: she cannot use her consciousness to reach out to anyone with any coherent meaning, and her body is thus imprisoned by her mind’s inability to understand what is meaningful in the contact she has with others. Her sense of reality is irrevocably distorted because her underdeveloped psyche is quite literally walled off (neurologically gated) from the rest of the world. Jeffers describes her mind as a caged bird living in darkness, a metaphor that conjures up images of a captive, living thing, beating its wings to escape. Jinny’s “mind had been from birth a crippled bird but when she was twelve years old her mind’s cage / Was covered utterly, like a bird-cage covered with its evening cloth when lamps are lighted, / And her memory skipped the more than forty years between but caught stray gleams of the sun of childhood” (CP 1:31). She craves the sun for its power to reveal the metaphorical darkness of her existence, to illumine a world that has all but gotten out of reach.

All of her social interactions are mediated by a mind that never developed beyond the age of twelve. She obsesses over candles and will eventually burn the house down with everyone in it. The consummate attribute of human aliveness—consciousness—stagnated within her. For humans, consciousness is the concentration of perception; it becomes the final place of arbitration for the experience of reality. Without it, humans are just as alive (like Jinny), but because it is so intimately connected with experience a damaged consciousness will never encounter the world in the fullness of human nature. Jinny wails for the light to shine on and touch her body and to feel its actual sensuous quality, and when it does she is able to be calm and at peace. To Jinny, light has more aliveness than the people around her whom she cannot reach at or into with any real sensuous purpose; her mind is too confused by the complexities of human interaction. The simplicity of natural phenomena makes it possible for her to experience it on her own terms, and within her own psychological limitations. She is incapable of socializing, so what can touch her without the mediation of the mind is most soothing and real to her. The Cauldwells have cast her aside as not worth knowing, subjected only to restraint and disdain by nearly everyone in the family. Aunt Stella is her only friend, willing to nurse her night and day.

The power of elemental forces as sensuous “beings” suggests the reader of *Tamar* consider other possibilities for aliveness in the universe. If being alive means only to touch that which is near us then nothing is not alive, the universe is an ecosystem, and everything is constantly reaching out and making contact. In the poem the ocean is described as having fingers that reach onto the land; roots dig deep into the earth looking for the living material that will be the sustenance of new life. Characters frequently extend their hands in gestures of pity, love and tenderness. Tamar reaches out to both Lee Cauldwell, her brother, and her lover, Will Andrews, for sexual satisfaction, and discovers and takes in their touch the illumination of the adult self. Both men

change her, she becomes mature, and her mind grows into maturity; through the sexual experience she learns about herself as well as each of the men, and in so doing, learns about the extremes of human experience. Through Lee she discovers that incest is only wrong in the psychological sense, that to encounter the proximal is a matter of course for all living things and not a perversion of desire. Joseph Carroll, in *Evolution and Literary Theory*, keys in on a definition of incest, suggesting why it may have been such an interesting topic to Jeffers:

The best currently available evidence suggests that prohibitions against incest are genetically programmed...These findings have large implications for literary criticism generally. By better understanding the nature of incest, we can avoid erroneous interpretations of texts, such as *Oedipus Rex*, in which incest is a central issue, and we can avoid erroneously importing mother/son incest into texts, such as *Hamlet*, in which incest is not a central issue. (44)

Tamar is further altered by Will, who in his innocence reveals to Tamar that there are psychological consequences for violating the universal taboo of sex with a sibling. We see in nature the same behavior. The active moves against the passive, both directing and shaping the flow and movement of the material world. Streams explore their bedrock into the seas, and the tide moves across the land it jags, all shaping all as they go. The resistance of stone is the paramount symbol for passivity, of non-reaching, but simply being and being acted upon, whose aliveness is tortured into new shapes by the changeling powers of the elemental world. Rock feels the buffeting of the sea, and is changed by it—it is inverted, in a sense. Like a tree blown in one direction by a powerful wind, it shows the impact and shaping influence of activity. The twisted, tortured coast cypress is a recurring symbol in Jeffers's poetry. In "Granite and Cypress," he calls those trees "the heavy-shouldered children of the wind," meaning the wind has birthed them, given them their form and

character (CP 1:105). This is an ecological vision transcending definitions of ecology that privilege biotic life over the system of relationships that shape it, and the materials that are shaped by it. All things in the universe are the same in that they reach into the essence of other things, and by exploring discover otherness. This discovery is registered both consciously, and unconsciously, by the human mind, but this discovery is present in all things, throughout the universe, regardless of what we perceive as an awareness of being. Aliveness in Jeffers, then, can be read as the essential quality of existence, not consciousness or biological integrity. He constructs an ecological vision that does not tolerate divisions between living and non-living, but considers them the same in that they feel and find their surroundings, map and know them, and thus create what we perceive to be thinginess—we know only what something is by what it is not. Aliveness is existence. Relationships create the universe, and so all that exists is, in fact, alive. Everything feels, in its own unique way, everything else. What grants existence is the interpenetration of what we might call the environment—that which plays on us. Nothing exists, perhaps with the exception of light, without things to come up against it and touch it. But even photons are scattered by the objects they discover. And existence is simply contact, whether felt by flesh and processed by the nervous system or the cliffs that are weathered by the wind and the water. Aliveness is the lurch toward something else, willful or perceptually not willful.

Jeffers's ecological vision is established by the incident that opens the narrative. Before the plot develops, before we ever meet Tamar, the poem announces itself as a philosophical treatise on the concept of aliveness. Lee Cauldwell, drunk and on horseback, slips from a cliff to the rocks below. The horse is killed, but the rider lives. Lee spurred the horse, a mare, once, and the animal resisted; "she trembled," fighting the urge of its rider with its own desire to live (CP 1:18). Trembling is a recurring symbol in the poem, representative of restrained passion, the horse quite

broken by civilization and the will of men to go against its own sense of freedom. The horse is resistant because the rider, Lee, and all riders, come to possess the lives of animals by drafting or breaking them, and redirecting their energies along the course of human use. Humans control and shape nearly all of the earth's ecosystems, and everything we come into contact with is immediately placed into a hierarchical relationship because of our ability to dominate all life. The horse dies—civilization slays it. The rules of men have cast it down to death against its own better judgment and urge for freedom; its individuality is harnessed, restrained, driven and shattered. Tamar will come to represent the opposite of this, of a throwing off of custom and morality to reach out to that which is nearest her, like a plant explores the soil and eats the life as it goes, and so commit incest with her brother Lee. In essence, desire is not a transgression, but the restriction and control of desire is transgressive. It perverts aliveness, directing the energies of the whole world to human ends, wherein the universe is exploited to extend the reach of man's experience. Because of his mind, man, through culture, can experience that which his body cannot of its own accord. He can feel the speed of the horse; in his nakedness, he feels the warmth of animal skins; and he is freed from his own biological restrictions by the liberating powers of fire to illuminate the dark and digest his food for him. Humans have the propensity and desire to control life, to keep it near us for ready use. In arrogance the life of the universe becomes limited to human experience and expectation and exploitation; man is an animal that explores and consumes insatiably. The various alivenesses of the world are broken on the rocks of human insistence as we interpenetrate our surroundings, powerfully, irresistibly, and occasionally abuse the life that sustains us. Jeffers critiques human nature for destabilizing and breaking the balance that characterizes the universe.

After the horse falls to its death, Lee lies injured on the tide-line, trapped beneath the beast. He is unable to move to safety, ironically trapped by the weight of the animal that he so skillfully controlled otherwise. Reality literally covers Lee, as he appears to himself helpless and weak, a fragile body with an oversized brain. The horse is more body than mind, representing the power of the material world over the ephemeral zone of the psyche. Jeffers puts the tragedy into perspective, dramatizing the environment as alive, but uncaring:

The night you know accepted with no show of emotion the little accident; grave Orion  
Moved northwest from the naked shore, the moon moved to Meridian, the slow pulse of  
the ocean  
Beat, the slow tide came in across the slippery stones: it drowned the dead mare's muzzle  
and sluggishly  
Felt for the rider...  
What sea-cold fingers tapped the walls of its deserted ruin...  
The icy fingers, they had crept over the loose hand and lay in the hair now. (CP 1:18)

The ocean, though it seems to be spreading over Lee in an attempt to claim him for itself, to feed the endless storms that rage in the sea, the kelp that climbs toward the sunlight, explores the coast and finds and discovers that which it is not. But the ocean does not claim Lee's body. He, like a primordial being "crawled without consciousness...like a creature with no bones, a seaworm," highlighting the interactive world that brings forth its various forms, the struggle for survival that finds its paramount expression in life's engagement with the all-consuming powers of the ocean (CP 1:19). At last Lee, "by half inches," symbolic of the slowness of evolution, pulls himself "out of the sea-wrack up to sandy granite, / Out of the tide's path." He is saved by a group of people that come upon the site of the accident. Their "hands were reaching for him and drawing him up the cliff," and he is saved, by human hands, from the chilling fingers of the ocean. His rescue evinces the affinity humans have for each other, the mutual valuation of human life, the warmth of humanity, and the empathy that divides us from the unconscious, but alive, world. In this environment, the human figure appears to be capable of more than self-interest. This uniqueness



alienates us from nature as we look for signs of love in the universe. The people's hands save Lee from the almost-prehensile grasp of the ocean. He is pulled upward by humanity as the facelessness of nature threatens his life. Lee survives, and the tragedy that is *Tamar* begins, thoroughly foregrounded by the concepts of affinity and aliveness.

Other elemental forces, in addition to the ocean and the sun, move with exploratory power through nature. The light of morning, though restrained, was "dammed behind the hills...but overflowed" (CP 1:22). Winds rage "around the gables of the house and through the forest of the cypresses," and oaks are described as "thrusting elbows at the wind." This same wind affects the cattle, who put "their horns to the wind." All things respond to the elements, the environment, and are gradually shaped by those encounters. The horns of the cattle, like the branches of the trees, are turned not entirely by will but in response to the exploratory power of the elements. In this sense, the wind is as alive as the ocean; it reaches out and touches that which it is not, and so becomes a distinguishable, discrete phenomenon. It explores, feels in a sense, and interpenetrates its immediate surroundings. Jeffers's ecological vision is strange, and incredibly powerful, in that he includes in his definition of life things that are not biotic, but elemental. Environment in Jeffers is a system of relationships that includes the stars, the sunlight, water, earth, wind and rain: animal, vegetable, and mineral are inseparable because they create each other through interaction and form distinctions. All things act and are acted upon by each other. There is no way to go outside a system that is created entirely by encounter. If all things are the product of relationships, then nothing can exist that does not relate back to the source. Even empty space is a quality of relationships. And there are no insurmountable interstices in Jeffers's universe. Exploration is a closing of the gap between things that are alive. The environment is a set of clashes, agon beyond human tragedy, whose constituents are always striving to possess the otherness that surrounds

them. The incessant friction of things shaping other things, and forces moving against forces and so defining them, transcends in scale and in time the temporary struggle of human existence. In a universe so tortured with aliveness, humans matter only in that they are a link in the unbreakable chain of being. This is the essence of inhumanism.

The idea that the universe is monistic yet made of innumerable connections, and that these connections create diversity, is Jeffers's ecological vision. Taking this into consideration, it makes sense that incest is used by Jeffers as a symbol for proximal creation, or the shaping of things by what's near them. Incest in *Tamar*, and elsewhere in Jeffers's poetry, is often a metaphor for the desire life has to interpenetrate and discover the immediate. Tamar's desire for sexual intimacy leads to a longing for carnal knowledge, which she first seeks out from her brother, then from her neighbor Will Andrews. She does not—because she cannot—venture into Monterey to meet a man, the way Lee is able to go there and meet women. Tamar's sexual transgression seems a matter of circumstance, because she is physically trapped on the ranch. More than once she literally takes hold of Lee and pulls him down with herself. For example: "Lee bent above the white pure cameo-face on the white pillow, meaning to kiss the forehead. / But Tamar's hands caught him, her lips reached up for his" (CP 1:53). This mimics the scene when Tamar and Lee have sex in the clear, fresh pool, the same pool where she meets Will to have sex with him—only then it is a different time of year, and the water has gone stagnant, nature mirroring the psychological pollution Tamar has experienced. But with Lee,

...when he had dragged her to the bank both arms  
Clung to him, the white body in a sobbing spasm  
Clutched him, he could not disentangle the white desire,  
So they were joined (like drowning folk brought back  
By force to bitter life) painfully, without joy. (CP 1:26)

After the sexual encounter with Lee, Tamar lay there, while “One of her arms crushed both her breasts, / The other lay in the grass, the fingers clutching toward the roots of the soft grass” (CP 1:27). Her clutching gesture indicates a deeper reach, inward, toward the purity of existence she will never have again—she longs for a connection to the safe, generative earth, but can only incestuously, self-touchingly crush her own humanity against itself. When she has sex with Will, a similar encounter, with similar, but slightly different, results, occurs in the selfsame pool. She resists Will’s advances, and the young man says “I love you so much too well / I would cut my hands off not to harm you” (CP 1:38). He indicates his “will”-ingness to reject self-love and so discover the power of creation in the act of sexual union. Tamar is revolted by Will’s morality, his virtuous selflessness, which sets her transgression with Lee in stark relief: “The boy feeling her body / Vibrant and soft and sweet in its weeping surrender / Went blind and could not feel how she hated him” (CP 1:39). Will, unlike Tamar and Lee, is aware of the consequences of his actions, and is a kind of unwelcome purity, a hesitation, in the midst of the aliveness of the world.

Isolated on the Cauldwell ranch, Tamar grows to maturity within the circle of her own family. Where Lee goes into Monterey to have sex with women, enjoying the freedom of choice, Tamar is driven by her loneliness to seek love where she can get it, and she takes, like the roots of a tree eating the nutrients in the soil, the aliveness that is nearest to her. Because of this her nature is conflated with the nature of the universe, of the ecological reality that we are shaped entirely by the world in which we live. Desire is not immoral, but essential—not only to human nature, but the universe itself. The psychological and social consequences—of breaking the taboo of incest, and beyond that, too, as Tamar is impregnated by Lee—of pursuing forbidden desires are severe, but only insofar as the enculturated are concerned. Cultures set the rules, and if we break them, we risk losing everything. But culture is simply an idea, not a real thing in the universe—all

technology and art is merely the rearrangement of existing materials. Therefore, culture is not alive; it is only an interpretation. Mores, or values, are one of many such interpretations. Life seeks life without the baggage of ethics, and this is beyond judgment, because it is natural. Incest corresponds to the way the ocean tried to eat Lee; the way the wind shapes the branches; the response of the material world to elements and encounters of nearness. Incest in *Tamar* becomes a metaphor for the desire all aliveness has to reach, find and feel what's near. In this sense all discrete iterations of nature have an aliveness, and that aliveness is given by that which encounters them. Everything exists because of spatial relationships. Ecology is the only truth available in the cosmos: this universe is driven by a desire to know itself and uses its many forms and forces to do so. It spokes out with awareness. To encounter is to know, and to know is to exist. This is the nature of Jeffers's pantheism: God is everything, and everything is alive.

Tamar's family tree is twisted and crossed through past inbreedings. Incest runs through the Cauldwell family. The patriarch, David, had sex with his sister, Helen. Cypresses, among other species of trees, feature prominently throughout the poem, and seem to surround the ranch. When Lee and Tamar have sex at the pool, the trees are reflected in the "inter-branching ripples" of the water, the forest above "over-woven" (CP 1:25). The trees are obvious symbols for the family tree, and the visual a representation of encounter and nearness, and of nature's ability to overlap itself. The two siblings, like their father David and Aunt Helen, wanted "to tangle the interbranching net of generations / With a knot sideways" (CP 1:30). Jeffers then writes one of the most beautiful, powerful and declarative lines of his poetic career: "Desire's the arrow-sprayer / And shoots into the stars." Desire, then, controls the actions of all things, of sexuality and starlight. It is the essential energy of Jeffers's ecological vision: it is, psychologically speaking, thanatos and eros—the death- and sex-drives. It is Schopenhauer's *will*.

Tamar learns about the sexual relationship David had with Helen through the mouthpiece of Aunt Stella, an old woman who becomes possessed, at times, by various spirits of the dead.

Take this description of her powers:

...here at Lobos the winds are torturers,  
The old trees endure them. They blew always thwart the old woman's dreams and  
sometimes by her bedside  
Stood, the south in russet black, the north in white, but the northwest wave-green, sea-  
brilliant,  
Scaled like a fish. She had also the sun and moon and mightier presences in her visions.  
(CP 1:28)

Aunt Stella is sensitive to both masculine (the sun) and feminine (the moon) forces, and is able to see into the human heart. Her mind seems at times to be controlled by the wind. The elements, even while she is sleeping or in a trance, afflict her thoughts, and shape them as much as her own generative powers of creativity. That is to say, Aunt Stella's thoughts and dreams are as much a product of her environment as her inscape. She begins calling Tamar "Helen" while in a trance, saying to her "Show him your beauty, / Strip for him, Helen, as when he made you a seaweed bed in the cave" (CP 1:28). Later, when Aunt Stella and Jinny take Tamar to the beach to participate in a kind of séance, "They lay on the odorous kelp" (CP 1:43). A primal scene is then enacted: "Yet she glanced no thought / At her own mermaid nakedness but gathering / The long black serpents of beached seaweed wove / Wreaths for old Jinny and crowned and wound her" (CP 1:50). The seaweed becomes an essential symbol for feminine life that thirsts for an encounter with the masculine. The plants grow upward from the sea floor toward the sunlight, seeking sustenance, traveling at the source with a certain feeling and awareness, uplifted in a kind of praise toward "the intolerably masculine sun" (CP 1:41). The kelp becomes a symbol of Tamar's sexual desires. The sun is the nearest object of light; seaweed does not grow toward distant stars, but the closest one. This is natural. The human fall into sin, forethought, is the traditional mark of deviance in man.

But Jeffers sees forethought as in the run of nature: man is no less natural than the animals or the elements. Inhumanism is a philosophy founded on human ethology, or the study of the animal behavior of the human species, and Jeffers never fails to remind the reader that if we accept the premise that humans are animal and thus blameless, because nature is blameless, then the universe will appear more cohesive.

The aliveness of the earth is illustrated by the opposition of rain and dryness: “The hard and dry and masculine tyrannized for a season. Rain in October or November / Yearly avenges the balance” (CP 1:41). On the beach, Tamar, brimming with a sexual desire appropriate to her age or level of maturation, is more than simply likened to the earth; and her body is more than a metaphor for the femininity of nature and creation. Jeffers has us consider the human body as a microcosm of larger, celestial and essential forces:

The beautiful girlish body as gracile as a maiden’s  
Gone beastlike, crouching and widening,  
Agape to be entered, as the earth  
Gapes with harsh heat-cracks, the inland adobe of sun-worn valleys  
At the end of summer  
Opening sick mouths for its hope of the rain. (CP 1:45)

Tamar’s desire, though incestuous and condemned by society, is as natural as the dry earth thirsting for rain. In this sense there is nothing particularly shocking about the sexual encounter between Lee and Tamar, brother and sister, or between their father David and his sister Helen. Jeffers puts humans back in their place, in the natural world—not above it. He insists the reader consider the possibility that free will is not the ultimate determinant of human behavior. His ecological vision challenges us to think of morality in naturalistic terms, that it is a quality of the human animal, but that it might be what makes us unhappy; we put judgments on unavoidable desires, the only universal desire being for immediate contact. Nature, God, is wild, and inhumanism does not necessarily have an ethical dimension. But inhumanism considers ethics a humanistic overlay:

limited, alienating and judgmental—a cultural construction that ties man, like horses to their halters, painfully to actions that are ultimately inconsequential except for the psychological dimension that has authority over our lives only because we grant it such. Not all transgressions dog us as negative or harmful. For instance, Tamar is uplifted by her encounter with the spirits of the dead. The poem goes,

...She in the starlight  
And little noises of the rising tide  
Naked and not ashamed bore a third part  
With the ocean and keen stars in the consistence  
And dignity of the world. (CP 1:48)

What Jeffers is doing in *Tamar* is literally phenomenal. The material world shows us, through simple exhibition, the wildness of itself, and the nothingness that is at stake. Consequences are an illusion, or at their greatest power a temporary upset, that the fire of creation cures: it cleans the earth and makes it ready to be new again. Humans should not be ashamed of their desires because they fleet through a world that is constantly in flux; everything is evanescent. Incest, being a universal taboo (though what counts as incest varies by culture), becomes the ultimate symbol for the aliveness, the awareness and the wildness of things. The reader might be shocked, but Jeffers is attempting to reconcile man's ego, a product of his psychology, with the impermanence of his material existence. Inhumanism is the refusal to deny ourselves the inert simplicity and innocence of the innate and darkest parts of human behavior, which, if we accept as natural, can put us back into a healthy relationship with our surroundings. But as the characters demonstrate, we must remain aware of the very real psychological consequences that come with actions that overreach established codes of morality.

What makes us human is culture-use, and with that comes morality, ethics, the dictate of restraint, and the psychological ramifications we face when going outside those limits. Our

animality, evinced by nature's wildness, is deep within us. For example, Lee and Tamar halter their horses just before they head to the pool to engage in illicit sex, and when that section of the poem ends, "The horses at the canyon mouth tugged at their halters, / Dug pits under the restless forehooves, shivered in the hill-wind / At sundown, were not ridden till dark" (CP 1:27). The animal kingdom longs for freedom from its human restraints, including humans. But for us all desire must be weighed against the consequences with which we must live. Not only that, to be tortured by psychological consequences is to live in a kind of hell, as is the case with David and his lifelong regret of having sex with his sister, Helen. In *Tamar*, the restriction of desire is seen as the source of many of mankind's problems. Everything in the natural world seems capable of living without self-censure, but not humans. The elements are even less to blame, being outside of the strictures of biology, and become a kind of cypher for God's power: they do not live or die, but act. Water, light, heat, gravity—these things exist eternally.

In the end of *Tamar*, fire destroys the house and everyone in it. Fire is the uncontrollable source of sensuous contact; an all-covering, all-pervasive energy that unscrupulously consumes everything in its path. It comes to stand for the power of God because it destroys without taking consequences into consideration—destruction begets creation. It is very much the Heraclitean fire in that its presence along the sea stands for the other great force, in addition to the water, of creation. But there is no final accounting of rights and wrongs. Life takes new forms, and the universe persists. The fire purifies everything, leaving nothing behind of the Cauldwell family's transgressions but ashes. Not even memory remains—everyone dies. The Cauldwells will join the prehistoric ghosts Tamar envisioned in one of her dreams:

Tamar saw the huddled bodies  
Squat by the fires and sleep; but when the dawn came there was throbbing music meant for  
daylight  
And that weak people went where it led them and were nothing; then Spaniards, priests



and horseback soldiers,  
Came down the river and wandered through the wood to the sea, and hearing the universal  
music  
Went where it led them and were nothing; and the English-speakers  
Came down the river and wandered through the wood to the sea, among them Tamar saw  
her mother  
Walking beside a nameless woman with no face nor breasts; and the universal music  
Led them away and they were nothing. (CP 1:34-5)

People and peoples come and go. Jeffers exhibits a strong sense of *amor fati* in all of his great narrative poems. The actions of his characters leave no permanent mark on the landscape, as we do not, either. Our self-torture is an illusion, yet the psychological torment of overleaping the restraints of culture can manifest itself as a very real and powerful force of self-destruction. Our desires and expectations are often at odds because of foreknowledge: we are aware that the world has consequences. Sin is a trap in which man is caught, torn by passion and restraint, like those horses tied to short halters, grinding their hooves into the earth.

## Chapter Five

### *Roan Stallion*

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In his classic training manual, *On Horsemanship*, Xenophon says of the relationship of the rider to the equine, “Temper of spirit in a horse takes the place of passion or anger in a man; and just as you may best escape exciting a man's ill-temper by avoiding harshness of speech and act, so you will best avoid enraging a spirited horse by not annoying him.” Robinson Jeffers’s most controversial and widely-celebrated narrative poem, *Roan Stallion*, ends just after a wild horse tramples an angry man and is itself shot by a woman. The man’s wife, called California, kills the stallion, and she looks at their young child with “the mask of a woman / Who has killed God” (CP 1:198). She has, like all humans have, what Jeffers describes later in *The Women at Point Sur* as “misty brainfuls / Of perplexed passion (CP 1:240). It is ultimately her fidelity to our species that causes her to shoot the horse, to shrink from her religious instinct—she sees the horse as an avatar of God—and act as the de facto executioner of divinity on earth.

Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, talks of the sacred and mystical significance of the horse in Hinduism: “At the opening of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad... the sacrificial horse, whose body contains the whole universe, is treated in the same way that a Christian poet would treat the Lamb of God” (142-143). Rudolph Gilbert writes in *Shine, Perishing Republic: Robinson Jeffers and the Tragic Sense in Modern Poetry*, “The Indians had their phallic stallion, Mamoji, to touch which caused maidens to bear children. A menstruating woman was kept in seclusion so that ‘she might not approach nor touch a horse,’ for the Indians believed that ‘such contamination’ would impoverish or weaken the animal” (73). Jeffers’s horse is well-foregrounded by perennial

myths involving women and horses. California is Jeffers's most able heroine, triumphing in mystical union with God and in revenge against her abusive husband. She is incredibly empathic, more oracle than sibyl, a pious priestess of the cosmic God.

There is perhaps no more spirited and supernatural horse in all of American literature than the namesake of *Roan Stallion*. At times a stud, at others a God, and always a symbol of the power of nature, the roan stallion is one of the finest examples, in all of Jeffers's poetry, of the divine in the world "out there." The poem is the first major narrative in which Jeffers seriously explored divine immanence as a part of his pantheistic, or ecological, vision. The roan stallion is a manifestation of God, making the entire creation sacred, not just human beings.

Most scholars have read the horse as a symbol for divinity and an iteration of animal sexuality. Robert Boyers considers the stallion's composition as somewhat inscrutable. I disagree with him that "The stallion was to call to mind qualities quite distinct from pure sexuality...yet these qualities are never sufficiently identified" (71). I believe Jeffers writes the roan as a real, material manifestation of beauty and power. He is beautiful as an animal, for the thing it is, and not simply what it can represent to the human mind. In this sense, *Roan Stallion* is a poem mostly about instress, Gerard Manley Hopkins's theological idea that we know the existence of other things because we are aware of our own unique identity, and so come to know the purpose or meaning of any other object or thing or person. The stallion is an icon of beauty, a statement of the purpose of objects within the body of God, their place in the web of creation. In what is the essential statement of Jeffers's ecological vision, "The Answer," from *Such Counsels You Gave to Me*, first published in 1938, he defines beauty: "Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe" (CP 2:536). This is how Jeffers conceives of beauty in his entire oeuvre. In a later lyric, "The Beauty of Things"

from 1954's *Hungerfield*, Jeffers writes of “unhuman nature its towering reality” as the subject for great poetry (CP 3:369). The stallion is, not a symbol of, the actual towering reality of unhuman nature. Jeffers stresses that, “to feel / Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural / Beauty, is the sole business of poetry” (CP 3:369). Instead of seeing this beauty solely in the human figure—which Jeffers opposes with inhumanism—he sees it in the wholeness of the universe, a wholeness created by connections. In *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*, Robert Zaller argues that the divinity and power seen in the roan stallion is what we call beauty:

In Jeffers, nature is divine enfigurement, natural process subsumes human purpose, and human imagination, far from sovereign, can at best faintly reflect a reality that transcends it at every point. The world thus appears as value-laden, which is the sign of divine immanence in it, and is experienced as pure potentiation, unconstrained efficacy—in aesthetic terms, as beauty. (170)

Throughout the narratives the idea that beauty is truth—that when we see something beautiful we are feeling the quality of the thing-in-itself—hangs over and diminishes human tragedy, shifting the focus from humanity to the objectivity of the material world we inhabit but only occasionally recognize. The apparatus of narrative poetry is what Jeffers needed to create stories that are not about people as much as they are about nature, and he employed its various elements—a narrator unfolding a plot enacted by characters within a setting toward conflict and its resolution—to transform the tragedy of human existence into an ecological paean.

According to Tim Hunt, “[Jeffers’s] turn to narrative reflects his search for a mode that would allow him to explore the complexities of his desire to affirm beauty and human meaning and yet also affirm his recognition of the insignificance of human desire and will in the natural order that science revealed” (66). California, the main character of *Roan Stallion*, in the words of

Karl Keller, will have, by the end of the poem, “a recognition that the power and beauty of the divine are defined by the natural rather than the supernatural” (115). The supernatural is a misapprehension—exemplified by California’s visions at the ford—of the natural, a bifurcation into two distinct parts of what Jeffers considered a unified whole. The poem is about both the natural and the supernatural, and the two terms are conflated by California insofar as there is no recognizable difference between the two. But the poem is also about human perceptions, that the beauty of things is “in the beholder’s brain,” and that this delimited apprehension is “the human mind’s translation of their transhuman / Intrinsic value” (“The Double Axe II: The Inhumanist,” CP 3:260). This subjectivity is the essence of California’s Christian visions that inhere in her mind as she literally struggles with the ferocity of nature—the raging floodwaters at the ford—and the beauty of its wildness. It is the same power that the stallion represents, and the beauty it actually is as a real thing in the world. California sees the horse as a competing or supplanting image for the Imago Dei—that God is not, perhaps, a man. Her visions are mystical, and the horse, to her, is a perfect emblem of the power of God.

Commenting on visions in the Christian mystical tradition, Steve Payne says in his book *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism: An Analysis of Sanjuanist Teaching and its Philosophical Implications for Contemporary Discussions on Mystical Experience*, that “Corporal and imaginative visions and voices are, in general, ‘a kind of overflow and echo of a much more intimate and spiritual process,’ the ‘radiation and reflex of contemplation in the sphere of the senses’” (68). Payne explains: “For John [of the Cross]...the highest ‘touches of union’ would seem to be like looking at the sun; the experience is certainly direct and immediate, but cannot be clear and continuous because of the limitations of mortal existence” (84). California can sense God in the elements but those instinctive feelings are distorted with anthropocentric

visions of Christ. Her being is tragic because it is the human story: life is a brief glimpse of the beauty of the universe, a fleeting vision of God. Karl Keller says, “it is in her vision at the river on Christmas Eve that California first learns of the spiritual power that is in nature” (114). She may have, as Keller argues, “a recognition that the power and beauty of the divine are defined by the natural rather than the supernatural” (115), but I do not believe she recognizes anything—rather, she can no longer distinguish between things. The end happens the way it does—Johnny, the dog, and the stallion die—because California comes up against the limitations of her humanity, and cannot transcend them, because she is unwilling or unable to trust in the religious visions that indicated God is imminent in the natural world.

In “Jeffers, Roan Stallion, and the Narrative of Nature,” Tim Hunt primarily examines narrative features of the poem. Hunt makes the argument that, “By the mid-1920s most serious readers of poetry no longer considered the narrative a viable form, and Jeffers’s use of it seemed to mark him as a poetic reactionary in a generation of poetic radicals” (64). Looking down the vista of history the radical nature of Jeffers’s poetry is enacted by form as much as subject matter: his narrative poems are like Greek tragedies updated for a post-19<sup>th</sup> century world, a time when scientific discoveries changed our understanding of human nature. Patrick Murphy makes an excellent case for Jeffers’s work as “verse novels,” a kind of variation on or extrapolation of the narrative poem, and the strikingly Modernist aesthetics that accompany such a reconsideration of genre. Murphy notes, “Throughout much of his life Jeffers envisioned his long poems in relation to the popularity of the novel and the effect its rise had on dramatic and narrative verse” (125). Jeffers read many novels, and was a great admirer of Thomas Hardy in particular. He says in a letter that he “Read aloud to my sons all Thomas Hardy’s novels, all Walter Scott’s, Dostoevsky’s great ones” (CL 1:134). Una writes, in a letter to Sydney Alberts, about the reputation Hardy had

in the Jeffers household: “We both have the most eager interest in his work and in him. I really think R.J. has a more constant admiration for Hardy than for any...writer of all his time” (CL 1:375). And Robin, answering a letter about his “favorite work of fiction,” responded with these words: “For pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment it would ~~probably~~ be one of Thomas Hardy’s—“The Woodlanders”—or “Far from the Madding Crowd”...And my favorite chapter {of fiction} would come from one of these latter books—some description of Gabriel Oak or Giles Winterbourne and their activities” (CL 1:992). It is clear that Jeffers had a great love of the novel, particularly Hardy’s naturalistic narratives, with their simple plots and characters who, particularly Gabriel Oak, spent their lives in direct and practical contact with nature.

Hunt addresses the importance of the novelistic qualities of Jeffers’s poetry for establishing his reputation as one of the finest poets of his generation: “If [the narratives] are the main impediment to establishing Jeffers as one of the major poets of his generation, they are, at the same time, the best means to make that case” (64). “His turn to narrative,” says Hunt, “reflects his search for a mode that would allow him to explore the complexities of his desire to affirm beauty and human meaning and...the insignificance of human desire and will in the natural order that science revealed” (66). For it is in *Roan Stallion* that Jeffers iterates his clearest vision of the philosophy of inhumanism he had had up to that point in time. The poem, in its tragic conclusion, reveals the anthropocentric mindset that puts mankind at odds with the unhuman world and the divinity that inheres in it. That is to say, inhumanism is a result of ecocentric thinking, of a recognition of the web of relations that creates beauty, “The wholeness of life and things.” This outstanding passage, subject of much critical attention, establishes the foundation for inhumanism, and is quoted below in its entirety:

Humanity is the start  
of the race; I say

Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust to break through, the  
coal to break into fire,  
The atom to be split.

Tragedy that breaks man's face and a white fire flies  
out of it; vision that fools him  
Out of his limits, desire that fools him out of his limits, unnatural crime,  
inhuman science,  
Slit eyes in the mask; wild loves that leap over the walls of nature, the wild  
fence-vaulter science,  
Useless intelligence of far stars, dim knowledge of the spinning demons  
that make an atom,  
These break, these pierce, these deify, praising their God shrilly with fierce  
voices: not in a man's shape  
He approves the praise, he that walks lightning-naked on the Pacific, that  
laces the suns with planets,  
The heart of the atom with electrons: what is humanity in this cosmos? For  
him, the last  
Least taint of a trace in the dregs of the solution; for itself, the mould to  
break away from, the coal  
To break into fire, the atom to be split. (CP 1:189-90)

A great deal has been made of these words by Jeffers scholars. When experience or knowledge are able to “slit eyes in the mask” of our humanity, we catch sight of God: science, love, wildness; “these deify,” and so make a worshipper of the onlooker. This passage is a kind of *ars poetica* for narrative poetry, the guiding principle and ultimate explanation of the philosophy Jeffers illustrates in every one of his narrative poems. It is the principle that underlies the writing of his tragedies, the use of human figures to draw attention to something much larger than themselves. It is not an actual guide for how to write poetry, but a statement that alerts the reader to the ultimate meaning of all of Jeffers's poetry: divinity is ecology, and we mistake ourselves as *the* crucial part. Jeffers is rare in that he is a poet who means what he says; it is appropriate then that his philosophy for how to write poetry should have to do with meaning rather than expression.

Robert Brophy, in *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems*, categorizes the *ars* passage, a digression from the plot for the purpose of addressing the reader



directly, as a “choric interjection” (78). Don Wilson, in “Robinson Jeffers: Poetry Versus Prose in ‘Roan Stallion,’” says much the same, that the passage is “actually a choric commentary and a worthy poem in its own right,” illustrating “Jeffers’ astonishing (and subtle) sense of rhythm, of proportion” (17-8). These interjections create a pattern Brophy identifies as repeating four times throughout the narrative, “a pattern something like that of the four choric sections of Greek tragedy: ‘California at the Stable,’ ‘Her Prayers at the Ford,’ ‘Johnny’s Departure,’ [and] ‘California’s Ecstasy’” (78-9). Regarding the “choric pronouncement” that “humanity is the start of the race,” Brophy argues, “Humanity’s static, self-satisfied state makes it like a coal crusted with an ash which insulates it and inhibits any exchange of energies with the world outside it. This ash-like insulation must be cast off so that man’s fire may interpenetrate the fire of the universe” (88). I believe Jeffers is talking about human evolution, and the ability of the species to change and so change its attributes. No individual has the power to go beyond human limitations, though Nietzsche thought we ought to try to be or at least believe in the possibility of such an individual. Evolutionary change happens because of ecological interaction, of contact with the environment; it is this continued contact with nonhuman nature that strives to battle the tides of anthropocentrism, solipsism, and fatalism. There is some encouragement fitted into the bleak story of *Roan Stallion* that the human figure is still in the process of becoming something; that it is still in the process of achieving its potential. Jeffers is not a teleological philosopher—he simply believes there is room for improvement.

Murphy argues that the initial choric interjection, the narrative *ars*, constituting Jeffers’s “first clear statement of Inhumanist doctrine,” is about breaking away from anthropomorphism (136). California, Murphy says, “frees herself from the oppression of her husband and the anthropomorphism of religious belief” (138). I disagree with Murphy’s reading of

anthropomorphism as restrictive. I believe anthropomorphizing the world can be a pathway for humans to understand the divine symbolically, or an example of what Jeffers called “the human mind’s translation” of what it cannot grasp. Rather, it is anthropocentrism that is problematic; anthropomorphism is the human mind’s attempt to familiarize the world, and it can feed anthropocentric attitudes—but they are not the same thing. Anthropomorphism is a step toward a liberation from loneliness and isolation, an “attemp[t] to reduce the otherness between humans and animals” (Daston 34). We should be sympathetic with ourselves when trying to understand how animals think. It is a touching expression of the human desire to connect in a world where we seem to be alone.

Believing that Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God is how California is able to see the vision at the ford, which clears the way for her later conflation of Christ with the stallion. California can then have an appreciation of the nonhuman world as divine and revelatory, as much the incarnation of God as the Christ. Humanism, not anthropomorphism, leads to her taking revenge upon the stallion. An anthropomorphic religious epiphany is what ultimately leads to her recognition that the stallion is divine. Inhumanism is not about doubting anthropomorphic vision but adjusting our psychological fixations and inflated self-importance to be worthy of those visions. Envisioning God as human is not dangerous in itself, but seeing ourselves as gods is.

William Nolte, in *Rock and Hawk: Robinson Jeffers and the Romantic Agony*, asserts that in the first choric interjection of the poem, “Obviously [the lines] express a decided criticism of the present state of humanity, depicted here as being in a perilous stage of half-development. Man has moved just far enough away from nature...to be out of his depth” (101). He goes on: “Breaking away from humanity is tantamount to cleansing oneself of unnatural desires—the most monstrous and terrible...of which is the desire to transcend one’s biological nature at the behest of some

metaphysical or supernatural fantasy” (104). It is important to make the argument that anthropomorphism is not unnatural; it is a mode in which humans reach out for understanding from a prison of self-reflection: it is a product of the imagination. We think in signs, and since we spend most of our time with ourselves, within the mind and the self, the most salient sign, or the sign that will recur the most, is the human being. Anthropomorphic vision is a reaching out of human aliveness toward animal understanding, and a step toward divinity. Anthropocentrism is the syndrome of thinking ourselves above nature. It is because of California’s inability to see beyond “the mask of a woman / Who has killed God” that she cannot think of the horse as anything but a horse, distant and other, after it kills her husband, Johnny. Her “obscure human fidelity” to her husband is at last her failure to embrace the nonhuman world: the life of the person becomes more important than the life of the horse, an avatar of God. God, in that sense, dies to the individual. The ending note of the narrative sounds on naturalism giving way to humanism. Arthur Coffin, in *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism*, provides the most digestible interpretation of the denouement of *Roan Stallion*, an ending that has perplexed and excited critics since the poem’s publication. He says,

Whatever may have been the possible value of California’s rebellion against the life represented by Johnny and, though unwittingly to be sure, against orthodox institutionalized Christianity, her overcoming is reduced to nothing by that same ‘mold’ or ‘crust’ of humanity against which the poet warned earlier in the poem. It is the same restraining humanity, as the poet suggests by ‘mold’ and ‘crust’ and ‘mask,’ that provides the ‘obscure human fidelity’ which causes California to fire at her God. We recognize that the tragedy of the poem lies in California’s inescapable enmeshment in life and in her humanity. (88)

In Coffin's reading, California cannot transgress her humanity, neither physically nor psychologically, and so an apprehension of the greater materiality and reality of the universe eludes her. Joseph Carroll notes that, "From a naturalistic perspective, individual minds are stimulated and constrained by a reality that exists independently of the mind" (*Evolution and Literary Theory* 51). Her mental faculties fall back into the trap of categorization, of the human and the other, to the demise of the unifying power in nature: the divine. Because of an illusion of separateness from the creation, California kills the horse, and thus, God. She is caught in the net of human exceptionalism and embraces the idolization of man. Keller puts it succinctly: "Out of love of self man thus kills God" (119). God dies to the narcissistic eye, because if there is no eye to look upon reality then it must irrationally, idealistically, cease to be.

The most recent piece of anthologized criticism on *Roan Stallion* is ShaunAnne Tangney's "The Mould to Break Away From: An Ecofeminist Reading of 'Roan Stallion.'" In it, she reads the poem through a contemporary critical lens. To some degree the article is problematic because of her interpretation of inhumanism, which is a distortion and misrepresentation of Jeffers's philosophy, the *ars* of *Roan Stallion*. More probably it is an example of the propensity of literary criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be concerned with ephemera and phenomena, pop culture and the media. Tangney argues that "Inhumanism makes no specific challenges to the lot of women in Western civilization; rather, it makes its broader focus the dangers inherent in hierarchical dichotomies" (148). She interprets inhumanism as a political rather than an ecological philosophy. Drawing the focus away from the universal web of relationships to the relationships between men and women is at odds with the actual definition of inhumanism she tries to define as political. Jeffers, in his preface to *Tamar, Roan Stallion, and Other Poems*, defined it for the reader: "a turning from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman

magnificence” (CP 4:428). Tangney uses inhumanism to critique patriarchal power and privilege—the “hierarchical dichotomies”—and to enforce the legitimacy of the critical framework she takes to the poem. That Tangney places women outside of the inhumanist critique is baffling, since they are human. At best her reading is a distortion of the fundamental definition of inhumanism; at worst it is an example of critical theorists misreading literature to find arguments for or against any number of sociopolitical causes.

Tangney’s essay serves as an example of the pitfalls of anthropocentric or exceptionalist thinking. What she sees as a “reluctance to situate [Jeffers’s] poetry in the material and political cultures in which he lived” (157) is not a refusal by critics—if the work has not been done it is not necessarily because of reluctance, but any number of factors—to consider contemporary critical frameworks like ecofeminism or new historicism. To speak for myself it is a suspicion of the power and accuracy of critical theory to illuminate a poet who openly rejected ephemeral meaning and strove to speak over the voice of history. The practice of talking about literature “in the material and political culture” in which it was written is an artefact of our own material and political culture. It does little to further an understanding of the poetry—Jeffers is a poet who says what he means—but provides a good deal of fodder to argue for the primacy of certain critical frameworks or political allegiances.

The idea of “Gongorism”—that a literary culture has become devalued to near insignificance from an obsession with obfuscation and newness for their own sake—is as applicable to contemporary literary criticism as the poetic movement Jeffers criticized. Jeffers writes about Gongorism in one of his few essays, “Poetry, Gongorism, and A Thousand Years:”

There was a seventeenth century Spanish poet named Gongora, a man of remarkable talent, but he invented a strange poetic idiom, a jargon of dislocated constructions and far-fetched

metaphors, self-conscious singularity, studious obscurity. It is now only grotesque, but for its moment it was admired in the best circles, and it stimulated many imitators. Then fashion changed, Gongorism was named, and ridiculed, and its poet is now remembered because his name was given to one of the diseases of literature. (4:424)

Gongorism is an example of “doctrinaire corruptions of instinct,” of the critical faculties being allocated for the pursuit of doctrinal goals, rather than, say, the goals of the poem. Jeffers’s work resists being used in the service of any sort of political rationale. Critical theory does not illuminate his poems very well: it is only a group of contemporary schools of thought that will soon become relics of our current postmodern obsession with culture. As such, applying a critical lens to Jeffers’s poetry reveals the transience of such modes of thinking and the doctrinaire, self-serving thrust of 21<sup>st</sup> century literary studies. In fact, Jeffers says “It is not necessary, because an epoch is confused, that its poet should share its confusions” (CP 4:423). Nor is it necessary that interpretations of any poetry share the confusions of the time in which those interpretations are made. If any philosophy is capable of moving us beyond sociopolitical agendas and our preoccupation with how we conceive of and construct identities, it is inhumanism. What Tangney perceives as reluctance on the part of other critics might well be her resistance to think of critical theory as a kind of Gongorism. After all, “The error in the artist,” or, for our discussion, the critic, “which perhaps was only momentary and experimental, is echoed with approval by his admirers and a shoal of imitators, so they mislead each other, and gregariousness and snobbery complete the corruption...So the flock gathers sheep” (4:424).

Jeffers does not speak of the ephemeral, but “Permanent things, or things forever renewed, like the grass and human passions,” he says, “and whoever speaks across the gap of a thousand years will understand that he has to speak of permanent things, and rather clearly too, or who

would hear him?" (4:427). This is good advice for the literary critic too. The loyalty of a critic should be to the literature, to the accuracy of interpretation, and its transmission to the degree that the original message is not bogged down with historical artefacts. And, again, Jeffers is a poet who says what he means; he leaves less room for critical wiggling because his goals are very clear. The *ars* section of *Roan Stallion* is an example of the clarity with which Jeffers put forth his philosophical aims. Tangney makes a doctrinaire argument, relying on *a priori* interpretive frameworks established by critical theory, to assert that Jeffers's critique of civilization is in fact a roundabout critique of gender, not the human species. Even so, she makes a good point that California struggles with the violence of inhuman as well as human nature, and grows spiritually as she opposes the masculine force, toward the divine discovery on her path to inhumanist actualization (a destination she will never reach.) Violence, like the crucifixion of Christ, triggers a recognition of instress in California, and she is able to both witness and feel, sensuously, the existence of God in nature. When the narrator says California "hated (she thought) the proud-necked stallion" (CP 1:186), "It's as if," Tangney argues, "she recognizes herself in the stallion: both are beautiful, noble, strong, but reduced to lives of servitude to Johnny...her wish for freedom for the stallion indicates her own growing desire to be free of her brutal marriage" (150). The sexual abuse Johnny commits upon California is symbolized in the loveless breeding the stallion carries out on the mare. In both instances the masculine takes the feminine by violent force. It is an ecological reality that life reaches into life, often with resistance, as the cliffs physically resist the weathering ocean.

In *Roan Stallion*, expressions of sexuality are not held up to the light of moral judgment; rather sexual force, though at times vicious, by Johnny and the stallion is an expression of God's facelessness, "of faceless violence, the root of all things," as Jeffers writes in the late lyric,

“Explosion” (CP :414). California understands the divine as wild, untamed power, often violent, without consideration or care, lacking sentience and reason (paralleled by Johnny’s brute and thoughtless treatment of California), incapable of anything but desire acted out against the physical resistance of other things.

William Everson, in *The Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure*, discusses Jeffers’s emphasis on the language of power. Power is the potential for force, or force at rest. The narratives are essentially engaging stories because power is a major theme, and the pace of the *Roan Stallion* keeps the characters engaging; the pace also makes those philosophical reflections, the interjections, fresh and rapturous. In the most notorious scene from *Roan Stallion*—the choric interlude that Brophy dubs “California’s ecstasy”—California rides the stallion to the top of a hill:

Here is solitude, here on the calvary  
nothing conscious  
But the possible God and the cropped grass, no witness, no eye but that  
misformed one, the moon’s past fullness.  
Two figures on the shining hill, woman and stallion, she kneeling to him,  
brokenly adoring.  
He cropping the grass, shifting his hooves, or lifting the long head to gaze  
over the world,  
Tranquil and powerful. She prayed aloud “O God I am not good enough,  
O fear, O strength, I am draggled.  
Johnny and other men have had me, and O clean power! Here am I.” (CP 1:193).

Everson, in his customary way, explicates the religious symbolism here. California sees the stallion as an avatar of God, and in so doing conflates its inhuman nature with the human nature of the divine Christ. She sees them both as the phenomena of God, of thought and action unified.

Everson makes much of this passage, identifying in it the spiritual essence of the poem:

The stallion stands for the Yang side of the divine archetype, the power and the majesty.  
By situating it on the mountain top, at the center of the cosmos, as it were, all the numinous



majesty of the universe seems concretized in the masculine symbol. But when we ask what constitutes the *fascinans*, the Yin, we do not find it in the woman. Despite all his sympathy for her, Jeffers has not invested the numinous in her. Rather, he has evoked it in the surrounding landscape, the natural setting of the earth, redolent with the subsumed radiance that testifies so hauntingly to the divine. (99)

Everson locates the masculine force in the animal, and the feminine in nature—not California. This is the binary of creation, of the two primary forces of the universe that generate all difference: active and passive. Ecology is the interplay between things, the oscillation: again, from “Explosion,” existence is action and consequence: “Back and forth, die and live, burn and be damned” (CP 4:413). That a binary foundation can create a universe does not require a great stretch of the imagination anymore: it is how our virtual worlds are constructed by computers—it is made by ones and zeroes. This, too, is how sexual reproduction works. Binaries appear to be the fundamental formula for the creation and the construction of reality. Language is a good bit of evidence that this duality exists, regardless of poststructuralist critiques of dualism in Western discourse. Our language essentially uses active and passive verbs only; it is the only way to describe relationships. This is not a product of linguistic formation, but of the possible modes of relation to the material universe. There is only life, and death; to posit an additional outcome for the material universe is impossible.

In *Roan Stallion*, as elsewhere, Jeffers situates the supernatural within the natural. In other words, materialism is and makes possible all things, and what we perceive as supernatural is only the mystery of undiscovered naturalistic things and properties. The supernatural is merely the human mind’s attempt to understand, or to translate, as Jeffers writes in “The Inhumanist,” the universal beauty of things. Where Derrida said “there is no outside-text,” establishing the

foundation for the ascendancy of irrationalism in the humanities, Jeffers seems to say “there is no outside-nature,” for culture, too, is a part of that nature. Man is an integral and inseparable part of that nature, too. And Jeffers, in a lyric from *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, says as much:

Sane and intact the seasons pursue their course, autumn slopes to  
December, the rains will fall  
And the grass flourish, with flowers in it: as if man’s world were perfectly  
separate from nature’s, private and mad.

But that’s not true; even the P-38s and the Flying Fortresses are as natural  
as horse-flies;  
It is only that man, his griefs and rages, are not what they seem to man, not  
great and shattering, but really

Too small to produce any disturbance. This is good. This is the sanity, the  
mercy. It is true that the murdered  
Cities leave marks in the earth for a certain time, like fossil rain-prints in  
shale, equally beautiful. (CP 3:124)

Man’s cities are alive, else they could not be “murdered;” and like other once-living things will make fossils in the environment of which they were a part. In Jeffers, there is only nature; to consider man separate from that is the great blunder of humanism, and the isolated fidelity to each other that encourages California to murder the stallion. To reconsider the culturally-constructed beliefs that alienate man most from nature—that there is something within us that lives outside of materiality constituting our perceptions, thus our reality, that there is a metaphysical world at all—vis-à-vis the facts of the natural world, is the great health and sanity proposed by Jeffers’s inhumanist poetics. Violence and contact are essential to creation continued; without contact there can be no “Other,” and this is the paradoxical triumph of monism—from one comes all.

## Chapter Six

### *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*

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*The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, first published in *Tamar and Other Poems* in 1924, is Robinson Jeffers's first one of a handful of narrative poems set in ancient Greece. He would reach the critical and financial apex with the Tony-award winning *Medea*. The poems are both inhumanist tragedies: the heroes transgress and challenge tradition by going "beyond" civilization. But Jeffers's ecological vision of wholeness—another Jeffersian synonym for nature, reality, and God—and integrity is most clearly expressed in the imagery and language of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Birds, storms, sacrificial animals—these and other images of nature gild the poem. It is most similar, as a nature poem, to *Roan Stallion* and *Tamar*, even though it is Greek in theme. Jeffers begins drawing heavily on Greek tragedy for his narratives in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. To help think of it as a Greek-inspired nature poem, let us begin with the story of "The Eagle and the Fox," one of Aesop's fables. The use of animal imagery in the poem is important not only in the original play but to Jeffers's ecological vision. The natural world, in Jeffers's poems, is full of animals that do not primarily symbolize or signify, but are written to be the things themselves. Nature is depicted in the poetry as it is in reality. The Greek fable goes like this:

An Eagle and a Fox became great friends and determined to live near one another: they thought that the more they saw of each other the better friends they would be. So the Eagle built a nest at the top of a high tree, while the Fox settled in a thicket at the foot of it and produced a litter of cubs. One day the Fox went out foraging for food, and the Eagle, who also wanted food for her young, flew down into the thicket, caught up the Fox's cubs, and

carried them up into the tree for a meal for herself and her family. When the Fox came back, and found out what had happened, she was not so much sorry for the loss of her cubs as furious because she couldn't get at the Eagle and pay her out for her treachery. So she sat down not far off and cursed her. But it wasn't long before she had her revenge. Some villagers happened to be sacrificing a goat on a neighbouring altar, and the Eagle flew down and carried off a piece of burning flesh to her nest. There was a strong wind blowing, and the nest caught fire, with the result that her fledglings fell half-roasted to the ground. Then the Fox ran to the spot and devoured them in full sight of the Eagle. (1)

We are told that the moral is “False faith may escape human punishment, but cannot escape the divine.” Unlike the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* contains few references to the divine, and almost nothing from Orestes, except in his final exchanges with Electra, when he famously says “I have fallen in love outward” (CP 1:178). Here, Orestes believes the wholeness of nature is the closest approximation to the human idea of God, the power of creation that is “The white of the fire... / The pure flame and the white, fierier than any passion” (CP 1:177) Orestes discovers himself in the creation; he is no longer separated by civilized tradition from the amorality, or what he sometimes called “disinterestedness,” of the universe, a word used of the falcon in *Rock and Hawk*. Orestes, by turning away from the human figure, “saves himself from the incest his sister offers, and from the tragic cycle of revenge after revenge that has destroyed the rest of the family, by identifying himself with the cyclic changes of the unhuman world instead” (Scott, “Robinson Jeffers’ Tragedies as Rediscoveries of the World,” 154). He saves himself from civilization; he goes beyond tradition and the law. Orestes saves himself, at last, from the vengefulness of the gods.

Divinity is still an essential part of Orestes’s breakthrough, however, it is stripped of its

anthropomorphic qualities, no longer “men in the shining bitter sky striding and feasting, / Whom you call Gods” (CP 1:176). In Jeffers, as has been frequently noted by critics, God is something larger than that—the totality of creation, a series of relations not very different from the atoms of a man’s body that make a complete organism. It would be right to think that Jeffers had a lot of synonyms for God: reality, nature, wholeness—and I believe we can safely add “ecology” to this list, though the poet himself did not use that word in any of his poems. Returning to the moral of the fable of “The Eagle and the Fox,” in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, bad faith does not bring the wrath of the gods down upon anyone or anything. Clytemnestra will ultimately be punished by Orestes—though her narcissism might play a role, if we read the poem like a traditional Greek tragedy, she is more an example of an indulgent narcissist, who is slain by the messenger of inhumanism, her son—in a state of confusion, driven on by the pleadings of his sister Electra, who wishes to take the throne of Mycenae along with her brother in an incestuous union that would not replace or transform the old order but perpetuate it. After killing his mother, Orestes experiences a vision of ecological wholeness that obviates morality and challenges the social order—even the idea of social orders themselves, in a kind of anarchistic resignation—and leaves the reader with a sense of postmodern aporia. While Orestes has come to terms with the contradiction between civilization and human nature, and discovered a larger meaning in the universe, the story does not provide a tragic conclusion that satisfies the typically humanistic preconditions of tragedy—to resolve the discords of living in a society that places moral restrictions on human nature. Similar to *Tamar*, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* makes the point that psychological consequences are superficial and rather meaningless in an incalculably massive universe; tragedy is a matter of scale, impersonal and indiscriminating, and the scale of our tragedies is so small as to be morally insignificant to the universal wholeness. Our gods are an invisible idea in the material largeness

of things, a reflection of narcissism: “It is all turned inward, all your desires incestuous” (CP 1:1760). The ecological systems that keep the natural world in orderly relation is the only abstraction that satisfactorily explains reality. In Jeffers, ideas are not commensurate with reality—they are an approximation, a postprocess, made by language.

Jeffers remakes the story of Orestes, a fundamental tale in the ascendancy of law in Hellenistic culture, into a philosophical attack on that which the law holds together and thus makes possible—civilization. *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* is a rejection of humanism because it is a rejection of the Western values derived from ancient Greek and Hellenistic culture. Enlightenment thinking is neither denied nor reasserted by the poem—it is transcended, moved beyond, even as the author works within the heritage of rational skepticism. Descartes’s *cogito* becomes “I think yet am insignificant.” The poem is an inhumanist reinterpretation of Greek tragic poetry from which apposite values are derived. Jeffers attempts to arrive at a truly objective conclusion. If we put anthropocentric thinking aside, what has Orestes done that is more abhorrent than other savage aspects of nonhuman nature? Without the human figure judgment does not exist—it is uniquely ours to distinguish between right and wrong—in fact, according to Genesis, this is what separates us from the rest of creation. This attempt to reintegrate the species with nature is partly what classifies it as a posthuman ecopoem, and also what could make it particularly appealing to postmodern literary theory if given the reading. The old source material is being used for something new, while the purpose and intent of the original work is simultaneously rejected and affirmed. *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* is an antithetical rereading of Greek motifs to deliver a counter-message: there is no such thing as the law. Though not the same as Aleister Crowley’s injunction to actually “do what thou wilt,” Orestes’s revelation is that consequences are a choice.

Jeffers makes use of aporia, or implicit contradiction, to undermine the foundations of rationalism. Robert Zaller, in “Spherical Eternity: Time, Form, and Meaning in Robinson Jeffers,” hones in on the contradiction implicit in a creation that is never finished: “Such a world can only be expressed in terms of contradiction because it *is* a contradiction, a world which is both endless and bounded, active in repose...The contradiction remains, too, between the individual and the historical community” (263). That sense of paradox clouds the cipher which is a critique of anthropocentrism, not a bland reinscription of neoclassical values. The poem is incredibly serious and in earnest, unlike the absurdist comedies and critiques of fashionable society from the Augustan age. It militates against a flippant treatment of law and convention. Jeffers wants us to consider with a very mature, austere eye that the the sarcasm of “A Modest Proposal” poses an important question worth seriously considering: so what if we were to eat babies? “What fills men’s mouths is nothing,” Orestes boldly claims, “and,” he tells Electra, “your threat is nothing” (CP 1:178). Ideas, language, judgments—these are all meaningless to the inhuman world Orestes saw in his vision. We know the formula of humanism, of Christian thought and theology, placed man at the moral center of God’s care and attention. However, science having proved we probably do not live in an anthropocentric universe, the law only applies to the degree that we are willing to allow it. Strangely, in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* the irrationality of existence is proved by the rational order of the universe, of creation and destruction, life and death.

Jeffers—though he played down the impression Nietzsche had on him, and not an irrationalist himself—invokes irrationalism to undermine tradition: he uses reason to prove the irrationality of civilization, the enterprise of sheltering ourselves from nature. Jeffers juxtaposes the Apollonian and Dionysian, puts them in stark relief, and then merges them in Orestes’s naturalistic vision. “How can I express the excellence I have found,” Orestes sings, “that has no

color but clearness” (CP 1:177). Jeffers explains the meaning, the importance, of Orestes’s self-liberation while addressing Nietzsche’s supposed influence on his work:

All past cultures have died of introversion at last, and so will this one, but the individual can be free of the net, in his mind. It is a matter of transvaluing values, to use the phrase of somebody [Friedrich Nietzsche] that local people accuse me quite falsely of deriving from. (CL 1:690)

It is this inversion of established values that makes *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* a revolutionary and transformative work in its own right, as well as an ancient tale retold. In a letter to his friend, George Sterling, he takes up Nietzsche’s influence again, this time speaking directly about Orestes: “It occurred to me with a sort of horror that others—not you, I know,—might imagine ‘beyond’ was meant in a foolisher sense, like Man and Superman—my God!” (CL 1:486). The poem is still to some degree about the weak and the strong, the validity of Nietzsche’s “will to power” as a guidebook for moving the species forward, and of the eternal struggle to maintain order in a fluctuating universe. The balancing principle here is not human law, but ecology—the law of creation. Jeffers is deconstructing the belief that the *polis* is a good thing, that justice binds men together, and that civilization is necessary for man’s survival. Rather, Jeffers says the opposite—civilization is “the enemy of man” (“The Broken Balance,” CP 1:374). Orestes is ultimately a hero of transgression, a character who literally “goes beyond” the acceptable limits of human behavior to construct a personal, deeply amoral, relationship with the universe, rather than rely on socially-constructed ideas of sense and propriety. Jeffers, in a letter to Mark Van Doren, answers the question that, “Yes, the ‘Tower Beyond Tragedy’—romantic title—meant the state of a mystic to whom tragedy was impossible because he had escaped finally from the sense of his own—not importance exactly—separateness” (CL 1:762). To escape from our separateness is to be inhuman,



for, as Jeffers says in *Roan Stallion*, “humanity is the mould to break away from” (CP 1:189). One flees the self by going outward—it is the only place to go—and finds a system that is ready to reabsorb it. It will anyway, in time. Inhumanism is a philosophy of resignation. And it is Orestes, the original hero of inhumanism, who “fall[s] in love outward” (CP 1:178).

Robert Brophy, in *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems*, the only thorough and consistently thoughtful study of Jeffers’s narratives, tells us about the meaning of eagles in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. As I said earlier, animals in Jeffers are generally best understood to be the things themselves, not anthropocentric analogs or abstractions. Brophy, however, interprets the eagle in Jeffers, like the eagle of Aesop’s fable, as an image of the power and force of nature, not a symbol for human characteristics. “The ‘eagles’ used by Aeschylus to characterize Agamemnon and Menelaus,” he argues, “become in Jeffers’ version the forces of nature: storm and lightning. This bird-symbolism Jeffers expands typically to include falcon, gull, vulture, and hawk” (115). But they are not symbols: they are real, and remind us that elsewhere the other elements of nature are real, too. They do not symbolize, but indicate; they do not stand for, but point to, the reality they are and that exists around them. Jeffers “expands” the avian symbolism to an actual, objective representation of the bird as a discrete aspect of reality. In this way, birds in Jeffers are not always, or even often, used to indicate a human trait—they do not signify, but are, nature in earnest. Clytemnestra, however, makes the humanistic mistake of viewing them in a traditional way, natural to Greek humanism—they represent the people of the *polis*. She threatens to “Empty out these ways and walls,” the behaviors and protections of the people of Mycenae, and “stock them with better subjects”—for she sees everything as subject to human dominion—“A rock nest for new birds here, townsfolk: You are not essential” (CP 1:141). Fierce and menacing, Jeffers has Clytemnestra pair anthropomorphism with the disposability of

the citizenry; she is confused by her own mixture of metaphors—she suffers the *hubris* of exceptionalism, the essence of her own *hamartia*. She expresses, in a sense, bad faith, as she does not consider herself subject to the wrath of the gods the way she considers the *polis* subject to the decrees of the queen. There is hardly a more traditional institution than monarchy, whose existence does not depend upon debate and consensus but divine decree. Its existence is reinforced and perpetuated by a belief in the gods. =

Clytemnestra's error is one of scope, size and relation; she does not understand that she is subject to anyone's judgment—even the gods', for she has ordained herself a priestess—and it is this mistake that allows room for both Orestes and Electra to exact revenge upon her. She invokes the social order preserved by common belief to convince Orestes not to kill her:

Child, for this has not been done before, there is no old fable, no whisper  
Out of the foundation, among the people that were before our people, no echo has ever  
Moved among these most ancient stones, the monsters here, nor stirred under any  
mountain, nor fluttered  
Under any sky, of a man slaying his mother. Sons have killed fathers—". (CP 1:161)

It is not the gods, but society, the birds of the *polis*, the ordering force of tradition, that, Clytemnestra believes, will not allow Orestes to get away with matricide. Because there is no precedent, however, for Orestes's actions, he does indeed go "beyond tragedy" to discover something outside of civilization—the wildness of the universe, the lack of psychological consequences for any man who transgresses morality itself: for one who has gotten outside the net of human relations, outside of the shaming influence of civilization. He conquers shame. Orestes, instead, chooses the community of things, not ideas, by embracing the reality of the natural world, a universe sensibly free of revenge, of ideas that hold the tribe together: "I have greater / Kindred than dwell under a roof," he says (CP 1:176). Orestes conquers the myths of Western civilization, as in the lyric "Shine, Republic," the "torch that flames from Marathon to Concord, its dangerous

beauty binding three ages / Into one time; the waves of barbarism and civilization have eclipsed but have never quenched it” (CP 2:417). This passage is useful to keep in mind when considering the transgressive character of Orestes, who, the embodiment of contradiction, can be identified with “The love of freedom [which] has been the quality of western man.” He gains a taboo freedom: the freedom from taboo. And though he goes beyond the traditional proto-humanism championed by Greek tragedy, he remains a link in that cultural ecology, the ecology of ideas and customs. This is a terrible irony—that is why Orestes has to be fictional. He is not to be imitated, but understood, as the great prophet of French symbolism, Arthur Rimbaud, was to reach into darkness and bring back the light of spiritual understanding for us. And, much like the message of the *Tower Beyond Tragedy*, Jeffers explains, “Rimbaud was a young man of startling genius but not to be imitated” (“Poetry, Gongorism, and a Thousand Year,” CP 4:423). I take this to mean Rimbaud’s highly emotional poetry as well as his eccentric lifestyle, which was quite beyond acceptable society, the debasement of life he praised and recounted in *A Season in Hell*. On this point, Rimbaud, according to Edward J. Ahearn in *Rimbaud, Visions and Habitations*, shares some common ground with Nietzsche. They both “[raise] questions bearing on ecstatic poetry, questions concerning sensation and reason—that is, relatively unmediated experience, and the impositions of intelligence...concerning disorder and form in the self and its expressions, indeed the unity and even existence of what we call the self” (Ahearn 164). All three writers indicate the same thing: the self is socially-constructed, thus able to be overcome. Jeffers often commented on the cycles of history, and the self is obviously the central subject of the history of psychology.

The “torch” of “Shine, Republic,” is self-referential: take the poem “The Torch-Bearer’s Race,” from *Tamar*, the same volume containing *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. It would seem Jeffers was wrestling with his place as a tragic dramatist in the Western canon, thinking particularly

of Aeschylus but also two of the other most important Greek poets: “O perfect breathing of the runners, those narrow courses, names like the stars names, Sappho, Alcaeus, / And Aeschylus a name like the first eagle’s” (CP 1:100). As Brophy argues, the eagle in Jeffers is a force of nature rather than a signifier of humanness—it is like lightning, the fire of creation, that pure flame of Orestes’s spiritual insight, the same fire of creation that burns in California’s skull in *Roan Stallion*. “The fire threw up figures,” says the narrator of *Roan Stallion*,

And symbols meanwhile, racial myths formed and dissolved in it, the phantom rulers of  
humanity  
That without being are yet more real than what they are born of...  
To whom temples, to whom churches, to whom labors and wars, visions and dreams are  
dedicate (CP 1:194)

Jeffers is talking about gods and how their “realness” is more real than the ideas and desires that spawned them, as they led to the production of monuments and, most importantly, moral codes. And while California cannot go beyond these racial myths—she cannot transcend the “obscure human fidelity” that potentiates her killing of the stallion in revenge for it killing her husband Johnny, whom she loathes—Orestes can and does, and so conquers the human figures that, while “more real” than the ideas and customs that generated them into existence, are “phantom rulers of humanity.” Orestes conquers ideas and the religions they produce—figures and symbols that signify—embracing, instead, the one true system: the ecology of the universe, the reality of things, and the actuality of being that situates us within nature. He embraces the human animal. For Orestes there is no confusion between reality and consciousness—the latter does not make the former but interprets it. I echo the poet here, who wrote, “The human people are only symbolic interpreters— / So let them live or die” (“Old age hath clawed me with its scaly clutch,” CP 4:384). No longer will Orestes be ruled, and so suffer the psychological consequences of transgression, by the universal human convention of theism. He remains a hero in the tradition of Western literature

while going beyond Classicism, humanism, and the Modernism that exalted human emotions and brought them into a sharp, almost hermetic, focus.

Clytemnestra recounts the anger Agamemnon incurred from Artemis for killing one of her sacred deer. She describes the storms, blowing westward from Troy, brought upon the Greek ships as an “eagle bound to break the oars of the fleet and split the hulls venturing” (CP 1:124). She reminds us that the priest, Calchas, recommended the sacrifice of Iphigenia, her daughter with Agamemnon. She thinks to kill her husband would be an appropriate sacrifice for the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Usurping the role of priestess, she considers a ritual—child sacrifice, blood sacrifice, for children are more blood-bound to their parents than their parents are to each other—is in order to set the actual wrong, infanticide, right. She will perform a priestly rite and so answer the call for vengeance, thus perpetuating the cycle. Clytemnestra uses religion as an excuse to kill Agamemnon; she takes revenge, even though the angry goddess Artemis was appeased by the sacrifice. The queen does not give due respect to the judgment of the gods, taking justice into her own hands. Cassandra, embittered by the Greek conquest of Troy, tells us that Ajax was punished for his crimes when a storm, divinely ordained, destroyed him on the sea: “Out of a cloud the loud-winged falcon lightning / Came on him shipwrecked, clapped its wings about him, clung to him, the violent flesh burned and the bones / Broke from each other in that passion; and now this one, returned safe, the Queen is his lightning” (CP 1:122). Jeffers, as Brophy argues, sometimes associates birds with powers that come from the sky, supplanting, like Lucretius, divinity with nature by resituating natural forces within the realm of the natural: eagles are winds and storms, falcons are lightning. The weather becomes a menacing, almost predatory presence in the poem. But it is inhuman—the storm is not a force of retribution, but a natural process.

Cassandra, in Aeschylus, is compared to a nightingale “because she is a victim of the rule of the strongest” (Giacomo 271). She is a subject of Agamemnon, then Clytemenestra, and is finally killed by Orestes. He is the most powerful character because he overcomes the rule all other men live by. In *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, Cassandra, like Clytemenestra, uses avian imagery to communicate prophecies. In the *Oresteia*, “Clytemnestra compares Cassandra’s last words to a swan song,” and in ancient Greece “there was a much perceived link between this bird and the prophets of Apollo...swans forecast their ends in their last songs” (269). If in Jeffers the swan is the essence of beauty, what he called “the lion beauty” in “Love the Wild Swan,” a lyric from *Solstice*, then Cassandra is the prophetess of beauty. She has seen it, “a storm of white swans” (CP 1:147). In her moving and brilliant monologue after eight years of captivity in Mycenae, she foresees mankind’s future, his end: “The frost, the old frost, / Like a cat with a broken-winged bird will play with you, / It will nip and let go; you will say it is gone, but the next / Season it increases” (CP 1:149). Man is likened to a bird that has lost its ability to fly: it is no longer beautiful, but pathetic. We have looked into the abyss too long, and the mask of self-love has fallen. Even so, the birds themselves continue, like the gathering ice, on into a posthuman world, as “the eagles of the east and the west and the falcons of the north were not quiet,” the discordant music of humanity having ceased. It would seem humans suffer so much because of anthropocentrism—we consider ourselves “above” the birds, a critique of anthropomorphic gods. They suffer, too, but we suffer outside the rational order of things—from shame, from the phantom powers of civilization. Jeffers’s poetry is about the reality of things. It is a Lucretian rejection of traditional theology. The poem is drenched in naturalistic language, and it is his frequent return to images of birds that helps Jeffers to subtly remove the Greek gods from the narrative, for nature is God is reality. Even Electra, as narcissistic as her parents, seems to intimate that the gods have become a burden to

human thought, oppressive, restrictive and similar to, but not the same as, the powers of nature: “We have hung like hawks under a storm, from the beginning” (CP 1:162). This is the argument she makes to entice Orestes into an incestuous union so they might rule as king and queen together, that they must replace the old with the new. Orestes takes that message far, far beyond.

The characters who suffer the most are those who live according to the old ways, mired in the superstitious belief in vengeful gods, wraiths of the mind, while Cassandra and Orestes see nature as the final arbiter of man’s fate. Though Cassandra suffers immensely, and is eventually killed by Orestes, she is freed by her own nihilistic prophecy—nothing has a purpose, because everything is being constantly put to another purpose by the cycle of creation. Things die so their materials might be made into new things. Whatever “essence” is, it has no sovereignty over matter, not even Christ’s soul, which fades at the end of *At the Birth of an Age* and is already “extinguished” (CP 2:5) when *Dear Judas* begins. Cassandra overcomes tradition, as she has “known one Godhead / To my sore hurt: I am growing to come to another” (CP 1:149): the godhead of nature, which, in her ecstasy of vision, she pleads to “lead my substance / Speedily into another shape, make me grass, Death, make me stone, / Make me air to wander free between the stars and the peaks; but cut humanity / Out of my being, that is the wound that festers in me.” She longs to escape anthropocentric thought and behavior; she rejects, at last, existence, and instead exalts the cyclic materialism that constitutes reality. Her vision has become one of naturalistic revelation, a kind of nihilism, a clearing of human cloudiness from her sights. She has seen through to the interconnected web of existence that is little more than a series of returns: “O force of the earth rising, / Of fallings of the earth: forever no rest, not forever / From the wave and the trough, from the stream and the slack, from growth and decay” (CP 1:147). Eternity is an important and necessary part of discovery that allows Orestes the freedom to consider his actions inconsequential,

and for Cassandra to let go of her wretched fate, tortured and imprisoned by others. Oskar Seidlin says of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* that “there is no eye to see, and no deed that can be seen, but only dead eternity which obliterates all, action as well as recognition” (449). Orestes’s discovery that the universe is eternal dwarfs his transgressive act. Cassandra’s vision is more terrible.

She describes her spirit as “vulture- / Pinioned,” the wings of her prophetic vision held down by the predatory bird of civilization that feeds on the fear of death, for it was only that ancient men, held in the grip of that fear—the uncertainty of life—laid up grain in store for the struggle of existence, and so made cities, laws, gods, and built temples to their own ingenuity. Cassandra, much like Orestes, sees death as a process of transformation, like the storms of the sea that throw men around in their well-made boats to the shores of their own eventual defeat. She is tired; her eight years of captivity have come to stand for the fatigue of perpetual existence. Life is a constant repurposing of itself, and suffering she desires, as in the words of Silenus, to have never been born—to never be born again as a human being. This is impossible, she knows, and in this way she and Orestes are kindred spirits, but what she has seen is dark, distant, and terrible. She sees the future of civilization, where Orestes sees beyond civilization as a fact of life. Cassandra suffers, but Orestes breaks free of suffering. These are the two noble ways that humans can set themselves free in Jeffers. It is a poem deeply interested in the power of the will.

To return to the critical assertion, mentioned earlier, that Jeffers was influenced by Nietzsche, it is imperative to look at the text of *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, a book that is nearly indispensable for understanding the transgressive values in Jeffers’s tragic poetry. Early in the text, Nietzsche asks, “Is there such a thing as a *strong* pessimism? An intellectual preference for the hard, horrific, evil, problematic aspects of existence which stems



from well-being, from overflowing health, from an *abundance* of existence?" (3). This seems to be at the heart of Jeffers's lyric "The Cruel Falcon," from *Solstice*:

In pleasant peace and security  
How suddenly the soul in a man begins to die.  
He shall look up above the stalled oxen  
Envyng he cruel falcon,  
And dig under the straw for a stone  
To bruise himself on. (CP 2:412)

Again drawing on bird imagery, Jeffers emphasizes the fact that modern man has, for the most part, lost contact with the essential elements of life. In particular, Jeffers says in the *Hungerfield* lyric "The World's Wonders," that "happiness is important...pain *gives* importance" (CP 3:371). This is the essence of Jeffers's tragedies, as he says in the following line from the same poem: "The use of tragedy: Lear becomes as tall as the storm he crawls in; and a tortured Jew became God." His tragic poems are thus stories that illustrate the necessity of suffering for the growth of the human psyche. Orestes suffers exile, the ostracism that was the ultimate form of punishment in the later Athenian democracy, coeval with the rise of tragedy. The final play of Aeschylus's trilogy, *The Eumenides*, provides a tragic explanation for the rise of Athena in the Greek pantheon. Without suffering neither the individual, nor the species, can advance in its understanding of the human place in the universe. As plants suffer and grow in search of sustenance, so man grows by reaching into civilization and finding no nourishment for his soul. Orestes grows beyond society because he values experience more than the comforts of civilization. This is something Jeffers had in common with Aeschylus. According to Robert Fagles in his introduction to the Penguin translation of the *Oresteia*, "Perhaps no paradox inspired Aeschylus more than the bond that might exist between *pathos* and *mathos*, suffering and its significance" (17). Contradiction is a perennial theme in the play.

Jeffers puts the sacred and the profane into one character, the Apollonian and the Dionysian urges balanced in him. Orestes commits the most forbidden act in ancient Greek society, while simultaneously crossing into a new, sacred space: the temple of nature. Radcliffe Squires, in *The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers*, argues that Orestes, “through his suffering...is able to ‘fall in love outward,’ rejecting ambition and passion and flowing into the pure beauty of an ideal reality...Orestes in effect excises the Dionysian element which Nietzsche insisted on in his definition of tragedy,” reinforcing, instead, Schopenhauer’s emphasis on the transcendence of suffering by the renunciation of human nature (54). Though Jeffers does not reject the Dionysian at all—he posits it in his characters, particularly Orestes and even, perhaps, Cassandra, who throws her mind into the future in a kind of drunken dance through time, the imprisonment of her body an irony not to be overlooked. She has the most mystical experience of any of the characters in the poem. In a fit of Dionysian wildness reminiscent of the *Bacchae*, Orestes, in a haze of confusion, kills both Cassandra and his mother. “Tragedy is...compressed into an action too swift for intention,” says Zaller, “and a reaction too intense for judgment or moral reflection” (“‘A Terrible Genius:’ Robinson Jeffers’s Art of Narrative,” 35). It is this lack of reflection, this frenzy of force and violence, that opens the aperture of Orestes’s mind to a world that is much bigger than human frailty. This is far from Apollonian order. However, his transgression illuminates the Apollonian, systematic order of the universe.

After the matricide Orestes attains to the perspective of the inhumanist, for he has “suddenly awakened” to the universal greatness that the frail, human walls of civilization, ever fearful, keep out (CP 1:175). He discovers what it is like to “be all things in all time, in their returns and passages, in the motionless and timeless center” (CP 1:177). The consequences of transgression are many but guilt is more pathetic because we have essentially been coerced into

punishing ourselves, and if a man should come to terms with what's in his own mind then the world can have no hold on him unless it kill or imprison him, like Cassandra. Orestes becomes stoic, which is not quite the same thing as achieving freedom. While Electra believes that the crime will "Make division forever," Orestes says that it was "Not the crime, [but] the wakening" which now separates him from others. "That deed is past, it is finished" he soberly asserts, echoing the final words of Christ, "things past / Make no division afterward, they have no power, they have become nothing at all." Benjamin de Casseres went so far as to assert that inhumanism "is the philosophy of the superman. It is the mystical dream of Nietzsche" (266). De Casseres, however, makes the mistake of calling inhumanism mysticism: though Jeffers believed that God was accessible because he is quite literally at our fingertips, we do his ecological vision injustice by considering Orestes's attainment of clarity a mystical, rather than an actual, event. Rather, the strangeness of the universal beauty is that it is in earnest; that reality itself does not require mystical transcendence to understand.

Nature is readily and endlessly available. Existence is always a direct apprehension of the nature of things. William Nolte, in *Rock and Hawk: Robinson Jeffers and the Romantic Agony*, goes further in depth in explaining the similarities between Nietzsche and Jeffers. Both of them were, he suggests,

Pagan[s] or, more precisely, Greek in associating the Good with knowledge and in rejecting the a priori reasoning that has been basic to Christian theology. Moral certitudes are thus the progeny of ignorance. Instead of viewing life in moral terms, they saw it as primarily aesthetic experience. Each was iconoclastic, as much concerned with exploding false (outworn and hence harmful), values as he was interested in proposing new values (27).

Zaller argues rightly that Jeffers believed “a closed and self-referential aestheticism was doomed to irrelevance and ultimate triviality” (“Robinson Jeffers, American Poetry, and a Thousand Years,” 38). The importance of aesthetics in Jeffers’s poetry is only important insofar that beauty is derived from immanence and reality. The Orestes of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* rejects romanticism by wandering into the hills and being killed by a snake. He embraces exile but finds no home outside the walls of civilization. Rather he has, like Jeffers, “seen through the trick to the beauty,” and uncovers the truth (“What Are Cities For?” CP 2:418).

Orestes is no more Greek than he is German or American; he represents a man without a country whose home is in nature. Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska argue that Orestes “is a Greek figure only in the sense that Dionysus and Silenus are of an ancient Greek heritage and in ‘The Tower Beyond Tragedy’ Orestes’ progress is toward a heaven that lies ‘beyond’ Nietzsche’s ‘good and evil’” (404). Orestes goes into the mountains and appears to enter the earth through death, instead of the graveyards of cities. Mary McCormack makes the case that “Jeffers wanted twentieth-century readers to look back beyond Judeo-Christian myth, beyond Greek god-based myth, to a closer connection with earth’s cycles” (137). But he did not want readers to look back, for it was only men standing in the wings of history. He wanted his readers, and all people—you can plot his work on the same line as humanism, far down at the coordinate of posthumanism—to look outward, to trust the physicality of existence. For Orestes acquires a “knowledge,” he says to Electra, that “Is out of the order of your mind” (CP 1:175)—it is probably not attainable through contemplation, but through a transgressive act that cannot, before it happens, be thought of as possible. Consider the words of Clytemnestra as an expression of the novelty of Orestes’s act:

This has not been done before, there is no old fable, no whisper  
Out of the foundation, among the people that were before our people, no echo has ever  
Moved among these most ancient stones, the monsters here, nor stirred under any  
mountain, nor fluttered

Under any sky, of a man slaying his mother. (CP 1:161)

No historical precedent can explain Orestes's deed; it is quite literally "out of the order" of all minds, from ancient Greek to 21<sup>st</sup> century American. He goes far beyond, further and without accompaniment, more than the concepts of good and evil; through a lack of conceptual thinking, in obeisance to actual experience and reality, he discovers a truth that proves the irrationality of all thinking. Jeffers's Orestes is a Dionysian man—Nietzsche uses *Hamlet* as his example—in that "Knowledge kills action" (46).

Orestes reconciles the Apollonian and Dionysian urges by proving the order of nature through a transgressive, mindless act. Jeffers achieves a literary triumph Nietzsche believed had only been accomplished by the ancient Greek tragedians. "The sublime and highly praised work of art of *Attic tragedy*" is "the common goal" of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives. Jeffers seems to be the kind of poet Nietzsche was hoping would read *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche informs us that it "is a book perhaps for artists with an inclination to retrospections and analysis (that is, for an exceptional kind of artist, who is not easy to find and whom one would not care to seek out...)" (5). This description fits Jeffers perfectly. In a rough sense of the word, Jeffers was a hermit; through isolation and contemplation he broke through to a new way of thinking about tragedy: there was no such thing. He was well-educated and interested in history. He took the political risk of historicizing Hitler while the dictator was at the height of his power in 1943, casting him as a tragic figure in "Tragedy Has Obligations:" "A choice / Comes to each man when his days darken: / To be tragic or to be pitiful" (CP 4:525). In a lyric from *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, Jeffers puts forward his idea of the tragic: "It is only that man, his griefs and rages, are not what they seem to man, not great and shattering, but really // Too small to produce any disturbance. This is good. This is the sanity, the mercy" ("Calm and Full the Ocean," CP 3:124). In other

words, the only tragedy is that man's life is not tragic, but he thinks that it is. Humans are only important as a piece of the system, easily replaced as a matter of course, because all ecosystems are self-correcting. Frederic I. Carpenter asserts that *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* "remains one of his most effective poetic tragedies, while at the same time it denies the final value of tragedy" (125). This is accurate, for while the play does not provide instructions for how to live in society, it does ascribe value to the knowledge of how to live, and be at ease, with the *reality* of society. Jeffers's poems are often comforting despite his harsh words. In other words, the poem explains that, while we should live in peace with each other we can also, at any given time, turn away and leave the accords of society lying where they were made. This can be done in life—many people today find satisfaction in living "off the grid"—but it is also the ultimate reality of death.

Inhumanism is a message about how to die. Jeffers's literature is a multi-part philosophical tract similar to the *Bardo Thodol* of Buddhism. *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* comforts us with the fact that anything and everything we do is wiped away by death. It is this lack of material consequence—for, as we saw in *Tamar*, psychological consequences are very real when one believes in laws and taboos—that frees man from his supposedly tragic existence. One need only take the extra step and deconstruct social consciousness. This is why Orestes has to leave Mycenae and wander the wilderness. He has, in essence, rejected civilization, "the enemy of man," as Jeffers writes in perhaps his most ecological of lyric poems, "The Broken Balance," from *Cawdor* (CP 1:374). It is not the internal man that Orestes "goes beyond," but the strictures of society. This is not a trite expression of neotribalism; Jeffers never believed that we could go back. Rather it is inhumanism: fierce individuality, self-reliance, a rejection of groupthink and a reassertion of independence. The speaker, finally, escapes the necessity of the chorus to explain his actions and give his life value. According to Nietzsche,

The chorus is a living wall erected against the pounding storm of reality, because it—the satyr chorus—is a copy of a more truthful, more real, more complete image of existence than the man of culture who commonly considers himself the sole reality. (47)

Civilization mediates between mankind and the wilderness. Orestes returns to nature by embracing Dionysian irrationalism; but through this realizes the Apollonian order of the material universe, the ecology of energy exchange:

...I entered the life of the brown forest,  
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone, I felt the changes in  
the veins  
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we have our own time, not  
yours; and I was the stream  
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and I was the stars  
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit; and I  
was the darkness  
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me. I was mankind also, a  
moving lichen  
On the cheek of the round stone...they have not made words for it, to go behind  
things, beyond hours and ages,  
And be all things in all time, in their returns and passages, in the motionless and  
timeless center,  
In the white of the fire... (CP 1:177)

Shambling toward a rough concept of ecology, Orestes expresses the oneness, the wholeness that Jeffers so prized and elevated beyond multiplicity, the monism that dominated his thoughts and actuates the philosophy of inhumanism. He goes outside, what Jeffers calls in one of his last lyrics, “The flaming world-walls, far-flung fortifications of being / Against not-being” (“The unformed volcanic earth, a female thing,” CP 3:431). Orestes attains to an elevated perspective—thus the tower—and gains a celestial, non-human vantage. The Dionysian and the Apollonian are united in a single philosophy: to encounter the reality of nature—the latter—one must engage with the former—passion. Orestes demonstrates,

Life at the bottom of things, in spite of the passing of phenomena, remains indestructibly powerful and pleasurable. This consolation appears in embodied clarity in the chorus of satyrs, of creatures of nature who live on as it were ineradicably behind all civilization and remain eternally the same in spite of the passing of generations and of the history of peoples. (Nietzsche 45)

Orestes erases his identity but earns his freedom. After killing Clytemnestra he can barely recognize Electra—he seems to have lost the concept of the personality entirely. To demonstrate Orestes’s state of mind I quote from W.B. Yeats’s poem “Before the World Was Made:”

What if I look upon a man  
As though on my beloved,  
And my blood be cold the while  
And my heart unmoved?  
Why should he think me cruel  
Or that he is betrayed?  
I'd have him love the thing that was  
Before the world was made. (270)

The speaker of Yeats’s poem is “looking for the face I had / Before the world was made,” where “the world” is civilization and the face is selfhood, or the personality. Jeffers, like Yeats and other modernists, “was concerned with the retention of subsistent sacral values as the key to the wholeness of man—a wholeness which the triumph of humanistic atheism, with its establishment in industrial society, had threatened” (Everson, *Robinson Jeffers: Fragments of an Older Fury*, 75). In other words, both Jeffers and Yeats believed that man has an identity not granted by the social order nor is it subject to the changes of culture and convention: it is sacred because it is essential. By entering the life of nature, the ecological system of proximal dependencies, Orestes discovers the true relationship of man to his environment. Civilization is not just a pattern of behavior, nor is it a false mode of belief used to organize mankind, who, unlike “Ants, or wise bees, or a gang of wolves...need lies, / Man his admired and more complex mind / Needs lies to



bind the body of his people together / Make peace in the state and maintain power” (“Faith,” CP 3:3). Civilization is the human nest, like a beehive or an anthill. It is no wonder Jeffers chooses these species—aside from the fact that the bee and the ant recur frequently in Greek myths and fables—to compare humans to: they “are among the most socially advanced nonhuman organisms of which we have knowledge” (Hölldobler and Wilson xviii). Wolves do not divide their labor the way ants, bees, and humans do. Industry has turned us into a kind of superorganism. Friedrich Schiller and Thomas Carlyle, writes Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, keyed in on how society was becoming more and more interlocked (169). Human beings were being transformed, through the creation of machines and proliferation of manufacturing, into a superorganism. John Locke, according to Carlyle, had cast human perception as a matter of contingent circumstances. “In its transactions with the world outside,” says Marx, “a mind so conceived responds like one cogged wheel turned by another.” “The image of the machine,” as Carlyle read in Locke, “connotes loss of inner freedom even as it provides outward power” (173). The industrial revolution evolved human beings into a superorganism, where each individual slowly loses its autonomy to the, pun intended, hive-mind. “Men moulding themselves to the anthill,” writes Jeffers in “The Broken Balance,” “have choked / Their natures until the souls die in them” (CP 1:373). Not only will we lose to the inevitable attrition of nature, but we have already lost to it, in a way—it is reshaping our actual individuality.

Orestes learns the truth by breaking a taboo, the grim truth that the personality, the self, is extinguished forever in death. Consciousness is temporary. Nothing separates us from the world but the lies we tell ourselves to keep civilization going. If man is not important, then what is tragic about him? If we go extinct, an understudy waits in the wings. What’s striking is that Greek tragedy was integral in the development of humanism and inhumanism. Paradoxically, they are

in the same tradition. According to Fagles, “the Gods of Aeschylus are superhuman powers, yet the *Oresteia* is such a humanistic statement one may often wonder if the gods could exist without us” (89). *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, like Jeffers’s *Medea*, lacks gods, inscribing divinity instead on the natural world. It is deistic; nature cannot consciously intervene. Humans are no longer of central importance, and like Fagles unwittingly intimated of Jeffers’s tragedies, there is no need for gods—there is no tragedy, because the beauty of the universe continues to exist. Inhumanism is a philosophy that obviates traditional ideas of divinity by conflating god with nature. In that sense inhumanism is an iteration of pantheism, with a specific focus on universal integrity.

The paradox here is not lost on critics. As John R. Alexander argues “The craft of poetry is a humanist’s, not an anti-humanist’s, occupation” (86). But he is wrong to make such an arbitrary distinction. Poetry is the craft of the poet; it is not exclusive to humanist ideology. Anyhow, Jeffers’s poetry is humanistic in the sense that it provides answers for how to live and be happy. One of his most famous lyric poems, “The Answer,” is just such a text in the sense of classical humanism. It prescribes a certain attitude toward human life that relieves the stress of knowing our own mortality: “Then what is the answer?—Not to be deluded by dreams” (CP 2:536). It is poetry designed specifically to address the crisis of faith in Western culture. The poem provides the reader with instructions for living contentedly, achieved by loving “Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe.” Beauty here is synonymous with nature, God, and reality. Jeffers’s notion of divinity is pantheistic, a kind of pagan monotheism. To live happily, one should “Love that, not man / Apart from that, or else you will share man’s pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.” Inhumanism is not synonymous with misanthropy; rather it seems to have as one of its goals the restoration of happiness in a meaningless world. Jeffers, I think, wanted to help us relax. Robert Ian Scott

figures the same, as he believed Jeffers “wr[ote] tragedies to prevent tragedies in our lives” (“The Ends of Tragedy: Robinson Jeffers’ Satires on Human Self-Importance,” 231). This puts him more in line with the ancient Greek tragedians than the dissonant fury of the other Modernists. Jeffers’s work is deceptive, and it has at its heart the goal of teaching readers to see beyond human ugliness to the restorative beauty of nature. In that way he is a very romantic poet. But unlike Wordsworth, it is not memories of nature, or spots of time, that can liberate us, but an immediate and ever-present engagement with it. His harsh realism and rejection of the primacy of the imagination is what makes him a postromantic writer. And much in the same way that inhumanism is not a rejection of the human, his romanticism is still that, but a mutation of established norms. The word “beyond” has significant implications not only in the poem under study but for his work and philosophical leanings as a whole. He returned to similar subject matter—in the same mode of prescriptive didacticism—in an untitled poem from his last collection, *Last Poems*. Again he attempts to solve the riddle of how to be happy: “What’s the best life for a man? / —Never to have been born, sings the chorus” (CP 3:424). Jeffers repeats the ancient answer given by Silenus, that it is better to never have existed. That answer, in fact, came from the chorus, the collective voice of the *polis*, which is entirely absent from *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Lawrence Clark Powell criticizes the poem on this basis: “The inspired prophetic utterances which Jeffers puts in the mouth of Cassandra do not make up for the absence of the chorus, which in Aeschylus, by its commonsense remarks, serves to balance the towering emotions of the drama” (54). It is precisely this that is the point of the poem: commonsense remarks constrain us. It is common sense that tells us of our importance, just as it was common sense that denied the heliocentric hypothesis of Copernicus, for everyone knew, of course, that the sun went around the earth.

*The Tower Beyond Tragedy* is a violent rejection of tradition and *a priori* truths. In that sense, it is a poem that fully embraces the inquisitiveness of science. In the lyric discussed above, wherein Jeffers asks “What’s the best life for a man?” and answers by saying,

To ride in the wind. To ride horses and herd cattle  
In solitary places above the ocean on the beautiful mountain, and come home hungry in the  
evening  
And eat and sleep. He will live in the wild wind and quick rain, he will not ruin his eyes  
with reading,  
Nor think too much.

However, he criticizes science for elevating discovery for the sake of itself:

The vast hungry spirit of the time  
Cries to his chosen that there is nothing good  
Except discovery, experiment and experience and discovery: to look truth in the eyes,  
To strip truth naked, let our dogs do our living for us  
But man discover.

It would seem Jeffers’s final word on the matter—for this poem was printed in his final volume—is that man’s life should be lived simply, in solitary engagement with reality. Reality is not simply disclosed to Orestes: he goes *into* it, becomes “all things in all time, in the motionless and timeless center” (CP 1:177). Everything is God—what else is there to discover?

In the poetry of Jeffers, nature, God, and reality are interchangeable terms. So when Cassandra says “the hard edges / And mould of reality” (CP 1:153), it is difficult to imagine she is talking about anything other than the natural world, the world of material, the counters of the environment. Objects and their “edges,” felt by us, representations of uniqueness, also indicate relationships, for we know things by where they end and others begin. We know, based on the early ecological thinking of Theophrastus, that a niche is a modern term for what he called a thing’s “proper country” (Hughes 1985). We might say, regarding biology, that an object is something that occupies its appropriate place—that is, appropriate to the niche it occupies. Something like the wind, a force, still has an edge—think of a sudden gust—and by its knowable qualities we

consider it a part of reality. It, too, is an aspect of nature. Ideas, thoughts, the soul—these are things that are felt but are not necessarily natural, or real. They are abstractions, and where they end, and where they begin, no one can say.

In his 1941 public address “Themes in My Poems,” Jeffers explains how reality, God, and nature are the same thing by explaining his views as pantheistic. The passage quoted below is how Jeffers was to explain Orestes’s point of view in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*:

[A] theme that has much engaged my verses is the expression of a religious feeling, that perhaps must be called pantheism, though I hate to type it with a name. It is the feeling...I will say the certainty...that the universe is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things; and is so beautiful that it must be loved and revered; and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it (CP 4:412).

Religious feeling comes from encountering the natural world. Contemplation brings about a sense of belonging, an awareness of the divine otherness. According to Robert Brophy, “Epiphany for Jeffers’ Orestes is in ecstatic communion with nature” (150). Though it is not exactly ecstasy he experiences, but a recognition of reality. Orestes’s spirit stays in his body—he experiences something he says there are no words to describe (it is something concrete, more holistic than mysticism), and that is an essential difference between pantheism and traditional, mystical faiths. His communion with nature is, by the very virtue of his existence, as an object in the world. He does not experience a flight of the spirit like Cassandra—the tragedy is that man’s spirit is not eternal, but an echo, Jeffers would say—but slays the spirit. He comes to understand himself *as a body*, and that it is always in communion with God—the universe. Jeffers goes on:

This is, in a way, the exact opposite of Oriental pantheism. The Hindu mystic finds God in his own soul, and all the other world is illusion. To this other way of feeling, the other

world is real and divine; one's own soul might be called an illusion, it is so slight and so transitory.

The soul, if it exists, is temporary, passing and ephemeral. Essentially it has no "harsh edge" by which we can know it. Nature, reality, while mutable, exist forever. Jeffers asserts there is a center, "motionless and timeless." It is the beyond where Orestes apprehends God as eternity. But this beyond is not metaphysical, but actual.

Arthur B. Coffin makes the argument that, "According to the fiction of Inhumanism, 'the beauty of things' will survive because for Jeffers, in his vision of radical orthodoxy, nature is literally God, and for Jeffers God must endure" (6). Coffin seems to be saying that, indeed, Jeffers sees reality, God, and nature as terms for the same thing, and this thing is the "single organism" to which Jeffers refers. Another word that we might shoehorn into the triumvirate of nature, reality, and God, is the 19<sup>th</sup> century scientific idea of "ecology," named by scientist Ernst Haeckel. Delmore Schwartz identifies the importance of that century's scientific discoveries to Jeffers's poetry: "Haeckel and Huxley seemed to create a picture of the world in which there was no room for most human values...When [Jeffers] speaks repeatedly of stars, atoms, energy, rocks, science, and the power of Nature, it is the Nature of 19<sup>th</sup>-century science which he has in mind and which obsesses him" (137). Jeffers, after years of developing his idea of inhumanism, cultivates the most ingenuous version in 1948's *The Double Axe and Other Poems*. The passage below is from "The Double Axe pt. II: The Inhumanist:"

"Does God exist?—No doubt of that," the old man says. "The cells of my old camel of a  
body  
Because they feel each other and are fitted together.—through nerves and blood feel each  
other,—all the little animals  
Are the one man: there is not an atom in all the universes  
But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, light, heat, and the other  
Flamings, the nerves in the night's black flesh, flow them together; the stars, the winds and  
the people: one energy,

One existence, one music, one organism, one life, one God: star-fire and rock-strength, the  
sea's cold flow  
And man's dark soul." (CP 3:256-7)

The "hard edges" referred to in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* are the discrete objects that constitute the material world. Like microscopic cells they articulate the "one organism" that God is. No more clear and powerful expression of ecopoetics exists in American poetry. Jeffers establishes his own version of pantheism as the inseparability of what we call reality, God, and nature. It—and by that I mean all three words—is "one energy," monistic and unchanging, though the "cells" that constitute it are forever in flux; time "flow[s] them together." This is the dynamic interplay of ecosystems; through proximity and energy exchange new things are born, live, die, and reenter the rawness that makes all things. Jeffers believes that this is not unique to our universe, or that our universe is even the only one—in fact, he is referring to what scientists call the "big crunch," or the equal and opposite reaction to the big bang, which, if the process of creation continues, as he writes in "The Great Explosion" from *Last Poems*, then new universes are born from the old ones. Jeffers's ecological vision is so radical that he makes the universe itself subject to ecological process. It never ends but is only repurposed, reformed, and reshaped by proximal interactions with various aspects of itself. But how does this monumental, massive sense of ecology relate to *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*? How does Jeffers execute his ecological vision vis-à-vis the religious awakening that Orestes experiences after committing matricide? He continues in "Themes in My Poems:"

This is the experience that comes to my Orestes...He is trying to tell his sister Electra what great vision and freedom he has found, on the far shore beyond duty-bound matricide and the ancestral madness...[*The Tower Beyond Tragedy* 175.16-177.13]...These verses express a mystical experience; they also express a protest against human narcissism.

Narcissus, you know, fell in love with himself. If a person spends all his emotion on his own body and states of mind, he is mentally diseased, and the disease is called narcissism...Certainly humanity has claims, on all of us; we can best fulfil them by keeping our emotional sanity; and this by seeing beyond and around the human race” (CP 4:412).

The light of knowledge must penetrate, rather than bend, around our position. And it is Orestes who attains the tower that is “beyond” tragedy. It follows that tragedy, then, is the product of narcissism, and there is no more narcissistic character in the poem than Clytemnestra, who considers herself a priestess, an executioner of the divine will, just in her retribution and sacrifice of Agamemnon who, because he sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia, suffers the tragic circumstances of the cycle of primitive blood vengeance.

As mentioned earlier, Nietzsche questioned whether or not a “strong pessimism” was not something derived from an “abundance of existence.” Jeffers seems to indicate that pessimism, or self-disgust, can come from idleness, in “The Cruel Falcon,” that prosperity can be a bad thing because it inures us to suffering, which “gives importance” to life. As John. R. Alexander argues, Jeffers’s work is not itself pessimistic: it “amounts to more than mere pessimism. Rather, it seeks to deny forever all traces of human emotion, including pessimism itself...It is instead a movement beyond pessimism to the most extreme sort of stoicism” (97). But that is not entirely true, because emotion is central to the mindset of Orestes when he overcomes humanity by slaying his mother. His victory is the antistrophe to the ancient pessimism of Silenus. His heart has grown toward a love of all things, to a love of the wholeness found in the natural world. “I and my loved are one,” he says (CP 1:177). Orestes seems to have discovered the truest form of love, which is resignation, peace, and understanding. It is an emotion “fierier than any passion,” one we humans “have not made words for” (Orestes refers to the species as “they,” in that phrase, indicating his own self-



identification with reality rather than the small fragment of psychology we possess). Orestes's epiphany is strictly religious in the sense that nature and God are used interchangeably. William Everson says that Jeffers is a religious poet above all because he "consciously cultivates...the sense of the numinous when apprehended directly in nature...he evokes it unequivocally as God" (*The Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure*, 7). Nature, God, and reality, it cannot be said enough, are the same thing within Jeffers's ecological vision, and he is as much a poet of reality and nature as he is of religion.

Clytemnestra's hubristic assumption that she will officiate in a priestly role over the sacrifice of Agamemnon is the origin of her own downfall, and ultimate source of Orestes's awakening. Jeffers writes, "The people murmured together, She's not a priestess, the Queen is not a priestess, / What has she done there?" (CP 1:122). Clytemnestra, speaking to the people of Mycenae, says "Too much joy is a message-bearer of misery"—one should beware a downward swing on the wheel of fortune when living in the comfort of joy and blessings, and what Jeffers called "pleasant peace and security" (CP 2:412). She continues:

A little is good; but come too much and it devours us. Therefore we give of a great harvest  
Sheaves to the smiling Gods; and therefore out of a full cup we pour the quarter.

No man  
Dare take all that God sends him, whom God favors, or destruction  
Rides into the house in the last basket. (CP 1:122-3).

Clytemnestra is referring to the spoils of victory from sacking Troy—including the captive prophetess Cassandra. She is drawing on tradition, here, the primitive sacrificial rites of agrarian culture, when grain was destroyed to thank the Gods for a bountiful harvest. The "basket" is also the ship Agamemnon returns in to Mycenae. Clytemnestra is being ironic, and her words are foreboding; she considers herself a priestess, an arbiter of the gods' justice, and plans to sacrifice Agamemnon—not to please the gods, but to take revenge for the king's own sacrificial offering of

Iphigenia which was, in fact, to gain divine favor. She says that Troy was conquered because they did not give sacrifice in thanks for the capture of Helen. She “will not have that horror march under the Lion-gate of Mycenae / That split the citadel of Priam. Therefore I say I have made sacrifice; I have subtracted / A fraction from immoderate joy” (CP 1:123). Unlike Orestes who does not dare to know the will of the gods but to go beyond it, she pretends to knowledge of divine will, in a priestly role she grants herself, that “God requires wholeness in the victim. You dare not think what he demands. I dared. I, I, / Dared” (CP 1:125). She is the embodiment of egocentrism, arrogance, and narcissism. She has made her own private pain the pain of the entire *polis*. It is certainly about her, she thinks: “I rule you, I... / I say the high Gods are content” (CP 1:129). She hopes to have a ritualistic animal sacrifice to honor the “lower” gods, “And the great ghost of the King.” Sheep will be killed, “a hundred beeves,” and “captives and slaves” burned alive. Clytemnestra, ironically, does not understand that the traditional customs she invoked to kill Agamemnon apply to her as well. She is like the eagle of the fable that opened this chapter, believing, in bad faith, that she has appeased the gods and can go about her business, and that the fox will be unable to destroy her livelihood. She trusts too greatly in established moral codes and the power of tradition to control the *polis*. In an even greater irony, Orestes and Electra will take on the role of the fox and exact revenge: in the fable, by eating the eggs of the eagle, which are, themselves, her brood; and in the play it is the archetypal versions of themselves that they overturn, reject, transform, and consume. This is particularly appropriate to the transformation of Orestes who transgresses the very concept of identity—the son, who may not harm the mother—to gain a world in which personality is inconceivable. He will enter the nave of nature, being merely a man. Robert Brophy reads this as Freudian. Orestes’s departure into the wilderness is a kind of “self-castration... which may be interpreted physically or psychologically, [and] he returns to the womb

of nature where he is eventually destroyed by the serpent, phallic representative of his father” (217). Zaller comes to the same conclusion that Orestes experiences a symbolic castration (*Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime*, 225; “Jeffers as a Dramatic Poet: Incorporating the Sovereign Voice,” 57). Though one could say Orestes was killed by a serpent because serpents are literal as well as figurative creatures of danger, venomous and silent. A Freudian reading of this play recapitulates the anthropocentrism of traditional, primitive Greek beliefs that both Orestes and Jeffers militate against. Jeffers abhorred the inward turn of Modernism. Hardly any 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy is more anthropocentric than Freudianism, making the world of nature merely a set of useful terms that signify psychological processes and states. However, Orestes, in effect, by killing Clytemnestra, slays the embodiment of megalomania..

It is good to remember that the play is a rough adaptation of the only Greek trilogy we have. This chapter began talking about the significance of Greek myth and nature imagery in Jeffers’s Poetry. Giacomo Fedeli notes of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, “Imagery concerning birds of prey is a key one of the whole trilogy...The eagle is the queen of birds [in Pindar],” and this is developed further in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and in other Jeffers poems. Aeschylus ends his story with the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides—a deity’s dominion and powers are changed—and Jeffers ends his in the same way: the old god of Western civilization—epitomized by the Abrahamic God—is being replaced by science. The vengeful god (the Western culture complex), thus, is transformed into a lesser, but more important, god (science) that promises to protect man and provide him with a good and long life. The scientific age is possible because of the zenith of Western culture—the skeptical philosophies of the Enlightenment. But this is only somewhat legible to us; there is no guarantee Jeffers wanted to land in this ground. He praised science but also recognized its limitations: “Science and mathematics / Run parallel to

reality, they symbolize it, they squint at it, / They never touch it” (“The Silent Shepherds,” CP 3:425). Science is not the same as reality, God, or nature—it, too, is an interpretation. An eco-poetic reading of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* is made possible by the politics of the environmental movement as well as the ecology of ideas—one culture leads to another, changes, but some of its original qualities are retained (the Eumenides are still basically the Furies, where vengeance is transformed into the law). The subject matter was also a backward and inward step away from the original subject matter of *Tamar* and *Roan Stallion* toward Neoclassical erudition and conventional forms of lengthy, dramatic poetry, in the model of Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon* and the eroding influence of the English Romantic narratives (Keats’s *Endymion* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*). While the other major works that inaugurated his career as a dramatic poet—*Tamar* and *Roan Stallion*—were Californian, modern in tone, and gynocentric, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* was foreign, archaic in subject material, and androcentric. But this indicates the ultimate trajectory of Jeffers’s poetry—away from more Modern subjects, and toward more traditional male characters like Cawdor, Arthur Barclay, Lance Fraser and The Old Man (with the particular exception of *Medea*, written at the request of Dame Judith Anderson). Even so, Hildegard Flanner explains that Jeffers “offers no encouragement or light to confused humanity, only the warning to man to mistrust man, but he is no less a reformer. There we find his place in tradition, rather than in a comparison to the Greek tragedians” (382). I strongly disagree with Flanner’s first sentiment: Jeffers, as I have explained, was a poet who wanted us to stop struggling to find meaning, and to be fearless and strong, and so attain what a realistic, mature inhumanist might call happiness. He is, however, very much in the cadre of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, not an opposing camp. Mark Griffith’s excellent essay “Robinson Jeffers and Greek Tragedy” covers these issues in full. He puts together a complete, convincing and creative

explanation of Jeffers's connection to, and role in retelling, the original Greek stories. Griffith remarks:

“He should not be thought of as taking unusual or illegitimate liberties with the Classics, but as entering into the spirit of ancient Greek playwriting and dramatic competition—always experimenting, always bringing things up to date, always applying a new twist to familiar ‘classic’ material” (28).

If we agree with Griffiths, Jeffers reads more like a postmodern deconstructionist than Modern by diving into old subject matter, picking it to pieces, and inserting a contemporary, critical, and dramatic voice. In attempting to remake stories cemented in the foundations of Western culture, he addressed the challenge that nothing new could be written, while doing so with an old story. To quote the poet: “The Greeks themselves were always changing their stories, and I think we inherit the privilege” (97). Jeffers gives new life to the heritage of Western literature.

But why did Jeffers choose the ancient tale of Orestes for his first Greek-inspired dramatic poem? George Staley situates the answer to this question historically. He makes the important point that “Jeffers turned to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides because he sensed that he was living in an age much like theirs, an age in which a great civilization had reached its peak and was just beginning its inevitable decline” (193), and that he was “Writing on the eve of a great and destructive war” (198). This brings up an interesting question: how different is Jeffers's play from the original Aeschylean trilogy, and why? Is it because of the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century physical science and 20<sup>th</sup> century psychology? Or is it due to Jeffers's own unique poetics, a pagan revival, wherein God and nature are the same thing, and reality is the verifiable presence of them? It is a grand trinity, where three big words create a new kind of godhead: ecology. It is a revival of natural history. Fagles, whose knowledge and understanding of Aeschylus is as good as, if not

better than, anyone, says of the original author that he “celebrates man’s capacity for suffering, his courage to endure hereditary guilt and ethical conflicts” (17). At the same time, Flanner argues, Jeffers is firmly in a tradition himself: “One feels that his scorn for mankind does in itself largely express his relation to tradition—the tradition of the reformer and the prophet” (382). He celebrates the importance of suffering, part of the Calvinist theology he was so deeply washed in, but not so much in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Cassandra is the one who suffers the most, both the victim of rape by the Greek soldiers and a prisoner held in captivity by Clytemnestra for eight years. Suffering and pain take a back seat to the mystical awakening Orestes has after killing his mother, whose pain is considered ancillary to the importance of her son’s conquest of both inherited guilt and those ethical conflicts, Aeschylus emphasized, existed for the ancient Greek. Orestes, “Unlike Aeschylus’ hero, who is reintegrated into the community by a trial before divine and human judges,” says Zaller, “he is exposed nakedly to the cosmos in all its terrible purity and wholeness” (*The Cliffs of Solitude: A Reading of Robinson Jeffers*, 33). Jeffers shows the attractiveness of life without consequences: not just social, but psychological. Orestes, by freeing himself of tradition and the law (whose establishment is praised in Aeschylus’s *The Eumenides*), sees the nature of reality not as a macrocosm of the human world, but proof against its essentialism and universal presence. Harold Watts thinks it a quality of the modern world that violence means something different than it did in ancient Greece: “Only an age characterized by a lack of desire to estimate experience ethically can produce human beings who kill without a qualm and accept their punishment with an air of being abused and misunderstood” (111). This is not a satisfying answer to the origin of Orestes’s nihilism, though it shares much with the meaninglessness explored in Modernist literature, of Sartre’s existentialism and Camus’s absurdism. Watts provides an attractive way of reading Jeffers into the Modernist canon, a place he has never truly

occupied. Perhaps he belongs there, whether or not he finds company with no other Modernist writer. His dramatic poems are transgressive, original, contradictory, revelatory and compassionate. He honed in and sharpened to an intense shine the isolated moments when people find themselves most confused by society's expectations. Jeffers wanted people to be at ease with the contradictions of the world, to suffer into contentment so they might appreciate their lives as important, but not necessary, pieces in an inconceivably complex world that fixes itself, builds new things on the unnecessary fragments. His narratives are somewhat sadistic descriptions of human frailties. Jeffers's prescription, "turn outward," to nature, is the primary message of his poetry. When Walter Kerr says that "Each event" of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* "seems without purpose, without urgency, as though the characters were automatons fulfilling a purpose which they do not grasp," he is right, but he is wrong to think this is not by design (279). Jeffers's Orestes and Cassandra exist to illustrate lessons much like they did in Aeschylus's trilogy, but they also reveal the importance of individuality and experience, and the power of poetry to instruct us still.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion

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There is no room for inhumanism in this world. It is too extreme for any of us. Del Ivan Janik considers it an “irresponsible and short-sighted” philosophy for society (109). Inhumanism asks us to devalue our lives, to some degree. For a man living in a world that no longer values his life what inquisitor would damn him to a lower dungeon? And the poet can become too good of a companion. The frequent reader of Jeffers must be warned not to become too reliant on the poetry to help him interpret the world. Jeffers’s integrity with us as an author leaves little room for anyone to expand upon his ideas with any attainable sincerity. In the same way, we engage with a powerful personality every time we read a Jeffers poem. He is more persuasive than Tolstoy. He is trying to call to us on a deeply spiritual level. And the earth is his shabby church. No one knew a transplanted New Englander, living on the beach, could become such a cliché. The great poems of Jeffers might be bound into one volume called *Notes from a Calvinist Bohemian*. It’s no doubt many good people love the earth the way Jeffers seemed to have: scientists, children playing in the woods, a mother in a garden. But it was not love Jeffers had for the earth. It was wild devotion, a wild love of the terrors of mystical devotion. Life and death. Like a druid praising trees and speaking into the wells of the underworld. But the message of inhumanism does not seem fit to take root. It is not a seed, but a stone. Think of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.” The goblin-fruit seeds Laura and Lizzie bring home from the market do not grow but produce only mirages—dreams, hopes. Yes, they are stones, and when the intellect falls upon them the imagination works, but nothing, really, is satisfied, no pressure relieved but created. The stone,



like the imagination, just does not live like the body does. That itself might be proof enough of the metaphysical world, that death is not everywhere. Wallace Stevens writes in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, “When we consider the imagination as metaphysics, we realize that it is in the nature of the imagination itself that we should be quick to accept it as the only clue to reality” (137). We need not necessarily agree with Jeffers to appreciate the quality and craftsmanship of his poems. But inhumanism has no give. The world will never want it. Who would renounce their humanity but madmen and suicides?

The first three major narratives poems are certainly good places to look to see Jeffers establishing the seriousness of his tone. *Tamar* is a good grotesque and a western gothic romance, *Roan Stallion* a beautiful obscenity that will always be controversial, and *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* an abridgment of the original of Aeschylus updated with a deeper existential crisis that seemed to be aligned with anarchic politics. It owes much of its pathos and philosophical posturing to Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Consider these words by Michael Zimmerman on Nietzsche’s contribution to ecological philosophy:

As if attempting to establish meaning for human existence in an almost completely impersonal world bereft of a Creator were not a sufficiently daunting task, Nietzsche raises the stakes by positing the horrifying claim that everything recurs *eternally*. Even the bravest, hardest, and most resolute individuals have difficulty in affirming life in the face of this claim. So far as we know, only one person managed to do so: Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s fictional hero. (174)

Orestes has heard and understood Zarathustra. Jeffers’s Greek hero leaves Mycenae because he has seen into the web of being. He knows he is free of society, but connected to all things, all of

which return eternally, and this is his triumph. The ability to see the wholeness of things is an indicator of genius according to Schopenhauer in his essay “On Philosophy and the Intellect.”

A genius is a man in whose head the *world as idea* has attained a greater degree of clarity and is present more distinctly; and since the weightiest and profoundest insight is furnished not by painstaking observation of what is separate and individual but by the intensity with which the whole is comprehended, mankind can expect from him the profoundest sort of instruction. (Loc 2005-2008).

Genius, then, is about vision, how large and intense it must be. How broad is the eye of the artist, the depth? And Jeffers is profoundly instructive. I want to make the point that Jeffers, raised on Christianity and Classicism, with a thorough European education, is always writing under a heavy influence of the 18<sup>th</sup> - and 19<sup>th</sup>-century continental aphorists.

His poems pretend to a certain level of moral authority. He believes that what he is saying is the truth. It presents a furious, one-sided argument. So really, to address the poems one ought to look at them as collections of aphorisms in poetic form. If the reader disagrees with the proverbial wisdom then the actual poetry, the actual words, become harder to see; things blur, and a nuance is created. Do not think of Jeffers’s poems as Modernist, but Neo-Classical. They stand on a different foundation. Inhumanism is a philosophy from the abyss, and Jeffers stands there—how long can a reader? And they are Classical in the sense that they already gather about them an air of timelessness. His narratives will be more lasting than his lyrics because they generally avoided focusing on specific political policies and politics—something he almost exclusively assigned to lyric poetry—of the time. The bulk of his work deals with themes that recur in human history. He will age well. And I believe his significance is easily and readily assessed by anyone who reads his poetry. We do not need time for his words to gain in significance. Sure, his

reputation will grow, but I do not believe his words will be any more relevant to the future than they are to us. In this sense Jeffers is not a fortune teller—he is not interested in the accuracy of what will or will not happen. To speak not only what was and will be, but what is, is the power of a prophet. By doing this his poetry is successful in making the reader reflect on the lack of real change a human life undergoes. Outside of us, the endurance of the world, is the great everlasting symbol of God's tortured body. Seeing it, and being a part of it, is beautiful.

Jeffers is the major American poet of the sublime. His narratives stand with Wordsworth, with the Romantic poet's evocations of terror and panic and wonder among the huge, looming forms of nature. They both liked to climb rocks. Consummate outdoorsmen. At one with nature. Jeffers, with all his philosophical influences, finds himself in the company of the Romantics, a devotee of their pagan nature-worship. If the modern era was only a speeding up of the industrial revolution, with its mechanization of time and experience itself, then Jeffers's poetry is an even stronger Romantic response. Inhumanism does not call for a return to nature but a severing of our connections to civilization. If we cannot sever them, then we must grit our teeth and live in a harsher reality more alienated from the cause and cure of our psychological distress. Jeffers's Romanticism isn't really postromantic, or some newfangled term, but a more intense kind of Wordsworthian retreat from civilization—sans ego. It is the Keatsian sublimation into nature. To be a true Jeffersian Romantic, one must not even praise man as he is: he is not worthy, for he is the destroyer. Nature, then, becomes God. It becomes the primary site of worship. God was, before, the old word for the great cosmic idea of oneness. And the expression of this unity is what we call reality, multifaceted and weird, as that which we know is true about the world. One cannot escape the big themes in a Jeffers poem. It is like a shouting. Oftentimes the poetry can become a belligerent soliloquy.

I do not think his verses can be used to raise ecological awareness, whatever that means. I think his poems only ever point to the massive tragic beauty of things. The urgency of his tone belongs to more than one mad man roaming the streets as I write this. To most criticism of Jeffers or inhumanism I can only respond with the words of Domenico from Andrey Tarkovsky's 1983 film, *Nostalghia*: "What kind of world is this if a madman tells you you must be ashamed of yourselves?" He is an old man, a survivor of fascism in Italy. He is homeless, and now, driven to complete despair, stands atop a statue, shouting in a public square in front of a scattered audience of people standing independently. His last words are, "O Mother! The air is that light thing that moves around your head and becomes clearer when you laugh," just before immolating himself and jumping to the ground. He runs covered in flame, and then dies. Jeffers was certainly, by an even very narrow definition of the word, sane. He is probably one of the more healthy-minded Modernist poets, a pragmatist perhaps, after William James. Yet his poetry is a poetry of intense reality streaked with the kind of mad vision seen in Thoreau. Thoreau writes in *Walden* that, "If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments" (69). In other words, life would reveal itself to be beyond reality. The realist experiences life with an undiluted purity.

Jeffers's poetry is real in the sense that what we know about the world is as much about knowledge as it is about the imagination. It is compiled of what we have perceived and what it comes out to once we have checked those perceptions with what we know is true. I do not mean what we think is true, but what we know as a physical fact about the world as a place. Jeffers's poetry encourages us to stop pretending, to stop thinking, to "Look—and without imagination, desire nor dream—directly / At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful?" as he writes in

“De Rerum Virtute” (CP 3:403). Now consider these words Jeffers puts in Medea’s mouth in that titular play: “People go mad / If they think too much” (CP 3:191). Thinking is a kind of sickness, then, in his poetry. The ideal man “will not ruin his eyes with reading, / Nor think too much” (“What’s the best life for a man?” CP 3:424). How does such an anti-intellectual poet exist? I think it is because of the cynicism of his time. If rational people were leading us to war, what good was the Enlightenment? And not just rational people but the best minds in the world? But Jeffers always impugns irrationalism. The poet wants to incorporate the rational and the irrational, to create the complete person, the individual. In “The Soul’s Desert,” Jeffers would have us think that God is not part of the irrational world, but both it and the rational world combined, and perhaps more.

They are warming up the old horrors, and all that they say is echoes of echoes.  
Beware of taking sides; only watch.  
These are not criminals, nor hucksters and little journalists, but the governments  
Of the great nations; men favorably  
Representative of massed humanity. Observe them. Wrath and laughter  
Are quite irrelevant. Clearly it is time  
To become disillusioned, each person to enter his own soul's desert  
And look for God—having seen man. (CP 3:15)

He reminds us that the greatest men lead us into disastrous situations. This attitude appears in his poems as a savage attack on humanism that culminates in the cynical dismissal of the possible existence, and ultimate need, of a savior. Jeffers makes no argument, really. That is it: inhumanism is a theological statement. It is not pantheistic or green or Nietzschean. Jeffers is not much of an ecopoet by today’s standards, nor even much of a Modernist. That his work resists assemblage with that of other writers or movements is a good reason to keep reading him.

It is also good to have a strong poet to question intellectualism. The poet should feel as well as think. But by 1935, Jeffers opened his book *Solstice* with a poem expressing doubt about the value of the metaphysical world altogether, in the brilliant lyric “Return:”

A little too abstract, a little too wise,  
It is time for us to kiss the earth again,  
It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,  
Let the rich life run to the roots again.

The poet immediately sets himself up as a voice of authority. He possesses the control of language and rhythm: each of the first three lines contains eleven syllables. The “A little... a little” of the opening line parallels “It is time... / It is time” repeated in the following two lines. Both the second and fourth lines end with “again,” adding more rhythmic texture to the spiritualized incantation. These words are intended to be sacred. The voice possesses knowledge of appropriate times, the cycles of nature, and the need to return to a source, the “rich life.” The reader feels there is “little...time” left.

I will go to the lovely Sur Rivers  
And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders.  
I will find my accounting where the alder leaf quivers  
In the ocean wind over the river boulders.

The presence of the poet is vibrant in these lines. We see him immersing his arms in the water, an act of natural piety, a gesture that communicates a desire, not only to the reader but to the poet himself, for death, the *amor fati*. To dip one’s shoulders into a river is to be almost face-first against the earth, literally kissing it, as he says we must. And he assures us, “I will touch things and things and no more thoughts” (CP 2:409). He is there among the elements, the unfeeling world. He writes in a letter to Pearl Levison that “the {central} value of things is outside us, and outside what we call life” (CL 2:328). The river calls to mind Narcissus. If the poem has any moral it is that when dipping your shoulders into the river of existence, remember you also must face your own reflection.

In *Moby-Dick*, after discoursing on the mystical nature of the sea and the religious significance it had in Ancient Greece and Persia, Ishmael says, “And still deeper the meaning of

that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (3). Melville sees evidence of the metaphysical world in the water, but Jeffers sees nothing because he is “kissing” the earth. His eyes, like anyone embracing their beloved in such a way, with a kiss of gratitude for an ultimate forgiveness—his eyes are closed. Jeffers does not simply want to think or feel: he wants us to marry them and make something new, something with integrity.

One is not always able to follow Jeffers into those places of ecstasy. In that sense his poetry can become inaccessible. His role as a poet is threefold. He writes, “to feel / Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural / Beauty, is the sole business of poetry” (CP 3:369). To feel, understand, and express greatly takes great thought and feeling. This does not mean that the reader will feel, understand, and be able to express great thought and feeling, too. The reader might not ever experience anything “great.” The great poet experiences greatly, and we read the impressions that these experiences make on the poet, if the poem creates that communicative moment between the author and the reader, as best they can get it into words. Poetry, writes Wallace Stevens, is about resemblances: “In the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance [poetry] touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it” (77). So the poet must communicate to the reader in a way that intensifies an experience they might never have, particularly the emotions that accompany those experiences. If we agree with Arthur Coffin that “In Jeffers’ view, modern man has, in effect, driven himself out of the garden of Nature, not because of pride or the sin of intellect, but simply because he lacks feeling,” then the poet’s mission is to redeem mankind from the hell of the metaphysical world by giving him feelings commensurate with reality, not the imagination (255). The poet, with Jeffers

taken as our paramount model, should awaken mankind to the ultimate reality of God as nature. *Roan Stallion* is perhaps the best example in Jeffers's poetry of this idea. And it was with the narrative poems, according to Tim Hunt, that Jeffers found "a way to probe the limits of our ability to experience nature's reality and our capacity to become conscious of it" ("Jeffers' 'Roan Stallion' and the Narrative of Nature," 67). Jeffers is doing this for the reader, allowing them access into a world of feeling that is outside the limits of common human experience. Once he does this, however, bathos savagely takes over, and one is reminded of God's reality.

I do not think that after postmodernism comes posthumanism. I am not sure there is a need for any new -isms of thought. The definitions of posthumanism are broad, from ecopoetry to cyborgs to ableism, the study of literature about prosthetic limbs and how this affects our conception of humanity. *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence is set partly in a medical prosthetics factory and expands our awareness of the lives of the differently abled. William Ernest Henley's *In Hospital* is another great text for the study of posthumanism as a revived investigation into the nature of man's composition, piece by suffering piece. I think that art is now about the size of things. It is deeply an ecological kind of poetry that considers the difference in size between an atom and the sun. Jeffers's poetry is notable for its frequent references to the actual size of and distance between things. While Thomas Mann investigated, felt, and explained the nature of time better than any other modern novelist—no greater story about the nature of time in the Western canon exists than *The Magic Mountain*—Jeffers explored space and distance. Of course Jeffers writes a lot about time, geological time, but not in the way Mann writes about time as relative and imaginary and contingent upon perception. Time does not belong in the same category of synonyms with God, nature, and reality, in Jeffers. He does inspire the reader to think of history, human evolutionary history, geological time and the unimaginable eons of the future. Jeffers and



Mann agree on the principle that time is circular, cyclical, eternally recurrent. The first lines of *Hungerfield* are “If time is only another dimension, then all that dies / Remains alive; not annulled, but removed / Out of our sight” (CP 3:375). As I said in the introductory chapter, in *Hungerfield* Jeffers frequently interrupts his deeply sentimental eulogy for his wife Una, then recently deceased, with details drawn from nature. The sad words are intermingled with phrases like “watching the sea-parrots / Tumble like clowns along the thousand-foot cliff, and the gannets like falling stars / Hawk at the sea,” and “Under the mystery of huge stones that stand there, / Raised high in the world’s dawn by unknown men to forgotten Gods.” The painful reflections are tempered with joy by a constant reminder of the aliveness of the universe. The birds, the beauty of the countryside, are to Jeffers the ultimate *memento mori*, for the world is built on the dead, its successes and its failures. So when Jeffers recalls a time when Una and he walked in youth, “A great skein of wild swans drop from the cloud” right before he mourns the present state of Una’s nonexistence. “She weeps a little for joy of beauty. Only the home-coming / To our loved rock over the gray and ageless Pacific / Makes her such joy.” The sad irony of Jeffers’s final years is that he saw Una, destroyed but somehow still present, in his old house sitting alone, looking “over the gray and ageless Pacific.” Time became a greater concern for Jeffers in his later narratives. In the three previous chapters, the early narratives, it is clear time has quite a bit less to do with Jeffers’s poetry than Mann’s novels.

But where Jeffers surpasses other writers is in his ability to trigger the imagination by forcing comparisons between things of microscopic and macroscopic size. Jeffers himself feels distant to the reader. His poems are long breaths, long sentences that take up more than the margins allow—his poems require that much space to live. And I believe Jeffers’s real, true self, is not very much in his poems. In letters he is unpretentious, answering questions from his readership

with great gentleness and kindness—this, I believe, is the man himself. His poetic voice is much harsher, wrathful, powerful, insistent, certain, even somewhat arrogant—because he is speaking to the *people*, not a *person*. He is a poet of the *polis*. But even this is not important, because he believed that if the state fell another would take its place, but the whole would still be beautiful. All things forever eternally, the universe lives and dies again and again in Jeffers. This is the greatest beauty because it is literally the largest in magnitude.

Even the war-torn struggles of state-formation are a part of that beauty, he would have us believe. Jeffers's sense of beauty is that of a terrible beauty—the sublime. It is a new kind of sublime, though. Frances Ferguson calls it “the nuclear sublime.” Ferguson writes that, regarding the history of the sublime,

Invoking the unthinkable...is not only possible but a rather familiar feature of an aesthetic tradition that has operated over the last couple of centuries at least. For I take the nuclear as the unthinkable to be the most recent version of the notion of the sublime, that alternative and counterpoise to the beautiful that was revived when Longinus' *Peri Hupsous* (On Great Writing) was rediscovered in the seventeenth century and became especially influential in the eighteenth. (5)

Robert Zaller, in “The End of Prophecy: ‘*The Double-Axe*’ and the Nuclear Sublime,” contends that Jeffers was the first to use the nuclear sublime. He says, “Writing at the onset of the atomic age, Jeffers was the first American poet to explore what Rob Wilson calls the nuclear sublime, although Wilson gives him no credit for it” (48). Jeffers was not alone, though he was one of the first, in deploying the nuclear sublime for poetic effect. In 1948 Jeffers was invoking the nuclear sublime in *The Double Axe*. William Carlos Williams wrote about nuclear war in his 1955 poem *Asphodel, that Greeny Flower*:

I am reminded  
                   that the bomb  
   also  
 Is a flower  
                   dedicated  
   howbeit  
 to our destruction.  
                   The mere picture  
   of the exploding bomb  
 fascinates us  
                   so that we cannot wait  
   to prostrate ourselves  
 before it. (23)

Even in Williams's poem the bomb is viewed as something that, in an age of atheism, demands our worship by its sheer demonstrative power, and the mythical powers of death and destruction. The bomb is evidence of the Kali Yuga, that we are living in the end times. "Jeffers himself was dourly confident that a nuclear war was imminent, and made much of this expectation in *The Double-Axe*," writes Edmund Richardson (379). Richardson contends that Jeffers's *Medea* is in some ways about the atomic bombs used by the United States during World War II. But I do not agree with Richardson that in *Medea* "Jeffers subtly reworked the Euripidean original in order to echo contemporary accounts of the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan" (379). Jeffers is almost never subtle. This is one of the great problems for literary critics looking at Jeffers's poetry or the roots of his philosophy or his place of importance in American letters. When writing about Jeffers one can hardly illuminate the hidden, but simply emphasize the obvious. Jeffers has been criticized for being repetitive. He believed in monism and his poetry is certainly faithful to that belief, at least his lyrics. The titles run together. When one quotes a Jeffers lyric it is best to always double-check where the lines came from, unless it is "The Answer," his most famous poem.

Where Jeffers was probably his least subtle was in his critique of global war, particularly the politics of the Second World War and the incipient fog of the Cold War that followed. We see

that Jeffers did not dance around criticism of war. He was very explicit, particularly in *The Double Axe* volume, about his cynicism. Seeing both wars as the overture to a new age, Jeffers became obsessed with prophesying the doom of mankind. His work after 1938's *Be Angry at the Sun* is heavy with this association. It is a religious association with the Biblical prophet Jeremiah. Jeffers, I believe, cannot be read as poetry unless the reader accepts his cosmological beliefs as convincing or at the very least philosophically valid. Hardly anybody reads the scriptures of another religion and agrees with them with the same vehemence as they do the sacred writings of their own religion. Jeffers has this unique distinction as a poet. It is an infamy, to have the poetic skill of a Biblical prophet whose greatest power relies on the reader's ability to not simply entertain inhumanism as an idea but to accept it as a truth upon which all the other poems are predicated. Consider the lingering cynicism in his words in *Last Poems*:

When the third world-war comes, do it well. Kill. Kill your brothers. Why not?  
God's on both sides. Make a monument of it:  
There were never so many people so suddenly killed. We can spare millions and millions,  
The chiefs in the Kremlin think, and I too. ("Monument," CP 3:419)

These lines are shocking. The poem does not encourage us to kill each other, but prepares us for the possibility of it. If God is on both sides then his will triumphs. Jeffers goads the war-making peoples on. That he says "We can spare millions and millions" if the United States and Russia went to war should not be taken as a joke. This is Jeffers's inhumanism at its near extreme: the prevention of self-destruction has no moral ground upon which to stand. He is a true aesthete because the only value he sees in the world is beauty. But the words of "Monument" are dark, bitter, ugly. I do not believe he is ever sarcastic in his poetry. But the sentiment is not uncommon: How do we gain God's favor? The words are exceptionally powerful, "Kill. Kill your brothers." It forces a question: after the world wars, what value does life have?

“The obligatory optimism” of Christianity, writes Schopenhauer in “On Suicide,” “denounces self-destruction so as not to be denounced by it” (Loc 1211). “Monument” is a very pessimistic poem. Jeffers, in the years after World War II, grew ever more cynical. How anyone could imagine nuclear war as a beautiful, sublime, worshipful expression of aliveness, a mighty wind, God’s power at play in the hands of men—in the late 1940s, is impressive as a morally objective stance, and a testament to his capabilities as a visionary thinker. While we fetishize the end of the world—zombies, viruses, aliens—living in the wake of the atrocities of the world wars that symbolically ended with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, millennials long for a good apocalyptic narrative. Readers of *The Walking Dead* comics and viewers of the popular television series are a new kind of millenarian, reveling in the fictional destruction of great cities and civilizations. The apocalyptic is necessarily the most violent of genres. Jeffers had, I believe, picked up on something that would only find its expression decades later, a broader sense of *amor fati* attached to apocalyptic narratives. John of Patmos, the author of the Biblical Book of Revelation, is particularly skillful at making destruction and human suffering seem quite beautiful in the rapture of Christ’s return to earth. No Biblical book is more beautiful and true to a Calvinist poet than one that is about an appointed day of wrath.

Jeffers’s 1939 poem “Nerves” is evidence of his ability to sense not only impending tragedy, but the importance of what changes those tragedies can bring:

Few minds now are quite sane: nearly every person  
Seems to be listening for a crash, listening...  
And wishing for it, with a kind of enraged  
Sensibility. (CP 3:11)

Our current media is flooded with survival narratives, of humans struggling to live in a world where civilization has collapsed. It is a kind of Jeffersian fantasy. Consider the prophetic words of The Old Man when he investigates a plane crash in part two of *The Double Axe*:

For no apparent reason an army bombing-plane  
 Pitched from the sky, and exploded on the rock-ridge  
 Below the peak. The old man at that time was riding not far away; he followed the smoke-  
 tree  
 To its hot yellow root. A spirit in the fire sang  
 "Oh Kittyhawk." The old man mocked it and said  
 "Oh Hiroshima." It sang "Oh San Francisco, Seattle, New York." He answered "Oh stony  
 goat-pastures.  
 But not to-morrow nor o' Monday. But," he said, dismounting,  
 And kneeling on the sharp rock his old knotted shin-bones, "Oh holy fire, the cruel, the  
 kind, the coarse feeder,  
 Oh cleansing fire" (CP 3:266).

Zaller informs us that the bomb "had, for Jeffers, disturbed the cosmic equation in a way that even the threat of entropy could not; it had introduced derangement, disorder" ("The End of Prophecy: 'The Double-Axe' and the Nuclear Sublime," 50). Jeffers was not against even the complete extinction of the species, however that might happen.

Reflecting on disaster in the lyric poem "Hope Is Not for the Wise," a poem about the historical gulf of disorder that occurred in Europe called the Dark Ages, Jeffers writes, "if life even / Had perished utterly, Oh perfect loveliness of earth and heaven" (CP 2:560). He did not think the universe would be too affected by nuclear war. The planet, yes, for a time, but to a man who measured beauty by God's ability to endure, all the loss would hardly be felt by the vast and populated divine body. The Old Man knows that the "stony goat-pastures" will not be exempt from nuclear war. He relaxes with an elemental thought, a thought of fire. Fire cleanses, and if the atom bomb is a new kind of fire, the fire of the stars, then the discovery heralds a new and terrifying age. "You children / Not far away down the hawk's-nightmare future: you will see monsters" Jeffers writes in a poem from *The Double Axe* ("Diagram," CP 3:120). And, for Jeffers, though we waste ourselves on civilization and die at last, the great consolation is that we are not alone in our suffering, but endure along with the rest of creation.

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# Curriculum Vitae

## Education

PhD, English Literature, 2017 – University of Nevada-Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV 89154

Major Coursework in: Mark Twain, William Shakespeare, Victorian Poetry, Devotional Poetry, Henry James, Rhetoric, Henry David Thoreau. Advanced to Candidacy: February, 2016. Dissertation, “Robinson Jeffers and the Reality of Nature,” complete.

MA, English Literature, 2011 – Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA 95521

Major Coursework in: Tutoring Developing Writers, Environmental Writing, Multicultural Queer Narratives, Virginia Woolf, and British Literature. Completed Master’s thesis, “‘The Enormous Unhuman Beauty’: Robinson Jeffers and the Climber’s Ethos.”

BA, Anthropology, 2006 – The University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73069

Plains Archaeology. Completed 5-week field school at Bryson-Paddock Kiowa Site in 2006, Newkirk, OK. Completed capstone project, “Is Homo Antecessor a Viable Taxonomic Species?”

AS, General Studies, 2002 – Southwestern Oklahoma State University, Sayre, OK 73662

## Teaching Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada-Las Vegas, August 2013 – Present  
Classes taught: English Composition 101 and 101E/F (6 sections), World Literature I (8 sections), World Literature II (8 sections).

Writing Center Consultant, University of Nevada-Las Vegas, January – May 2013  
Conducted writing conferences with students to improve their writing skills.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Humboldt State University, August – December 2010  
Presented material in a British Literature survey. Responsible for web interface, grading.

Instructional Student Assistant, Humboldt State University, August 2009 – May 2010  
Worked with composition instructors in a lab setting to develop student writing skills.

K-12 Substitute Teacher, Eureka City Schools, January – December 2011  
Managed classrooms at all levels of K-12 education.

## Presentations

“‘The Enormous Unhuman Beauty’: Robinson Jeffers and the Climber’s Ethos.” Presented at the 2012 Robinson Jeffers Association Conference, Pacific Grove, CA, June 2012.

“Flame of Knowledge, Fire of Sin: Pleistocene Man in the Works of Robinson Jeffers and Loren Eiseley.” Presented at the 2013 Western Literature Association Conference, Lubbock, TX, November 2012.

**Publications**

“Nouvelle Romance de Cyclisme,” *Aethlon: A Journal of Sport and Literature*, 2015. Poem.

“Beckham County Has No Team,” *Stymie Mag*, 2015. Poem.

**Professional Affiliations**

The Robinson Jeffers Association, 2011 – Present

Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, 2012 – Present

Sierra Club, Toiyabe Chapter, 2012 – Present

Western Literature Association, 2012 – Present