Chapter III

Revisiting Jeffers Country

The contemporary concern for the environment has generated in literary discourse a new critical preoccupation with place in literature. Leonard Lutwack in his *The Role of Place in Literature* calls for an increased sensitivity to place, "a sensitivity inspired by aesthetic as well as ecological values, imaginative as well as functional needs. In so far as the representation of place in literature has an important influence on how people regard individual places and the whole world as a place, it may be concluded that literature must now be seen in terms of the contemporary concern for survival" (1).

The focus on place in literature is not a contemporary trend. Walter Allen in *The English Novel* claims that the Gothic novel was the first to establish "a peculiarly intense relationship between the characters and their immediate environments" (100). Ian Watt sees Daniel Defoe as the first of the English writers who visualized the whole of his narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment (26). More recent examples of writers wedded to their place would include Wordsworth (the Lake District), Thoreau (Walden), Steinbeck (California), Hardy (Wessex) and Yeats (the Irish countryside).

In an essay on Hardy in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, Lawrence argues that the controlling element in *The Return of the Native* is not the human action, but the setting where the action takes place, the wasteland of Egdon Heath: "What is the real stuff of tragedy in the book? It is the Heath. It is the primitive, primal earth, where the instinctive life heaves up. [...] Here is the deep.
black source from whence all these little contents of lives are drawn" (415). Lawrence went on to generalize:

This is a constant revelation in Hardy’s novels: that there exists a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it. Against the background of dark, passionate Egdon, of the leafy, sappy passion and sentiment of the woodlands, of the unfathomed stars, is drawn the lesser scheme of lives [...]. The vast, unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, surrounds us in its eternal comprehensibility, and in its midst goes on the little human morality play; [... ] seriously, portentously, till some one of the protagonists chances to look out of the charmed circle [... ] into the wilderness raging around (419).

In “Speaking a Word for Nature,” Scott Russell Sanders maintains that what Lawrence wrote about Hardy applies more to American literature. “Again and again in the great works of American literature, the human world is set against the overarching background of nature. As in Hardy’s novels, this landscape is no mere scenery, no flimsy stage set, but rather the energizing medium from which human lives emerge and by which those lives are bounded and measured” (ER 183). In Studies of Classic American Literature Lawrence finds a divided consciousness in the works of Melville, Cooper, Hawthorne, Crevecoeur, and Thoreau: on the surface they were concerned with the human world, but underneath they were haunted by nature. This divided consciousness arose, Lawrence argues, because in America “there is too much menace in the landscape”(48). Alfred Kazin in a study of the influence of the landscape on American writers, A Writer’s America: Landscape in Literature, also notes the inescapable sense of place that informs many of its great writers.
The poetry of Robinson Jeffers testifies to the poet's intense preoccupation with the Californian landscape. In December 1914, when Una and Robinson Jeffers had their first glimpse of the Carmel Coast, they knew without being told that they had come to their "inevitable place." Thus began what Loran Eiseley would call "one of the most uncanny and complete relationships between a man and his natural background that I know of in literature" (Not Man Apart 23). The poet admits that but for his meeting with Una and their coming to the Carmel coast, his poetry would not have been written at all (SP xv). Jeffers has often been criticised for the perversity and violence in his narrative poems. But he has always maintained that his stories were drawn from the coast where he lived. "The psychology of stories was observed from life." he says. "and in this country" (Alberts 113). He finds a hostility in the land to common human life. "It is not possible to be quite sane here," he argues. The region has a mood "that both excites and perverts its people" (SL 68). James Karman notes that Jeffers absorbed the unusual stories he had heard, and worked them into his poems. Una contributed a great deal by bringing the poet the stories she had collected from the inhabitants of the coast. "From the very beginning," says Edith Greenan in Una Jeffers. "Una gathered up the eerie tales around and about the strange Santa Lucia Mountains—from the secret places and landing places along the shore, from farmers, from fishermen. from all kinds of people." Una had "such a glorious way of coming back home and telling some small incident," she adds, "dramatizing, building an entire legend out of it" (29).

Tor House was built on the crest of the hill above the sea on Carmel Point. Jeffers worked as apprentice to the stonemason in building the house, using the granite boulders found on the shore. Hawk's Tower, which was inspired by old Irish towers, was a formative influence, strengthening his prophetic stance and ecological
vision. In *The Stone Mason of Tor House*, Melba Bennett reveals that every night he walked the tor. "watching the stars in their courses, marking the rising or setting of the Constellations and feeling the direction of the wind and noticing the tides at ebb and flow" (qtd. in Karman 52). The sound of the ocean, the "surf-beat's ancient rhythm," reverberates through his poems.

Karman relates how life in Tor House was simple with reduced material wants and a disciplined, regular lifestyle in communion with nature. Every afternoon, Jeffers worked on his property: he planted nearly two thousand trees—eucalyptus, cypress and pine: he also worked with stone, thus recreating and restoring his habitat (50). Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature, and the Formation of Culture*, sees such rustic habitation and relinquishment of material goods as a form of ecocentrism. He points to the example of Thoreau who built a cabin in the woods and dwelt there as an economic and spiritual experiment. He mentions Thoreau’s notion of voluntary simplicity, which tends to conjure up a hardy person or couple who have turned away from material progress, moved to a rural setting, and chosen a life of isolated and austere self-sufficiency (145). This voluntary withdrawal from the mad rush of civilization promises to restore the attenuated bond with nature. In William Faulkner’s "The Bear," Ike McCaslin sees the bear after he relinquishes the material belongings that bind him to civilization; Thoreau experiences the beauty of the changing seasons; Jeffers finds his God "in the enormous invulnerable beauty of things."

Jeffers's poetic landscape is the realistic representation of the real Californian coast. He draws vivid details of the land and its creatures in his poems. But Jeffers's understanding of history and geology makes his sensory perception more than mere descriptions of nature. Jeffers accurately notes the geological formations underfoot
the coast—the ridges of ancient black lava, the rockwalls of "light-gray diorite with two or three slanting seams in it. / Smooth-polished by the endless attrition of slides and floods" (2: 546), "the granite and lava tongue" on which Tor House is built, "the black lava rockhead" on which stands the Point Sur Light. In "The Women" he describes an earthquake:

In the scoriac shell granites and basalts, the reptile force in the continent of rock

Pushing against the pit of the ocean [. . .]. The old fault

In the steep scarp under the waves

Melted at the deep edge, the teeth of the fracture

Gnashed together, snapping on each other [. . .]

[. . .] The long coast was shaken like a leaf. (1: 309)

A place that has been inhabited by a number of races through the years, Jeffers's coast is a haunted region:

Boulders blunted like an old bear's teeth break up from the headland;

below them

All the soil is thick with shells, the tide-rock feasts of a dead people.

Here the granite flanks are scarred with ancient fire, the ghosts of the tribe

Crouch in the night beside the ghost of a fire. (1: 210)

The soil is full of the leavings of ancient tribes who had lived there. In "The Last Conservative" he writes, "I used to see ghosts of Indians / Squatting beside the stones in their firelight. / The rock-cheeks have red fire-stains (3: 418). In "Cawdor" Jesus Acanna picks up "a knife-edged flake of wrought chalcedony," not mindful "That his own people had clipped it out and used it/ To scrape a hide in their dawn or meat from
a shell” (1: 467). Tamar sees in a dream, the cavalcade of races along the Pacific coast. She sees the race-history of the region, all strangely alike. First the brown-skinned Indians, then Spaniards, and then the English come down the river to the sea and hearing the universal music / Went where it led them and were nothing” (1: 35).

Jeffers’s poems reveal the sense of the embeddedness of a community’s history in its environment.

Jeffers is awed by the sheer abundance of life on his rocky coast and his poems celebrate the prolific variety of the coastal flora and fauna. On the bare headlands facing Carmel Bay, wild flowers in great numbers brighten the boulder-strewn ground, flowers of every conceivable colour in prodigal abundance. Jeffers weaves a colourful tapestry in his poems with the wild flowers of the region: “Today we saw the first flush of wild-flowers, glad was our hill-side / With yellow violets and blue-eyed grass” (3: 20). In “The Maid’s Thought” (1: 3), he describes whole hillsides in the upland canyons bursting aglow with golden broom, the pools rimmed with “sulphury pollen dust of the wakening pines,” the stalks of purple iris which blaze by the brooks, the deerweed shivering with gold, the white globe-tulips blowing out their silky bubbles, the bronzebells nodding. Lance Frazer discovers that the “warm wind up the mountain was wild with fragrance, / Chiefly the scent of the chiya bushes, that wear rosettes of seed / Strung on the stem” (2: 314-15). Onorio Vasquez tells Clare of his father’s place in the canyon:

‘The darkness under the trees in spring is starry with flowers, with

redwood sorrel, colt's foot, wakerobin,

The slender-stemmed pale yellow violets,

And Solomon's-seal that makes intense islands of fragrance in April.’

(2:103)
Lester Rowntree, a botanist, wrote of Jeffers's treatment of the trees and flowers of the Carmel coast in *The Carmelite* (Dec. 12.1928):

> It is a relief to find someone with a grasp on the feel of the place, someone who can treat our forests and wild flowers with the dignity they should inspire, for they have suffered sorely at the hands of sentimentalists . . . . Much has been written of the trees and plant life of our district and many erroneous references made, but no one has tied them to the landscape and to the very core of the land in which they grow, as has Jeffers. (qtd. in Powell 87)

Tortured and gnarled trees—clinging tenaciously to the granite cliffs, defying all that the elements have been hurling at them for centuries—guard this wind-swept coast. The canyon stream-beds are lined with willow, alder and sycamore:

> Each clump of yucca stood like a star, bristling sharp rays; while westward the spires of the giant wood
> Were strangely tall and intensely dark on the layered colors of the winter sundown; their blunt points touched
> The high tender blue, their heads were backed by the amber, the thick-branched columns
> Crossed flaming rose. (2: 47)

The Monterey coast is home to countless land and sea birds; even today, one can see thousands of cormorants and gulls and Kittiwakes perching on rocky promontories projecting into the bay. Sea lions and seals haul out on to them to sleep and to argue. These, and many other birds and animals native to the region appear in Jeffers's narratives and short poems. Some of the characters have a deep awareness of
the presence of these creatures and of their natural habitats, an intimate awareness of
the particularities of their immediate surroundings that can be described as local
knowledge. In "Cawdor." Fera goes to the "Rock’s foot, / Where the great ribbed and
battering granite face / Came down and found earth. In spring the cliff-swallows nest/
A third of the way, and a pair of duck-hawks/ Two thirds of the way.” She searches
for Hood’s grave, “but this loose earth was only a squirrel’s mound/And that was a
gopher’s digging” (1: 499). As Hood returns home after his long absence, as he enters
the first canyon. “A mountain lion stood stilted on a bare slope between alder and
redwood watching him come down: / Like the owner of the place” (1: 419). This
contrast between the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the land, where the non
human appears more attuned to its environment, is a technique Jeffers employs
recurrently in an effort to question and mock man’s proprietary attitude towards the
earth.

Steve Crouch in Fog and Sun / Sea and Stone: The Monterey Coast, explains
how seals and sea lions have given Point Lobos its name. The Spaniards who came
there saw them frolicking in the sea in great numbers and called them sea-wolves.
Primitive Spanish maps noted this headland as La Punta de los Lobos Marinos (31).
They are still there today, barking and conversing with each other as they bask idly on
the rocks, so much an unavoidable part of the landscape. They are often portrayed in
Jeffers’s poems. loafing in the swinging tide, completely attuned to the rhythms of the
sea, barking on the Soveranes reef or “making a watery noise of roaring” or staring at
the shore “with sleek heads uplifted and great brown eyes with a glaze of blind / Blue
sea-light in them.” As Jeffers describes in "Orca":

Sea-lions loafed in the swinging tide in the inlet, long fluent creatures

Bigger than horses, and at home in their element
As if the Pacific Ocean had been made for them. Farther off shore the
island-rocks
Bristled with quiet birds, gulls, cormorants, pelicans, hundreds and
thousands
Standing thick as grass on a cut of turf. (3: 206)

Salt Salmon are observed racing up into the fresh waters of the river against the
smoulder and menace of a long angry sundown. The fierce musical cries of the
sparrow hawks hunting on the headlands. their red backs gleaming, can be heard.
“Westward the wave-gleaners. / The old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together,
the northwest wind wakening / Their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance (1:
108). “Phenomena” (1: 118) touches on the all enveloping grandeur of a natural
background which imparts beauty to all the objects it frames—“to the dingy freight
ship lurching south in the eye of a rain wind,” hawks hovering the white grass of the
headland, cormorants roosting upon the guano-whitened sheries, pelicans awind, sea-
slime shining at night in the wave-stir like drowned men’s lanterns, the old Point
Pinos lighthouse winking over the dark water and the flight of the twilight herons.

Along these shores the tide comes in twice a day; waves pound ledges exposed
to the sea, the spray from the impact shooting almost a hundred feet into the air. The
strip of the shore between the high tide and low tide mark, the inter-tidal zone,
harbours a swarm of life, a plenitude of living things that is not possibly seen
anywhere else. The vibrant colour and life throb of the creatures of the “waste of the
ebb under the cliff,” where Fera and Hood go to gather mussels and abalones, are
described thus.

Stone wilderness furred with dishevelled weed, but under each round
black-shouldered stone universes
Of color and life, scarlet and green sea-lichens, violet and rose sea-anemones, wave-purple urchins,
Red starfish, tentacle-rayed pomegranate-color sun-disks, shelled worms tuft-headed with astonishing
Flower-spray, pools of live crystal, quick eels plunged in the crevices.

Thus the region, its flora, and fauna are so repeatedly named in Jeffers's poems that it becomes a kind of incantation whereby he seeks to familiarize his readers with the land and make them aware of the sense of belonging that the land evokes in him. The intimacy with the land that is an important ingredient in these poems serves to create in the reader an awareness of and familiarity with not only the Californian landscape but with all naturally beautiful places. His natural aesthetic involves so much more than the mere visual appreciation of his environment. Rather, it seems to be what Baird Callicott in "The Land Aesthetic" would describe as "a three dimensional, multi-sensuous experiential continuum," whereby appreciation of the environment's natural beauty involves the ears (sounds of wind, insects, birds, animals or silence itself), the surface of the skin (the warmth of the sun, the chill of the wind, the texture of grass, rock, sand, etc.), the nose and tongue (the fragrance of flowers, the odor of decay, the taste of saps and waters) as well as the eyes (347). Such an aesthetic sensitivity to a place would precede an ecological sensitivity as one is startled into an awareness that this beauty does not come in parts, but only when seen as a whole—the land, its vegetation and its creatures. The animals and birds in his poems seem to be part of the land, "at home in their element." Only man, by refusing to be a part of nature, appears to be a misfit, an intruder, the sole agent of despoliation.
The violence, the wildness, the sheer elemental power, and the vibrant abundance and the biodiversity of this rocky coast inspired the poet and sustained his spirit, and even years after his death, this rocky coast is still Jeffers country. Even today, it retains its savage character and seems to mock man's inability to leash its wild splendour. "I should say that this rocky coast is not only the scene of my narrative verse, but also the chief actor in it" (Themes in My Poems 35). Even in the last poems he continued to insist that his loved subject has always been the land, "Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees / Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters" (3: 484). This evocation of the non-human as a major presence, more important than the human characters, is significant in Jeffers's ecocentrism.

Jeffers's extremely long poems seem to correspond to the massiveness of the land in which they are set and reflect the immensity of the ocean that is a constant presence: "certain scenes awake an emotion that seems to overflow the limits of lyric or description, one tries to express it in terms of human lives" (Jeffers Country 10). The land is also the central motif that holds together the extremely long narratives. "There is an angry concentration of power here, rock, storm and ocean," which is also seen in the poems. Such a massive, majestic background demands narrative poetry of violent power. Tragedy seemed a fitting vehicle in depicting the coast and its people; the very violence of the land seems to require a corresponding degree of violent emotions:

This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places,

(The quiet ones ask for quieter suffering: but here the granite cliff the gaunt cypresses crown
Demands what victim? The dykes of red lava and black what Titan?

The hills like pointed flames

Beyond Soberanes, the terrible peaks of the bare hills under the sun,
what immolation?) (1: 209).

The poet himself admits the importance of the landscape in his consciousness and its role as inspiration to his poetry: “Thus each of my too many stories has grown up like a plant from some particular canyon or promontory, some particular relationship of rock and water, wood, grass and mountain” (Jeffers Country 10).

The poet often looks at the landscape from a height and records the panorama before him. Such a perspective dwarfs human beings and their inhabitations, and deflates their importance. It also adds a note of menace, a feeling of impending disaster. The Frazer group sees from a height Drunken Charlie’s hut in a gorge of the cliff “like a brown pebble,” and his boat like a "split berry / Of bladdery seaweed up the thin strand” (2: 314). In “Thurso’s Landing,” Fayne and Rick standing on the head of the hill, looks down on the valley below and sees Thurso’s house “like a grain of corn in the crack of a plank, where the hens can’t reach it”(2:184).

In “Apology for Bad Dreams,” Jeffers presents the incredible beauty of the Californian coast—the redwood forests, the precipitous sea cliffs, the shining ocean, bathed in the purple fountain of light of the setting sun. Against this beauty is set a scene of human cruelty and sadism; in a clearing amidst this “unbridled beauty” are a mother and her son torturing a horse. The first effect is one of contrast; but after a description of the human cruelty, the human scene recedes into insignificance: “Seen from this height they are shrunk to insect size, / Out of all human relation.” As Robert Brophy remarks in Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual and Symbol in his Narrative Poems, perspective is a device by which the poet often fits his human characters into a
frame of reference necessary for true judgment (258). The observation, "You cannot see the face of the woman," makes the human actors irrelevant by making them just another part of the terrible beauty of the landscape. The landscape absorbs the sordidness of the woman’s cruelty. One comes to discover that the violence is not confined to the human drama; the landscape too has implications of violence and tension—the slopes dropping headlong into the steep ravine, the fountain and furnace of incredible light, beating up out of the west. But out of this violence, “grows apparent out of it” an unbelievable beauty, as Venus “grows” out “from the lit sky.” The poet concludes that even pain, suffering and cruelty are essential elements that make up the fabric of the whole and can be integrated into the incredible beauty of things. In the works of Thomas Hardy, though the immense, brooding landscapes appear more important than his human characters, eventually it is always these characters who emerge as the focal point of any scene. In Jeffers’s short poems, on the other hand, human beings are totally marginalized. At best they hover on the fringes of the landscape. The narrative poems do have human inhabitants, but they are repeatedly rendered insignificant against the immensity of land and ocean. This technique of contrasting the pettiness of man with the magnificence of nature is an intrinsic feature of Jeffers’s insistence on a shift from “man to not man.”

Jeffers’s characters are chiefly the ranchers of the coast, men and women who have a close relationship with the land in which they lead such isolated lives. The peculiar relationship between the landscape and the characters is developed in all Jeffers narratives. The landscape serves not just as a setting but has a more active role, as an influence on the characters and thus on the action of the poem. The coast with its age-old cypresses worked into deep-sea knots by the wind, "the age-redden granite that was the world’s cradle." the ever-restless ocean, the sea fogs that envelop
the coast and the red lichen that glow like coal on the old twigs in the fog, fills Tamar with a reverence for its strange power. She attributes her unnatural desire to the wildness of her environment:

Was it the wild rock coast
Of her breeding, and the reckless wind
In the beaten trees and the gaunt booming crashes
Of breakers under the rocks, or rather the amplitude
The wing-subduing immense earth-ending water
That moves all the west taught her this freedom? (1: 25)

The bleak and gaunt qualities of the landscape are reflected in characters like Stella Moreland, who endured her life on the strength of her visions in the “sea-shaken loneliness. little loved, nursing an idiot, / Growing bitterly old among the wind-torn Lobos cypress trunks”(1: 28). Fayne Frazer ponders over her husband’s character:

He was like this mountain coast,
All beautiful, with chances of brutal violence: precipitous, dark-natured, beautiful; without humor, without ever
A glimmer of gayety; blind gray headland and arid mountain, and
trailing from his shoulders the infinite ocean. (2: 348)

Many of Jeffers’s older characters are like the wind-buffeted Monterey cypresses clinging tenaciously to the granite sea-cliffs, bent, twisted and weathered by the salt winds. The landscape seems to have imprinted on the human characters its own qualities. The twisted and knotted trees also serve as symbols of the introversion of the incestuous inhabitants of the coast and of the entire human race.
Frederick Bracher advocates the concept of literary regionalism, which implies that writers are influenced by the culture and geography of a region. He points out that such a regionalism is very strong in Californian writers who present a view of the area from the inside, not curiously and from a safe distance, but with some sense of concern for, or identification with, the region (277). But while the sense of belonging to the land combined with a concern for it, is strong in Jeffers, he cannot be called a regional poet in the usual restrictive sense of the word as one who only describes the region, its flora and fauna, its topographical and climatic features, its legends and folklore. The Big Sur coast is to him not just a region; it embodies a philosophy and enables him to have an environmental perspective.

Edward Nickerson points out in "Robinson Jeffers: Apocalypse and His Inevitable Place." that his geographical setting was also very important in an explanation of the intensity of Jeffers's apocalyptic feeling (WAL12: 112). From his tower high on Carmel Point, he could see the unending Pacific Ocean in the north, south and the west. It is little wonder that he named the Californian coast "the world's end" and the sea "the final Pacific" or the "last ocean." But these eschatological perceptions were based not just on his geographical position but also on his theory of history, which he explains in "The Torch-Bearer's Race."

Here is the world's end. When our fathers forded the first river in Asia
we crossed the world's end;
And when the North Sea throbbed under their keels, the world's end;
And when the Atlantic surge rolled English oak in the sea-trough:
always there was farther to go,
A new world piecing out the old one: but ours, our new world?
Dark and enormous rolls the surf; down on the mystical tide-line under
the cliffs at moonset

Dead tribes move, remembering the scent of their hills, the lost hunters
Our fathers hunted; they driven westward died the sun's death, they
dread the depth and hang at the land's hem,
And are unavenged;

I am building a thick stone pillar upon this shore, the very turn of the
world, the long migration's

End: the sun goes on but we have come up to an end. (1: 99)

If the coast was migration's end on the historical level, on the anagogical it was the
epitome of the world itself and man's situation in it (Nickerson WAL12: 113). As
Mark Thurso remarks: "This is the prow and plunging cutwater, / This rock shore
here, bound to strike first, and the world behind will watch us endure prophetical
things / And learn its fate from our ends" (2: 218-19). Robert Brophy describes the
coast as the final frontier where “America’s violence, its rape of the land, its betrayal
of the indigenous peoples, its pillaging of resources” must be faced ultimately. The
coast sums up all migration and the history of human "progress”—a progress that
entails destruction of the land and destruction of the indigenous tribes. As Jeffers
points out in "The Redeemer," the land was conquered

'Not as people takes a land to love it and be fed,

A little, according to need and love, and again a little;

sparing the country tribes, mixing

Their blood with theirs, their minds with all the rocks and

rivers. their flesh with the soil: no, without hunger
Wasting the world and your own labor, without love

possessing, not even your hands to the dirt but plows

Like blades of knives; heartless machines; houses of steel:

using and despising the patient earth . . .

Oh, as a rich man eats a forest for profit and a field for

vanity, so you came west and raped

The continent and brushed its people to death.’ (1: 406-7)

The “strange, introverted and storm-twisted beauty of Point lobos”(SP xvi)
pervades almost all his poems and turns out to be a force which influences the
characters and their actions. Andrew Mauthe points out that Point Lobos is also a
symbol of permanence (RJN 25: 9) In "Point Joe," Jeffers points out that "Permanent
things are what is needful in a poem, things temporally / Of great dimension, things
continually renewed or always present" (1: 90). Against the relative permanence of
Point Lobos, the human drama enacted by Tamar becomes insignificant and transient.
The life forms on the Point are the things that are continually renewed. It is significant
that even after the destruction of the human cycle, the land remains more or less
unchanged. and regeneration continues: "Grass grows where the flame flowered; /
[...] The old trees, some of them scarred with fire, endure the sea-wind" (1: 89). In
"Bixby’s Landing," he lets the landscape and its inhabitants fill the poem. The first
image is of the human impact on the landscape:

They burned lime on the hill and dropped it down here in an iron car

On a long cable; here the ships warped in

And took their loads from the engine, the water is deep to the cliff. The
car
Hangs half way over in the gape of the gorge,
Stationed like a north star above the peaks of the redwoods, iron perch
For the little red hawks when they cease from hovering
When they've struck prey; the spider’s fling of a cable rust-glued to the pulleys. (1: 388)

But this picture immediately shifts from the ruins of man’s ingenuity to nature that has reclaimed its pristine condition. The car hanging perilously over the abyss seems an emblem of the human race. What had earlier been images of man’s dominance over nature now appear to reveal his extremely slight control over it. Set against the immense landscape, the cable appears as tenuous as a “spider’s fling” and as natural. The poet seems to say that while human alterations may leave their mark on the land for a while, these alterations are absorbed and naturalized, and the land reclaimed by the creatures and the elements:

The laborers are gone, but what a good multitude
Is here in return: the rich-lichen ed rock, the rose-tipped stone-crop, the constant
Ocean’s voices, the cloud-lighted space.

The kilns are cold on the hill but here in the rust of the broken boiler
Quick lizards lighten, and rattle-snake flows
Down the cracked masonry, over the crumbled fire-brick. In the rotting timbers
And roofless platforms all the free companies
Of windy grasses have root and make seed; wild buckwheat blooms in the fat
Weather-slacked lime from the bursted barrels.
Two duckhaws darting in the sky of their cliff-hung nest are the voice of the headland.

Wine-hearted solitude. our mother the wilderness.

Men's failures are often as beautiful as men's triumphs, but your returnings

Are even more precious than your first presence. (1:388)

Human beings are framed out of the landscape. Kirk Glaser remarks on the ambivalence that Jeffers displays towards the land. He longs for the landscape to be cleared of its human components, yet he also needs to maintain some humanized sense of place so that he may inhabit the land (Dimensions 164). Like the duckhaws in their cliff-hung nest, Jeffers from his house high up on the cliff considers himself to be "the voice of the headland."

Jeffers' coast seems to become what Mikhail Bakhtin in The Dialogic Imagination, describes as a "chronotope." By chronotope, Bakhtin meant the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically represented in literature. Writing about the significance of chronotopes in novels, Bakhtin describes them as the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. "The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narratives" (250). Bakhtin describes the representational importance of the chronotope:

the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. But the event does not become a figure [...]. It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground
essential for the showing forth, the representability of events [. . .]. It serves as the primary point from which "scenes" in a novel unfold, while at the same time other "binding" events, located far from the chronotope, appear as mere dry information and communicated facts [. . .]. Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood [. . .]. (250)

The chronotope of the coast holds together and concretizes the narrative sequences in Jeffers's poems. The coast in his narratives is not just the border country between land and ocean. The tone and tenor of the poems with its excesses of violent emotions and actions are occasioned by the natural violence of the coast. The wind-battered Californian coast, naturally earthquake prone, with its dry summers and resultant forest fires, and its torrential rains leading to floods proved to be an ideal setting for a prophetic poet whose poetry reverberates with apocalyptic overtones. The ample proportions of the mountains, the sheer precipices dropping into the vast ocean, and the overwhelming vastness of space are not mere descriptions but the very apparatus that conveys his ecocentric philosophy.

Jeffers uses the perspective of time to emphasize his awareness of the history of the coast. The past, the present and the future seem to coalesce here. The poet remembers "the tide rock feasts" of a dead people who have lived and suffered here, and he invokes "the ghosts of the tribe. In his poems the ghosts of the poet's earlier creations join the ghosts of the earlier generations. The actual past, which is history,
and the imaginary past, which is art, merge to realize a myth of the eternal present. The eschatological tendencies present in Jeffers: tend to merge the future too in the present. As Bakhtin explains, “Eschatology always sees the segment of a future separating the present from the end as lacking value; this separating segment of time loses its significance and interest, it is merely an unnecessary continuation of an indefinitely prolonged present” (148).

Facets of a character, like attitudes to nature, geographical knowledge, and conceptions of the human subject’s compulsions are faced at the level of the chronotope. In Jeffers’s poems the chronotope becomes literally a place where a “line is overstepped” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 169), a massive threshold from which there is no turning back. In almost all the poems, it is not inside the houses, that the critical events take place, but under the open sky, flanked by “Mountain and plain, the immense breadth of the continent,” and the “mass and doubled stretch of water.” In Thurso’s Landing, it is on the cliff overlooking the ocean that the final scene is enacted, where man’s judgement is passed:

The platform is like a rough plank theatre-stage
Built on the brow of the promontory: as if our blood had labored all round the earth from Asia
To play its mystery before strict judges at last, the final ocean and sky,
To prove our nature
More shining than that of the other animals. (2: 278)

Bakhtin’s views about the special relationship that time has to space in the idyll is relevant in an examination of Jeffers’s landscape. In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin describes this relationship as an “organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and
crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. Idyllic life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one's children and their children will live” (225). It is this quality of the Big Sur country, where time appears to stand still, that fascinated Jeffers. As he describes the effect the coastal mountains:

for the first time in my life I could see people living—amid
magnificent unspoiled scenery—essentially as they did in the Idyls or the Sagas, or in Homer's Ithaca. Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come. Here was contemporary life that was also permanent life; and not shut from the modern world but conscious of it and related to it; capable of expressing its spirit, but unencumbered by the mass of poetically irrelevant details and complexities that make a civilization. (SP xv-xvi)

Bakhtin also notes that when the unity of place in a novel is strong, time appears to collapse upon it. Temporal boundaries between individual lives and between phases of one and the same life are weakened and rendered indistinct: “The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave [...], and brings together as well childhood and old age [...], the life of the various generations who had also lived in that same place, under the same conditions, and who had seen the same things” (225), contributing to a cyclical rhythm. Thus the coast, where the evolutionary drama is visibly at work, helps to emphasize the poet's concept of cyclical time. The lives led by Jeffers's ranchers, in close contact with nature and away from the corruption of civilization, are apparently idyllic. But at the same time,
the poet takes care to emphasize the narrowsness and isolation of their seemingly idyllic world, in which relations between people and human relationships with nature are built on either patriarchal or humanistic foundations. It is a world where people have lost contact with each other and with nature, where it is necessary to find new relationships, freeing themselves from false hierarchical relationships between objects and ideas and to once again bring together those elements that have been distanced from one another. Thus the coast is a vantage from which to look back at human presumption—the rape of the land, the destruction of nonhuman life, and the annihilation of native tribes—and also the point from which to turn outward, break the incestuous bonds of humanity, and acknowledge the intrinsic oneness of all life.

Jeffers's accurate knowledge and vivid descriptions of the land and its natural phenomena serve to orient his reader towards the earth and familiarize him to a land, its natural features and its people. Along with his intimations of reverence for the beauty and abundance of the land, there is an emphasis on the insignificance of man. Thus the Californian coast proves to be an effective backdrop for an inhumanist philosopher-poet who calls for a shift from an egocentric to an ecocentric position for humanity. The violent, threatening and destructive aspects of the coast also trigger off the prophetic tendencies of a poet who could sense the decadence of Western civilization and its fatal movements towards death. Together with a concern for man's estrangement from the earth, the elements of warning and admonishment are tacit in his lines. His Pacific coast is thus the end of the road—the very verge, the drop-off cliff of the world, which has to be cleansed through destruction.
Works Cited


