Chapter VI

The Web of Life: The Short Poems

Confronted with the realization that his actions cause irrevocable damage to the ecosphere, man's dilemma is that there are no easy solutions to the problem of the environment. It has become necessary to question the very foundations of the modern, industrial, growth-oriented way of life, which has engendered the crisis. A change in perception and attitude is required before man can even begin to redress the situation. As Fritjof Capra points out in *The Web of Life*, the new paradigm that is required is a holistic worldview, in other words, an ecological view (6). When science has lost its infallibility, at least as far as environmental health is concerned, philosophical voices calling for a change in attitudes are heard. Ecophilosophical concepts such as deep ecology, transpersonal ecology, and ecofeminism, which combine philosophical insights based on scientific foundations, have become increasingly relevant. It is possible to relate many of the ideas of Robinson Jeffers, specially his philosophy of inhumanism, to these ecophilosophical concepts, which evolved years after his death.

A Biblical vision of the withering of the earth as a result of man's violation of the laws of God assumes significance in the modern world, where a similar scenario can come about as a result of the violation of the laws of nature. Man's subjugation and exploitation of the earth have raised visions of a future world, which would suffer or die as a result of human transgressions. At such a critical juncture, at least a few have come to realize the need for a shift to more viable alternatives that would question and deconstruct the accepted power-oriented categories of belief. A questioning of hierarchies of dominance and power—patriarchal, racist, colonial, anthropocentric—has resulted in a tentative yet gradual shift of significance from
such power centres to hitherto marginalized voices that show a willingness to expound feelings of mutuality and interdependence.

Anthropocentrism, which has taken firm root in the human psyche over the centuries, holds that the human species is superior to all other species, by virtue of its possession of various unique characteristics. It sees humans as the most significant aspect of the cosmos, and everything else, the biotic as well as abiotic components, has to be measured relative to human needs. This view has contributed in no small measure to the delusion of human self-importance. The feeling that he stands apart from nature and is superior to other forms of life has generated in man a callous indifference to the non-human elements of the ecosphere, resulted in his blind destruction and exploitation of the planet, and caused the present environmental crisis.

Opposing this dominant view are the concepts of biocentrism and ecocentrism. According to Kent Ashton Walton’s definitions in “Environisms,” biocentrism is the view that all life is equally valuable, regardless of the nature of the organism. Ecocentrism holds that natural systems are the basis of all organic existence, and so possess an intrinsic value—a value that is independent of its use or relation to humans: humanity is dependent on these natural systems, not vice versa; human actions must not be detrimental to organic and inorganic life; characteristics of natural systems such as diversity, stability, integrity (beauty) are considered intrinsically valuable.

Several ecocentric philosophies have developed in response to the worsening environmental crisis. One such environmental movement that calls for a radical change in human relationship towards nature is deep ecology. The term was coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who along with George Sessions gave a theoretical foundation to the philosophy. Briefly stated, deep ecology holds that all
life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans; richness and diversity contribute to life’s well-being and humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. It points out that the impact of the human race on the earth is excessive and rapidly getting worse; the flourishing of nonhuman life requires a decrease in human population. Therefore deep ecology calls for a change in basic ideological, political, economic and technological structures.

Michael Zimmerman in “Introduction to Deep Ecology” says that deep ecology is founded on two basic ideas: one is a scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on earth, together with the idea that anthropocentrism—human-centredness—is a misguided way of seeing things. Deep ecologists believe that an ecocentric attitude is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on earth. Instead of regarding humans as something completely unique or chosen by God, they see men as integral threads in the fabric of life. They believe that man needs to develop a less dominating and aggressive posture towards the earth, if he and the planet are to survive. The second component of deep ecology is what Arne Naess calls the need for human self-realization. Instead of identifying with his ego or his immediate families, man would learn to identify with trees and animals and plants, indeed the whole ecosphere. This would involve a pretty radical change of consciousness, but it would make his behaviour more consistent with what science says is necessary for the well being of life on earth.

Fritjof Capra defines deep ecology by contrasting it with shallow ecology and showing that it is a network concept in *The Web of Life*:

Shallow ecology in anthropocentric, or human-centred. It views humans as above or outside of nature, as the source of all value, and ascribes only instrumental, or ‘use’, value to nature. Deep ecology does
not separate humans—or anything else—from the natural environment. It does see the world not as a collection of isolated objects but as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views human beings as just one particular strand in the web of life. (7)

Bill Devall and George Sessions in *Deep Ecology*, point out that the writings of poets like Robinson Jeffers contributed greatly to the deep ecology perspective (80). The philosophical roots of deep ecology can be seen in the social criticism and the ecological implications in Jeffers's poetry, especially the short poems.

Giving the non-human inhabitants of the planet their due importance and relegating the human element from a position of centrality, Jeffers insists that all life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to man. In “Animals,” he describes the non-human aspects of the universe that are able to survive in extremely hostile environments. Sea-lions survive where man cannot—“life near kin to human, intelligent, hot-blooded, idle and singing,” floating at ease in the ice-cold water. Even the tongues of flame on the surface of the sun which assume animal-like characteristics—“the beautiful passionate bodies of living flame, batlike flapping and screaming, tortured with burning lust and acute awareness” (3: 364)—are more intensely alive than man can ever be, and are more worthy of praise than human beings. The poet stresses the kinship of the non-human elements to the human component, before abruptly relegating the human to a marginal position. This ability to present the universe as all alive and interrelated encourages ecological sensitivity by putting mankind in its place as one form of life among many, and certainly not the most significant.
In Jeffers' scheme of things, the non-human elements of nature take precedence over human beings. He sees animals as having a dignity that men lack. In "People and a Heron," he wonders "why a lone bird was dearer to me than many people. / Well: rare is dear; but also I suppose/ Well reconciled with the world but not with our own natures we grudge to see them / Reflected on the world for a mirror" (1: 113). In "Autumn Evening," as he watches a heron flying against the autumn coloured sky, as he listens to the sea's voice, he thinks, "No matter/ What happens to man . . . the world's well made though" (1: 117). Poems like "The Broken Balance" contain passages in praise of the creatures that seem to be the more fitting inhabitants of this glorious earth

That tight blood-loving weasel, a tongue of yellow
Fire licking the sides of the gray stones.
Has a more passionate and more pure heart
In the snake-slender flanks than man can imagine. (1: 373)

The jewel-eyed hawk, the tall blue heron, the "black cormorants that fatten their sea-rock . . . With shining slime; even that ruiner of anthills / The red-shafted woodpecker," are more worthy of praise than human beings:

These live their felt natures: they know their norm
And live it to the brim; they understand life.
While man moulding themselves to the anthills have choked
Their natures until the souls die in them. (1: 373)

Contrasting the perversity of man with the natural instincts of animals, Jeffers can accept the predatory instincts of the non-human element as natural in the scheme of things:
Here was death, and with terror, yet it looked clean and bright, it was beautiful.

Why? Because there was nothing human involved, suffering nor causing; no lies, no smirk and no malice;

All strict and decent: the will of man had nothing to do here. The earth is a star, its human element is what darkens it. (3: 206)

Celebrating the richness and diversity of life on the coast, he castigates humanity for its meanness and perversity: “the breed of man / Has been queer from the start. It looks like a botched experiment that has run wild and ought to be stopped” (3: 207). Poems like “Original Sin” illustrate the viciousness of human beings, “the most repulsive of all hot-blooded animals,” who roast a mammoth to death in a perverted desire to witness its agony. In “The Inquisitors” autochthonous spirits examine some human specimens and wonder how such fragile creatures could be so noxious. The insignificance of humans is compared to the immensity of nature. In nature’s grasp, they are “too helpless even to scream.” Puzzled over man’s destructive tendencies, the nature spirits on further examination discover that the human brain is just a “drop of marrow,” and wonder, “How could that spoil the earth?” They conclude that the destructive power is in the human discoveries. “‘The blasts and the fires are nothing: freckles on the earth: the emanations / Might set the whole planet into a tricky fever / And destroy much’” (3: 210). But in the process of destruction, human beings would not just destroy themselves, but would wipe out all life from the earth. The earth spirits finally end on a typically Jeffersian note of hope that whatever be the destruction wrought by the human race, “‘It is not likely they can destroy all life: the planet is capacious / Life would surely grow up again’” (3: 210).
Jefters emphasizes the enormity of the human impact on the earth, which is rapidly getting worse, and points out that human lifestyles and the population explosion are key elements of this impact. In “Post Mortem,” the poet prophesies the destruction of natural strength and beauty, as a result of over-population and exploitation. “Passenger Pigeons” reflects on species that have become extinct after explosions of population—the passenger pigeons and the American bison. The poet apostrophizes death: “You Death, you watch for these things, / These explosions of life: they are your food. / They make your feasts’” (3: 435). Now perhaps death has turned his grossly craving black eyes on humanity. The poet comments on mankind’s seemingly impressive achievements: “we have bridled the cloud-leaper lightning,” “snatched the live thunderbolt / Out of God’s hands,”

we have taken

The primal powers, creation and annihilation; we make new elements, such as God never saw,

We can explode atoms and annul the fragments, nothing left but pure energy, we shall use it

In peace and war. (3: 435)

He compares man’s misuse of his mind’s abilities to the monstrous growth of the dinosaurs that had ruled the earth with tearing teeth and enormous bodies plated with armour that made them invincible. The sabre-toothed tigers had huge fangs that were as unnecessary as our sciences. Our minds are like those tusks—“hypertrophied and terrible.” For the human race the time for extermination seems to be drawing near, as Jeffers comments in “Birth and Death,” “Breeding like rabbits we hasten to meet the day” (3: 440).
In many of the poems Jeffers contrasts a decadent urbanized civilization with native cultures that are more in tune with nature. In "New Mexican Mountain," the white Americans watching the Indian dance are described as "Pilgrims from civilization, anxiously seeking beauty, religion, poetry: pilgrims from the vacuum. / People from cities anxious to be human again" (2: 158). The young tribals are ashamed of their culture and their rituals, "they are growing civilized." They do not realize, as do the poet and the Taos mountain and the confident tribal drum, that "civilization is a transient sickness." "Not Our Good Luck" contrasts the folly of the trappings of civilization with "the ancierter simple and silent tribes of the stars." God as energy pervades the entire universe, be it the squalor of the present or the grandeur of the past. In spite of her gods and her religions, "God also moved on the city;" the poet stresses the human realm, which is seen as a dimension of the natural. Though man turns away from it, the beauty of things touches everyone: "he is nowhere not present. his beauty, it is burning in the midland villages / And torture men's eyes in the alleys of cities (1:13). Thus, held together by the interweaving current of energy that flows through the universe interconnecting us with our environment and with other beings, nature becomes a single reality, rather than a number of separate entities.

In "The Coast Road," the poet surveys the rottenness of cities from the isolation of his mountainous retreat. John Elder in Imagining the Earth describes this as a characteristic circuit in Jeffers' poetry: love of the wilderness and hatred of civilization feeding on each other. The polarization of his own feelings is further intensified for Jeffers by his perception of a larger historical process of estrangement (8). The destruction that the poet portrays is still in the future. The human capacity for subduing nature seems to have acquired a frightening momentum. The desire to protect the world from men seems to translate itself into a vision of human
obliteration. By separating humans from his poetic landscape, he goes beyond humanity to envision an ideal though seemingly impossible state where the non-human and the human are equal participants.

In *The Cliffs of Solitude*, Robert Zaller states that the failure to sustain cultural purpose and value marked the onset of decadence. The decadence of the West—or, more precisely, its incipient decline—emerges as a dominant theme in Jeffers' verse in the twenties and remains so to the end of his career (205). In "The Broken Balance," Jeffers writes:

The world sickens with change, rain becomes poison,

The earth is a pit, it is time to perish.

The vines are fey, the very kindness of nature

corrupts what her cruelty before strengthened.

When you stand on the peak of time it is time to begin to perish. . .

(1: 374)

The poem is a realization that the corruption was inherent in man, not in the world around him. The balance has been broken between man and his sustaining beliefs as well as between man and his environment. It is when man starts losing his organic connection to the earth that he starts perceiving it as an object of conquest in his obsession with what he calls "progress." Robert Zaller describes the delusion of man's progress:

Progress was the ultimate project of the modern will, the reduction of the world to terrain, of universal process to naive recurrences that, once deciphered, passively awaited man's disposal. But progress itself was curiously afflicted by loss of effect, increasing mastery by loss of control, as purpose degenerated into mere persistence and finally "deep
indifference. " a mechanized somnambulism in which the will, having lost even the memory of its own command, drifted destructively in a phantasmal void. Lost amid conquest, modern men were dwindled and anxious: in the mass they seemed still more vulnerable, as they clung to each other for support. (207)

In the poem "The Purse-Seine," Jeffers describes the fishermen going out at night in their boats to cast their huge seines for schools of fish, and he paints a realistic picture of their prey caught in the net beneath the boat:

I cannot tell you

How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish

Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent

Water to a pool of flame [. . .]. (2: 517)

Jeffers transfers this scene to another setting, as he looks down from a mountaintop at night on a "wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light" and asks himself: "how could I help but recall the seine-net / Gathering the luminous fish?" The comparison of the people in the city to the sardines caught in the purse seine seems to him both beautiful and terrible, and he keeps his distance from them on his mountaintop, stoically accepting the reality: "surely one always knew that cultures decay, and life's end is death." Western civilization was dying from its own rapacity, and the right action to take in the midst of such decadence is to stand apart from it and refuse to be involved.

The "net" of the city separates men from their natural environment; deprived of their roots, men are helpless and unable to stand alone. They are unnaturally
dependent on their fellow creatures; but that relationship is the unreal one between trapped victims: their glow is the shimmer of decay:

I thought. We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great cities; now there is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free survival, insulated from the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent. The circle is closed, and the net is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet they shine already. (2: 518)

Jeffers uses the image of the net in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy"—"the net of desire Had every nerve drawn to the center, so that they writhed like a full draught of fishes, all matted in the one mesh" (1: 176)—to describe a culture built on self love. Zaller describes urbanization as the outer symptom, the public manifestation of this collapse upon the self. "The tightening web of community created isolation within dependence. enlarging the sense of self while destroying the scope of free activity, as narcissism and anomie reinforced each other in a self-perpetuating cycle"(207). Christopher Lasch in The Culture of Narcissism,² gives a description of a narcissistic society, which is remarkably congruent with Jeffers's:

The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence, in one area after another, and has made the individual dependent on the state, the corporation, and other bureaucracies. Narcissism represents the psychological dimension of this dependence. Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem. He cannot live without
an admiring audience. His apparent freedom from family ties and institutional constraints does not free him to stand alone or to glory in his individuality. On the contrary, it contributes to his insecurity, which he can overcome only by seeing his "grandiose self" reflected in the attentions of others, or by attaching himself to those who radiate celebrity, power, and charisma. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror, whereas the rugged individualist saw it as an empty wilderness to be shaped to his own design. (qtd. in Zaller 207-8)

Against such a background of decadence caused, to a large degree, by loss of contact with the earth, deep ecology calls for a return to a way of life that is totally tied to the rhythms of the earth. Jeffers too writes longingly for such a return to a life in tune with nature: "I too / Believe that the life of men who ride horses, herders of cattle on the mountain pasture, plowers of remote / Rock-narrowed farms in poverty and freedom, is a good life" (2: 522). In "Still the Mind Smiles," the present time is a disturbed one with "misery and riches, civilization and squalid savagery, / Mass war and the odor of unmanly peace":

In order to value this fretful time

It is necessary to remember our norm, the unaltered passions,

The same-colored wings of imagination.

That the crowd clips, in lonely places new-grown; the unchanged

Lives of herdsmen and mountain farms'

Where men are few, and few tools, a few weapons, and their dawns are beautiful. (2: 310)

But at this point, we have so disturbed the natural rhythms that it is impossible to get back to a pre-technological state. We have moved so far away from nature; we have
choked the earth by sheer numbers. Many deep ecologists feel that it would be best if
the industrial world were just to collapse. Such a collapse is visualized by Jeffers too
as the only way out, and therefore the charge of misanthropy is equally strident when
applied to both deep ecology and to the poetry of Jeffers. But being anti
anthropocentric is different from being misanthropic. What Jeffers, like the deep
ecologists, is trying to do is to dislodge the ingrained notion that human beings are the
most important species on the planet, rather than that they should be wiped out from
the face of the earth

"Carmel Point" dwells on "the extraordinary patience" of nature that suffers
with fortitude the ignominy that man inflicts on it. It knows that its present diminution
and defacement are just temporary phases in the cycle of existence: "It knows the
people are a tide / That swells and in time will ebb, and all / Their works dissolve" (3:
399). The image of the pristine beauty, now seemingly lost, lives on in the very grain
of the granite, to be redeemed at the proper time. Jeffers reiterates his concept of time
as cyclical, and the present deterioration, both cultural and natural, as a sign of a
civilization that has gone past the peak. While seeing a kind of determinism in the
order of existence, and the futility of human schemes of action, Jeffers suggests an
ethic that would make human existence on the earth more bearable. Freed from his
egocentric delusions, having learnt to uncentre his mind from himself and to
acknowledge his kinship with the objects of nature, man will acquire the confidence
to survive in a world where all his earlier assumptions of centrality have become
untenable:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;

We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident

As the rock and ocean that we are made from.
Where is our consolation?

Beautiful beyond belief

The heights glimmer in the sliding cloud, the great bronze gorge-cut sides
of the mountain tower up invincibly,

Not the least hurt by this ribbon of road carved on their sea-foot. (2: 523)

Jeffers's concept of time as cyclical assumes significance when his poems are
examined from an ecological perspective. Ecology can also be regarded as the science
of cyclical patterns, the description of the unending natural cycles of growth and
death. Jeffers's poems reiterate and affirm the cyclical nature of all existence—birth,
growth, death, decay, and rebirth. For Jeffers in “Shine, Perishing Republic,” the
entire Western civilization is moving to its death. He uses life-cycle imagery and
stresses the decaying phase of the cycle, settling in the “mould of its vulgarity.”
"Mould" could also stand for decaying organic matter, signifying an inevitable stage
in all natural cycles—what evolves from earth will return to earth to render it fertile
for future growth. "The fruit rots to make earth, / Out of the mother; and through the
spring exultance, ripeness and decadence; and home to the mother" (1: 15). All life
cycles move to such a conclusion. As he says in “The Shears,” on death “we become
part of the living earth / And wind and water we so loved. We are they” (3: 412).
While death and decay are part of the natural cycle, and inevitable, what is unnatural
seems to be man's rush towards progress and his unnecessary intervention in the
natural order of things, upsetting the balance and shortening the natural life span:
"You making haste haste on decay". Yet Jeffers affirms life. "Life is good," regardless
of length, and all life, however transient, is significant: "Meteors are not needed less
than mountains" (1: 15). “The Cycle” portrays human migration and historical cycles
as natural, rather than historical actions. Nature, replaced with the products of modern
technology, will once again resume its lost splendour. Jeffers stresses the cyclic nature of human civilization that came west from the Mediterranean and Asia. The desolation that accompanies the decline of a civilization is upon America. Man's overweening desire makes him restless and hence transient.

As Chris Johnston in “Four Dimensions of Deep Ecology” explains, the central idea of deep ecology is that mankind is part of earth, rather than apart and separate from it. This idea is in contrast to the dominant individualism of our culture, where we see ourselves as separate from our world and hence indifferent to it. It calls for biological egalitarianism—the belief in a more equal relationship between humans and nature. Johnston points to two key ideas that have emerged from scientific thinking that support this view, Systems Thinking and the Gaia Hypothesis.

Fritjof Capra sums up the key characteristics of Systems Thinking in *The Web of Life*. The most important criterion of systems thinking is the shift from the parts to the whole. Living systems are integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of smaller parts. Their essential or systemic properties are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. Systemic properties are destroyed when a system is dissected into isolated elements. The properties of the parts are not intrinsic properties, but can be understood only within the context of the larger whole. Thus, systems thinking is 'contextual thinking;' and since explaining things in terms of their context means explaining them in terms of their environment, we can also say that all systems thinking is environmental thinking (36-37).

"Natural Music" is an attempt to integrate man into the landscape. Man and the landscape belong together and if man has the strength to listen without "Divisions of desire and terror / To the storm of the sick nations, the rage of the hunger-smitten cities" (1: 6), he would find that the still, sad music of humanity is part of the natural
scene. It is when man stands apart that he fails to "listen" and loses his "voice."

"Salmon Fishing" celebrates the end of the seasonal cycle. The death of the season is reflected everywhere: the short days, the river's devouring mouth, the menace of the sunset, the red ash of the solstice, the red shallows of the river, the bloody bodies twitching on the rocks. The violence that accompanies this death vibrates in the poem, in the cruel, primeval gestures of the anglers. The anglers, insignificant human participants in the natural scene become elements of the landscape. Nature itself is the subject; human actions acquire significance only as part of nature. The poem figures nature as an organism comprehending human life as one of its many elements. In "Monument," there is no substantial difference between one form of life and another:

Erase the lines: I pray you not to love classifications:

The thing is like a river, from source to sea-mouth

One flowing life. We that have the honor and hardship of being human

Are one flesh with the beasts, and the beasts with the plants

One streaming sap, and certainly the plants and algae and the earth

they spring from,

Are one flesh with the stars. The classifications

Are mostly as kind of memoria technica, use it but don't be fooled.

It is all truly one life, red blood and tree sap,

Animal, mineral, sidereal, one stream, one organism, one God.

(3: 419)

While the parts have value, only the whole is truly important, only the whole endures. "Night" (1: 114-16) has cyclic and cosmic imagery—imagery of the sun, tides, ocean, the movement of the earth, the stars—which moves from man to cosmic whole through the landscape. The dramatis persona is here the cosmic whole. But
since that whole cannot be comprehended by man, the landscape becomes the metaphor of that whole. "To us the near-hand mountain / Be a measure of height, the tide-worn cliff at the sea-gate a measure of continuance" (1: 115). The imagery tries to integrate man into this cosmic whole. The inhuman world is presented anthropomorphically—tide-rock lift streaming shoulders, the ocean is prone, the Pacific leans on the land, the stars tire of their flow, sing, think, dream. Man, on the other hand, is dehumanized. He has grave depths like the ocean; man's life "though furious for continuance" is but a flicker like the life of moths and worms.

The Gaia Hypothesis takes this idea of the shift from the parts to the whole further and applies it to the whole planet. All life on/in Earth can be seen as a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The whole is like a huge super-life form that we call "Gaia" (after the name of the ancient Greek goddess of Earth). Stephen Harding points out in "From Gaia Theory to Deep Ecology," that the Gaia Theory of atmospheric chemist James Lovelock and evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis has revived the ancient view of the Earth as a living organism:

Put simply, they say that the Earth is alive—that a life-like quality emerges from the interactions of living beings with each other and with non-living parts of the planetary system (the rocks, atmosphere and oceans). They say that not only does the Earth support individual living organisms and species, but that sum of all these organisms in the Earth's environment creates a system that is, in itself, alive. Lovelock and Margulis also made the bold conjecture that this living organism, our Earth, is able to self-regulate essential characteristics of its environment.
Jeffers was able even at the beginning of the century to have a vision of the earth as an organism that sustains itself. Harding continues that such a Gaian approach opens new doors of perception and opens up our vision of the inter-dependence of all things within the natural world: "There is a symphonic quality to this interconnectedness, a quality which communicates an unspeakable magnificence [. . .]. As you experience this dynamic, ever-shifting reality, you may suddenly find yourself in a state of meditation, a state in which you lose your sense of separate identity, and become totally engrossed in the life process being contemplated. The contemplated and the contemplator become one."

Poems like "Return," "Vulture" and "Oh Lovely Rock" describe moments of such intense identification with the non-human aspects of nature. "Return" is the recognition of Western civilization's spiritual and physical uprootedness from the earth. The poet visualizes a physical immersion in nature, an immersion that is not clouded by the rational human consciousness, which cripples the instinct to participate in the processes of nature. The last two lines of the poem, especially the apostrophe " [. . .] noble is the mountain, oh noble / Pico Blanco, steep sea-wave of marble" (2: 409), assumes significance because it reverts to an animistic kind of relationship with the natural world at a point of time, when such a relationship would seem almost an anachronism. But the poet is careful to link this animistic view to a geologic view of the mountain Pico Blanco when described as a "sea-wave of marble" is related to a time when the rock that constitutes it was molten liquid like the ocean. Connecting the pagan reverence to a modern scientific view of the natural process succeeds in reanimating a sense of wonder in the natural world. The return that the poet attains is a return to a unified organic vision, a recovery of an old emotion based on a modern scientific view of nature. In "Vulture," the poet watches the bird circling above him
and inspecting him, as he lies death-still on the hillside. Gradually appreciation of the beauty of the bird evolves into an intense desire to be integrated into nature, a feeling that is almost religious in its intensity: “To be eaten by that beak and become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes—/ What a sublime end of one’s body, what an enskyment: what a life after death” (3: 462).

Jeffers tries to cultivate ecological consciousness, a process that involves becoming more aware of natural objects like rocks, animals and trees, and cultivating the insight that everything is connected. “Oh Lovely Rock” describes the experience of learning to appreciate silence and solitude and rediscovering how to listen. In the first stanza, the reader’s eyes are drawn up the rock walls along with those of the poet and the firs that “stare up” the steep rocks, to see forest on forest hung on the mountain ridges. The different trees along with the rock appear to be a single entity.

The second stanza shifts to the human scene; there is something ritualistic in the little motions that Jeffers makes—“I laid a clutch of dead bay-leaves / On the ember ends and felted dry sticks across them and lay down again”(2: 546)—reminiscent of the primeval gestures of the anglers in “Salmon Fishing,” and presenting man as an integral part of the scene. The tenderness and love of the father for his sleeping son seems to be enhanced by the setting. The implication here seems to be that while these human attachments are important, the poet is able to move beyond them. In a moment of attentiveness, the rock wall captures his attention, “as if I were / Seeing rock for the first time.” The rock, “light-gray diorite with two or three slanting seams in it,” appears to him as living rock, possessing “the silent passion, the deep nobility and childlike loveliness.” The poet experiences a state of being different from his own, yet related to him. The inhumanist vision is attained in such moments of identification with the nonhuman world.
letters's wife testifies to a similar experience in his life as he was handling the boulders during the building of his house: “As he helped the masons shift and place the wind and wave-worn granite,” writes Una, “[...] he realized some kinship with it and became aware of strengths in himself unknown before” (SL 213). He saw the hardness of his own personality in the boulders and the coldness that would give his “unagitable and somewhat earthfast nature” its characteristic stone tranquillity (1: 112). The kinship that he felt extended the reach of his consciousness and induced something akin to mystical illumination (Karman 48). “Thus at the age of thirty one,” continues Una in the same letter, “there came to him a kind of awakening such as adolescents and religious converts are said to experience.” Stephen Harding in “What is Deep Ecology?” describes the significance of such an experience:

A key aspect of these experiences is the perception of gestalts, or networks of relationships. We see that there are no isolated objects, but that objects are nodes in a vast web of relationships. When such deep experience occurs, we feel a strong sense of wide identification with what we are sensing. This identification involves a heightened sense of empathy and an expansion of our concern with non-human life. We realize how dependent we are on the well-being of nature for our own physical and psychological well-being. As a consequence there arises a natural inclination to protect non-human life [...].

From this oneness there arises a deep appreciation of the reality of inter-dependence, and from this comes the urge to be involved in opposing all sorts of ecological abuses. Such an identification with the physical world is developed in the case of the only two protagonists in the long poems who succeed in attaining an inhumanist vision. The
universe imagined as an organic whole echoes the vision of tribal cultures, which in
their contact with the earth perceives a spiritual force in nature. Such a unity with the
land will be desirable to Jeffers, a merging of human self and natural other. As Capra
says: "Ultimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness. When
the concept of the human spirit is understood as the mode of consciousness in which
the individual feels a sense of belonging, of connectedness, to the cosmos as a whole,
it becomes clear that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest essence" (7). This
intuitive recognition of the interrelatedness of all forms, seen in Jeffers's poems is the
hallmark of the deep ecology movement, and is the basis for the elaboration of any
ecological philosophy. To conclude, the main features of Jeffers’s poetry have much
in common with a deep ecological point of view; his poetry stresses an ecocentric
rather than anthropocentric worldview; it encourages respect for and protection of
richness and diversity, and sees the dangers of an exploding global population.
Recognizing the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that we
are all embedded in and dependent on the cyclical processes of nature, his poetry
questions the existing beliefs that motivate the destruction of the ecosphere.

Notes

1 In 1983, camping in Death Valley, California, Arne Naess and George
Sessions formulated eight platform principles that serve as the basis of deep ecology:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth
have value in themselves. These values are independent of the
usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.

2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of
these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life demands such a decrease.

5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.

6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.

7. The ideological change is mainly in appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.

8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary change.

(Devall 70)


**Works Cited**


