Chapter II
The Making of the Poet

I

Nearly four decades after his death, Robinson Jeffers remains a troubling presence on the American literary horizon. Not really forgotten, not given due credit, he is often considered an isolated figure on the Californian coast—the last frontier on the continent’s end. A poet who consciously set himself apart from the poetry and poets of his generation by his almost reclusive life in Carmel, his unusual poetic form and by his anti-modernist stance, he has emerged after years of neglect and obscurity as a strangely influential poetic voice. In an age of environmental concern, he occupies a prominent position in the canon of major American poets as one who attempted to reorient our anthropocentric perspectives, to take us beyond the petty concerns of modern man to contemplate a transhuman magnificence.

Born on January 10, 1887, Robinson Jeffers had an unusual childhood, which Robert Brophy describes in “Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur.” A precocious student, whose education was strictly monitored by his scholarly father, the young Jeffers attended various schools in Europe. On his return to America, his father, apprehensive of any distraction that would affect the boy’s education, saw to it that he made no lasting companions of his own age. Dissatisfied with his son’s progress in American schools, Dr. Jeffers soon sent him back to Europe. The repeated relocations in successive schools, the resultant lack of companions, and an extremely disciplined upbringing, made Jeffers, at that early age, a solitary boy endowed with an extraordinary stoicism. By the age of twelve he was fluent in German and French and could read Latin and Greek. Despite his strong Christian beliefs, Dr. Jeffers never required his son to share his faith. As Jeffers clarifies, “My father was a clergyman
but also intelligent, and he brought me up to timely ideas about origin of species, descent of man, astronomy, geology, etc., so that progress was gradual, none of the view-points of modern science came as a revelation" (SL 255).

In 1903, the Jeffers family moved to California and young Jeffers entered Occidental College, Los Angeles. An excellent student, he took courses in biblical literature, geology, history, Greek, rhetoric and astronomy, and for the first time in his life made friends. But the stoicism of his childhood remained with him in his college days and a fellow student testified to his “almost unlimited endurance” (Powell 10). He graduated in 1905, at the age of eighteen. Undecided on his career, Jeffers studied literature at the University of Southern California, took courses in philosophy, Old English, French literary history, Dante, Spanish romantic poetry and history of the Roman Empire at the University of Zurich, studied medicine for a time at the University of Southern California, and enrolled in the School of Forestry at the University of Washington at Seattle. His unusual education determined many of the features of his poetry—he familiarized with Greek, Roman and Biblical themes, German Philosophy and biological, geological, astronomical and medical details.

Jeffers married Una Call Kuster in 1913. The influence of Una on the poet's work can never be overestimated; as he himself admits, “My nature is cold and discriminating; she excited and focused it, gave it eyes and nerves and sympathies” (SP xv). 1914 marked not just the beginning of World War I, but also a year of personal mourning. The death of his baby daughter and that of his father left Jeffers desolate. The war years were troubled ones for him. As Robert Brophy explains, he was torn between an idealism that drove him toward enlistment despite domestic ties and the beginning of a philosophical pacifism. War was to be the matrix of many poems of his later poetry (3). For Jeffers, World War I marked the end of Western
civilization and threw up questions about Western humanism and Christianity. The war thwarted Jeffers’s plan to settle down in a little village on the southern coast of England. Jeffers wanted a quiet place to live, a retreat away from society. On a friend’s suggestion, they decided to visit a little village on the Californian coast, Carmel-by-the-Sea.

The impact and influence of Carmel on Jeffers was tremendous. “When the stagecoach topped the hill from Monterey,” says Jeffers, “and we looked down through pines and sea-fogs on Carmel Bay, it was evident that we had come without knowing it to our inevitable place” (Powell 13). He describes the feelings that the place evoked in him:

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 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)

In 1919, he bought land on a knoll overlooking Carmel bay facing Point Lobos. There, apprenticing himself to a stonemason, he began work on his Tor House. After the completion of the stone cottage, began the single-handed construction of a forty-foot tower, which took five years to build and which proved to be so formative in his poetic stance and expressive of his aesthetics. The huge boulders needed for Hawk Tower were rolled up from his shoreline.
The young Jeffers was influenced by the poetry of Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Coleridge (Brophy 4). He produced romantic melodramatic verse in his first book, *Flagon and Apples*, in 1912. *Californians*, which appeared in 1916, was also written in the same vein. It was at this point of time that Jeffers made some conscious decisions concerning his life as a poet. He realized that modern poetry was becoming “slight and fantastic, abstract, unreal, eccentric [. . .]. It must reclaim substance and sense. and physical and psychological reality. This feeling [. . .] led me to write narrative poetry and to draw subjects from contemporary life; to present aspects of life that modern poetry had generally avoided; and to attempt the expression of philosophic and scientific ideas in verse” (SP xiv). His writings shed their “rhyme tassels” and became philosophically integrated under a stoic pantheism. He recalled a statement made by Nietzsche—“The poets? The poets lie too much”—and decided that he would never say lies in verse, nor “feign any emotion” he did not feel, nor “say anything because it was popular, or generally accepted, or fashionable in intellectual circles” unless he himself believed it (SP xv). He believed that poetry should concern itself chiefly with “permanent things and the permanent aspects of life.” “Permanent things are what is needful in a poem, things temporally / Of great dimension, things continually renewed or always present” (1: 90). “Fashions, forms of machinery, the more complex social, financial, political adjustments, and so forth, are all ephemeral. exceptional: they exist but will never exist again” (SP xv). He would exclude from his poetry most of the details of modern life, especially life in the cities, and concentrate instead on permanent things like the sea, the stars, the mountains, and human passions enacted against the natural world. As he says in “A Little Scraping,” the Monterey coast provided everything he needed:

This mountain sea-coast is real,
For it reaches out far into past and future;
It is part of the great and timeless excellence of things. A few
Lean cows drift high up the bronze hill;
The heavy-necked plow-team furrows the foreland. gulls tread the furrows;
Time ebbs and flows but the rock remains.
Two riders of tired horses canted on the cloudy ridge;
Topaz-eyed hawks have the white air;
Or a woman with jade-pale eyes, hiding a knife in her hand,
Goes through cold rain over gray grass. (2: 282)

It was George Sterling and James Rorty who, in 1925, first “discovered” the intriguing genius of this isolated poet, who insisted on staying away from literary circles. For the next ten years, Jeffers was a sensation (Brophy 4). He proved to be a self-effacing celebrity, almost indifferent to the recognition bestowed on him. Jeffers’s one public appearance was to collect money to pay his property taxes in a Carmel growing too expensive for him. Since the early twenties, he lived a simple, rustic life with few needs. celebrating life in communion with nature. Brophy describes the poet’s daily schedule, which consisted of writing in the morning, stonework or planting trees in the afternoons. In the evenings, he would walk under the stars, read to his family by kerosene lamps, or watch the vastness of the ocean from his tower parapet. Una’s death in 1950 marked the end of one of the most creative unions in literature: “Una has died,” he says in “Hungerfield,” “and I am left waiting for death, like a leafless tree / Waiting for the roots to rot and the trunk to fall” (3: 375-76). He died on January 20, 1962; reports say that on that day, Carmel was covered with an almost unprecedented snow (Brophy 7).
Very few poets have been subjected to such extreme fluctuations in their critical reputations as Robinson Jeffers. In his lifetime he was either praised extravagantly or disparaged with vehemence. Received with enthusiasm and even idolized in the twenties, he was violently condemned in the thirties as critical opinion reversed itself: he was accused of fascism, anarchy, primitivism, pacifism, isolationism, sadism, misanthropy and atheism, and seldom judged on the merits of his poetry. Pointedly ignored in the forties, he lived in critical oblivion till his death in 1962.

The 1916 publication of *Californians*—now judged an immature work—hardly received any critical attention. *Tamar and Other Poems*, which appeared in 1924, was unnoticed until James Rorty and George Sterling brought it to critical notice. Rorty, Mark Van Doren and Babette Deutsch labelled Jeffers a major poet, and expressed their praise in influential reviews¹. Other critics agreed that a poetic genius had indeed arrived on the American scene. Jeffers brought out a new edition of "Tamar" with two additional long narratives, "Roan Stallion," and "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," and several short poems. The new book created a sensation and Jeffers became famous overnight. Babette Deutsch in the *New Republic* ranked him "with the foremost American poets not only of his generation, but of all the generations that preceded him."² His admirers compared him to Whitman in his verse style and to the Greeks in his violent subject matter. This unrestrained adulation was in some measure responsible for the severe rejection of the later years. But meanwhile, Jeffers's reputation soared.
Jeffers’s next book, *The Women at Point Star* (1927), failed to fulfil the expectations aroused by “Roan Stallion.” The poem was condemned for its excessive violence and perversity. *Cawdor and Other Poems* (1928) helped dispel the doubts caused by *The Women*. and Van Doren was moved to compare Jeffers to Euripides, Sophocles, and Shakespeare. After the publication of *Dear Judas and Other Poems* (1929), Jeffers was criticized for his unorthodox treatment of Christ and frequently accused of atheism. The second long poem in this volume; “The Loving Shepherdess,” a tender allegory of sacrificial love, was well received by critics. 1932 witnessed the zenith of literary popularity with the favourable reception of *Thurso’s Landing and Other Poems*. Granville Hicks found “Thurso’s Landing” “the most human poem he had written, in the sense that its characters act from comprehensive motives . . .” and describes it as “sweeping forward on the wings of an imagery even nobler than that we have known.”

Yvor Winters’s condemnation of Jeffers’s work as “pretentious trash” in *The Defense of Reason* had a gradual deleterious effect on Jeffers’s reputation. The New Critics, who dominated literary criticism from the 1930s to 1960s, rejected Jeffers’s poems, which refused to conform to New Critical tenets. Jeffers’s commitment to poetry of direct statement and linear narrative was a challenge to the modernist mode of poetry championed by them. They adopted either a scathingly condescending attitude towards Jeffers or completely ignored him. This neglect helped to keep Jeffers out of poetry anthologies in the 40s and 50s and out of influential journals. Further, the length of the long poems too made it difficult to include them in anthologies. The long poems, on which critical attention was focused, overshadowed the meditative shorter poems, which are undoubtedly Jeffers at his very best.
Factors other than literary quality contributed to the decline of Jeffers's reputation. By the end of the 30s, the charge that he had fascist sympathies and that he had no social commitment further damaged his reputation. *Give Your Heart to the Hawks* (1933), *Solstice and Other Poems* (1935), and *Such Counsels You Gave Me and Other Poems* (1937) received poor reviews. In 1936, Ruth Lechlitner in the *New Republic* chastised Jeffers for not producing politically correct poetry—“plain annihilation of humankind (followed by peace) will do Mr. Jeffers nicely. Provided . . . that he can sit alone in his stone tower, surrounded by California scenery, while the whole disgusting business is going on, and dash off a last poem or two before peace gathers him to her bosom.” In 1937, Eda Walton saw him as one who had “removed himself too far from his own age to be seriously listened to as a prophet.”

Though each book fuelled new controversy, Jeffers remained entirely aloof from literary criticism. His explicitly sexual themes and anti-Christian and anti-national opinions shocked conservative readers. His philosophy of inhumanism offended everyone who assumed man's central position in the world—Christian, Marxist, humanist. His apparent indifference extended to a steadfast refusal to commit himself to any political and economic organization, which only heightened his alienation from influential circles.

Jeffers had, throughout his life, ascribed to the theory that a poet should not be involved in contemporary affairs. But both books of poetry published in the forties, *Be Angry at the Sun and Other Poems* (1941) and *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1941) showed an obsession with contemporary affairs; both of them were violently anti-war. These volumes reveal a social conscience, the lack of which was severely criticized a few years ago. But Jeffers's pacifism in the forties, when the war against fascism had assumed the proportion of a crusade, was as unpopular with the critics as
his lack of social commitment in the thirties. He was even suspected of being a fascist. The political views expressed in *The Double Axe and Other Poems* proved so embarrassing for his publishers that they prefaced the book with a disclaimer that “Random House feels compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet.”

By 1948, however, Jeffers the playwright had acquired critical acclaim. The dramatic adaptation of “The Tower Beyond Tragedy” was followed by two plays, *Medea* and *The Cretan Woman*. The 1954 volume, *Hungerfield and Other Poems* and the posthumous publication of a collection of short poems, *The Beginning and the End and Other Poems* (1963), provided opportunity for many favourable reappraisals of the poet’s work. The noted poet, James Dickey declared that Jeffers filled a position in America “that would simply have been an empty gap without him: that of the poet as prophet, as large-scale philosopher, as doctrine giver.”

Winfield Townley Scott in the *Saturday Review* noted that “the neglect of Jeffers, even the scorn of Jeffers in the past three decades constitutes the major scandal of contemporary American poetry.”

Academic interest in Jeffers has been negligible, for the wild, expansive narratives did not fit into the conventional definitions of modern poetry. The academy’s neglect is all the more interesting, because Jeffers, unlike many modern poets, commands a general readership. In the years after his death, there has been a renewal of interest in Jeffers’s poetry. His pacifism inspired the antiwar movement of the sixties and seventies. His cosmic view of nature inspired ecologists in the seventies and eighties. “No longer an isolated voice crying, Cassandra-like, in the Californian wilderness, Jeffers would become the acknowledged mentor for a new
generation of poets from William Everson and Gary Snyder to Robert Bly and Czeslaw Milosz" (Varadamis, *Dimensions* 26).

III

The themes of Jeffers's poetry remain consistent throughout his mature period. He is a pantheist who finds his God in the physical world. He believes in the cyclic nature of all existence. Change, which is at the centre of life's dynamism, is brought about by violence and pain, for every form resists its own dissolution. Human resistance to God is resistance to integration into the organic whole of the universe. The cycle moves inexorably from birth to death and decay wherein the material of each body is re-assimilated into soil and air. Death is not cataclysmic, but inevitable and natural. His vision of existence is informed by the sense of the cosmos as a whole. Evil is part of the wholeness of things. He attempts to reconcile human perversity with the essential beauty of things.

For Jeffers, a "good life" consists in detachment from desire for power, wealth and permanence, in indifference to pain, joy or success, and in turning outward to God, who is "all things." He advises a cosmic perspective, a stoic balance, and a shift from human centred attitudes. He criticizes the delusion of human centrality and the presumptuousness of human self-importance. Saviourism is condemned for the implicit arrogance that one can change the world. Every poem's theme, one way or the other, is the divine beauty of the cosmos and the transience of the individual.

The Californian coast comes alive in his poems; his descriptions of the landscape are realistic. He bestows personhood on the land whereby it becomes the
"protagonist" in his poems with the human beings only "symbolic interpreters." The poems can thus be considered parables. Robert Brophy clarifies that his genre is at an important level ritualistic: that is, each story represents a Dionysian process, illustrating the cycles of life and death. Jeffers consciously chooses a kind of stereotyping (he calls his characters "puppets"); his men tend to be Apollonian, stoic, stolid and presumptuous; his women are Dionysian and are agents of violence and change (Dimensions 15).

Jeffers speaks in many voices; standing on "the little stone-belted platform / On the turret on the head of the tower," he is a prophet who can see the present civilization at "its peak of flight / Waver like a spent rocket." Like the prophet who is desperate to communicate the truth he perceives, he deals in exaggeration and overstatement; he tries to shock to communicate. Though his condemnation of man may sound misanthropic, such language is found frequently in prophetic utterances; it is the bitterness of despair over a humanity he loves. Scattered in his narratives are apocalyptic allusions, the awareness that we are on "the drop-off cliff of the world" about to "watch the ocean boiling and the sea curl up like paper in a fire and the dry bed / Crack to the bottom"(1: 84)

At times he is a mystic, adoring his god in the solitude of his tower as in "Night". At times he is a teacher, suggesting how to live, as in "Signpost": "Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity." He is a philosopher who can prescribe to ailing Western civilization the "heal-all" that he has found. His philosophy of inhumanism is woven into most of his poems, espousing a stoic detachment, and a shift from man to nature. He celebrates the rituals and primeval rhythms of nature as in "Salmon-Fishing" and "To the House." Often he is the grave
ecologist. "mourn the broken balance, the hopeless prostration of the earth / Under men's hands [. . .]. The beautiful places killed like rabbits to make a city"(1: 375).

Robert Brophy points out that Jeffers instinctively comes to grips with all the themes from the literature of the West. "He deals with agrarian and pastoral types, the epic sweep of migration, hero archetypes, endemic violence, search for Eden, the failure of the American Dream, extermination of indigenous tribes, the grandeur of the landscape, the mysticism of wilderness, immersion in nature, the folly of progress, the moral dilemmas of ownership, the ecology of land development, the rule of law, power and greed" (Dimensions 16). In The Environmental Imagination, Lawrence Buell outlines enduring environmental themes—the aesthetics of relinquishment, the personification of the nonhuman, an attentiveness to environmental cycles, a devotion to place, and a prophetic awareness of possible ecocatastrophe. These ingredients are present in full measure in the poetry of Jeffers.

The environmental movement of the twentieth century found encouragement in the poet, who deplored the urbanization of America and the uniformity of a culture that destroyed its natural splendour. William White, commenting on the issuance of the Jeffers postage stamp, wrote: "The present day ecologists should make Jeffers their hero: he was talking in philosophical and poetic terms years ago of the things they are talking about in 1973." In 1977, Kevin Starr pointed out that no other artist had done more than Jeffers to nourish a "new respect of nature on its own terms." He explained that "because of his poetry we are more aware of the otherness of natural things. And in that new respect for otherness in the inanimate, in that fresh and vital respect to the beingness of rocks and rivers and trees, are the sound beginnings of an environmentalism that is so very much more than a program of protection. It is a philosophy of creation itself." Not Man Apart: Photographs of the Big Sur coast
with lines from Jeffers’s poetry helped to focus efforts to preserve the Californian
cost: the lines from “The Answer” became a credo for Western conservationists:

and know that however ugly the parts appear the whole remains

beautiful. A severed hand

is an ugly thing, and man disserved from the earth and stars and his

history . . . for contemplation or in fact . . .

Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness, the greatest

beauty is

Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty

of the universe. Love that, not man

Apart from that, or else you will share man’s pitiful confusions, or

drown in despair when his days darken. (2: 536)

In his foreword to The Double Axe and Other Poems, William Everson asserts

Jeffers’s legacy of ecological wisdom: “The ecological crisis has driven home with
great force the pertinence of Jeffers’s insistence that man divorced from nature is a
monstrosity. By wrenching attention from man to cosmos he has served as a powerful
counterbalance to perennial human egocentricity, and his witness in this regard is only
beginning. No matter what civilizations survive this one, the pertinence of his vision
will go on, because it is not possible to state the case more emphatically” (xiv). As

awareness of the environmental crisis dawns on modern man, the ecological vision of
the poet gains relevance in a critical period in human history. Jeffers is now being

considered the poetic precursor to many explicitly ecological modern poets like Gary
Snyder, W.S. Merwin and Wendell Berry, as one who could offer in the early
twentieth century a philosophical foundation for the nascent ecology movement.
Notes

Quotations from or references to the articles mentioned below, unless otherwise stated, are from annotated extracts in Jeanette Boswell, *Robinson Jeffers and the Critics 1912 – 1983: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources with Selective Annotations* (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow, 1986).

4 Deutsch, “Bitterness and Beauty,” 338-39
5 Mark Van Doren, “Bits of Earth and Water,” *Nation* 128 (Jan 9, 1929) 50.
6 Granville Hicks, “A Transient Sickness,” *Nation* (13 April 1932) 433.
Works Cited


