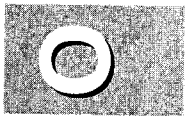

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in the evenings, but he and Una accepted. Jeffers spoke fluent French to Dali and they got along well. Later at the great Dali costume party Jeffers came wearing a crown of flowers.

Reprinted from the "This World" section of the San Francisco Chronicle, June 11, 1972. (c) Chronicle Publishing Co., 1972. Mr. Cerwin, a public relations consultant in San Francisco, was early associated with the Pebble Beach area. He has authored at least four other short pieces on Jeffers: "Twenty-Four Hours a Day," proposing laureateship for Jeffers (Pine Cone, May 8, 1931), an account of "Jeffers hiding out in his tower as dashing co-eds arrive to have him pen his name on his latest books" ("Familiar Sights," Pine Cone, April 15, 1932), "How Authors Got That Way," recounting the various sources of inspiration for Carmel's authors, including Jeffers, (Pine Cone, Sept. 1, 1933), and a review of "Give Your Heart to the Hawks" (Pine Cone, Nov. 3, 1933).

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JEFFERS' "MEDEA": A DIONYSIAN RETRIBUTION

Robert J. Brophy

Some see great irony in the fact that Robinson Jeffers is best known for his adaptation of Euripides' "Medea" -- a task which he undertook almost accidentally, as a favor to the actress Judith Anderson; actually the drama is most congenial to Jeffers' vision and character modes.[1] Its plot follows a pattern similar to that of the "Oresteia" from which Jeffers adapted "The Tower Beyond Tragedy"; Medea is a Clytemnestra who will sacrifice her children lest her false husband survive in any way. Medea is also like Tamar who is a Dionysian agent moving the cycle of a family history (in striking parallel to the career of civilization and all earthly history) toward a final, violent dissolution, rejecting her lovers' proferred escape to a limbo-life of civilized quiescence. In some ways Medea is the Phaedra-like character of Jeffers' "Cawdor" and his "Cretan Woman," the spurned girl whose would-be consort rejects her earth-mother fertility-invitation in order to seek his diversion in thrills of the hunt and in men's companionship.

The "Medea" story had already been used by Jeffers in his narrative "Solstice" (1935) which modernized Euripides' setting and character motivation but retained the primitive, volatile, witch-like quality of Euripides' heroine. Jeffers locates the origins of this Medea (Madrone Bothwell) in the Rockies ("What great surf of mountains beats from the distant ocean wave over wave, waves of live stone," Solstice, p. 130) and has her return there as to a centre ("I cannot tell; I think she had too much energy to die. I think that a fierce unsubdued core / Lives in the high rock in the heart of the continent, affronting boundaries of civilization and Christ.").

The "Medea" story describes a savage, primordial woman, wooed and won by a lover whose adventurous life then becomes a civilized travesty. His ruthlessly

executed quest for the Golden Fleece degenerates into a hunt for power, security, and city sophistication. Jason's presumptuous manipulations of his wife and offspring soon bring Medea to vengeance. He would take her babies from her to give them the "opportunities" of civilized life; she slaughters the children lest they be contaminated and lest her consort survive through them.

The theme of "Medea" is the "sudden disaster out of the clouds" warned of in "Apology for Bad Dreams."[2] At the story's core are violence, precipitous defeat, and death. The theme is the restoration of nature's balance, the reversal of human hopes, the threatening aspects of existence which men would avoid, even ignore, but not with impunity. Here, deep in the story's workings, is a ritual-like pattern which is common to all Jeffers' narratives because it mimics the basic life-form of existence itself, the only subject Jeffers sees fit for his art.[3] In many ways Jeffers' short narrative, "The Humanist's Tragedy," is the reader's best introduction to "Medea." In this adaptation of Euripides' "Bacchae," Jeffers sets the careful, future-oriented, self-congratulating complacency and conservatism of King Pentheus against the sudden, irrational, violent, drunken career of Dionysus, celebrated in Pentheus' mother Agave's dark forest cult. The contest is unequal. Pentheus cannot contain the stranger god in prison; neither can he control the orgiastic cult. As he tries to monitor its mysteries for the "good of the state," he is torn asunder by his own god-maddened mother who in religious ecstasy believes she has beheaded a lion (a fragmentating that recapitulates Bacchanal communion rites). Pentheus' mistake is one of idolatry. He worships "all the dignity of man, the pride of the only self-commanding animal, / That captains his own soul and controls even / Fate, for a space" (Dear Judas, p. 123). This hubris, this overweening presumptousness, this blind rejection of limits, makes the inevitable downfall all the more violent. Pentheus' hubris is Jason's; Agave's retribution is Medea's.

Medea is the pre-rational answer which primitive forces make to civilized presumptions. She is raw power responding to genteel cruelty and cultured rationalization. Driven to madness, she knows she is driven. Pushed too far, her fury breaks. Responding with the savage vigor inherited from her tumultuous mountain origins, she takes the calculating Jason by surprise, unable to anticipate or fathom her craft and intensity. Civilization had essayed to corner and rob her, then cast her aside; she was useful for a time but is now no longer "productive" according to its purposes. Her response dramatizes the precariousness of civilized security and power. Her choice is instinctive; it acts out the violent substructure to all being, the remorseless, sudden ascendency of Dionysus over Apollo.

Nietzsche in his Birth of Tragedy popularized this labeling for the polarities of dynamic process. "Apollonian" suggests the god of the sun -- power, skill, formalism, control, art, civilization, and continuance; "Dionysian" conveys the orgiastic suddenness and pre-civilized madness of Dionysis -- instinct, mystery, violence, riot, and rebirth. Both are aspects of being; they are located at opposite poles of the cycle: Apollo presides over the fruitfulness and growth of spring and summer; Dionysus, over the dissolution of fall and the pre-natal wasteland of winter. The two antinomies are essential for dynamic continuance: "Unless the grain of wheat fall to the ground and die . . . ."

At their most basic level, Apollonian and Dionysian imply nothing recognizably human. They are the inexorable ebb and flow, day and night, life and death. Humans

experience them as part of existence; they prefer Apollo to Dionysus only in as much as human instinct demands continuance, security, control, etc. Humans define tragedy in terms of hubris and hamartia because they must find guilt in any course that leads to catastrophe. This, according to Jeffers, is the human bias that distorts vision and prevents holistic participation in the God of Beauty. Humans welcome Apollo; they would build a tower to heaven as Jason would; they would make history linear; but Dionysus will have his day. This is why Jeffers wishes to mount, with his Orestes, the "tower beyond tragedy," i.e., be so purged of pity and fear (which obscure vision and destroy objectivity) that he could prescind from the "normal" human motives of continuance. He would prefer not to be involved with the outraged cries of those flayed by a reality which contradicts their romantic dream. Actually Jeffers is interested in the human drama only in so far as it bodies forth non-human drama (again see "My Loved Subject"). The poet Jeffers is a man and must deal with man's problems, motives, and biases, but only as they translate into a larger frame which is both Apollo and Dionysus, the agony of the Hanged God eternally trying the experiments of new being.[4]

"Medea" speaks to men the irrational chaos that lies just beneath any culture's surface, the sudden catastrophe each one fears, the volcanic psyche each man senses within himself. The individual's response to "Medea" is often a frightened one; it stirs waters at a depth unwonted. Judith Anderson's portrayal made the stage Medea doubly overpowering. There is in the tension and rhythmic violence of the lines a hypnotic dance toward oblivion reminiscent of Hitler's speeches; Medea sounds the call of the god to flee down the mountain and partake of dark mysteries. She invokes the god of energy, "bright burning fire," "gold gifts" that consume. Medea is descendent of Helios, a god more primitive even than Dionysus. Through the "wine, blood," and flesh globules of her regal victims she becomes his sacrificial priestess. She personifies the Dionysian triumph over the Apollonian arrogance of man's self-constructed, self-congratulated, self-sufficient world.

NOTES:

1 New Directions Press has reissued "Medea" along with "Cawdor" in the fall of 1970. This is envisioned as first of a series of "revivals" of Jeffers texts which have been long out of print and unavailable except through rare-book dealers.

2 See "Apology for Bad Dreams" (Selected Poetry, p. 176) for Jeffers' statement of his ars poetica in terms of this Dionysian madness and violence which he had to reconcile with his world.

3 See "My Loved Subject" in The Beginning and the End: "Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees / Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic interpreters-- / So let them live or die." Mountain and ocean, etc. are in turn interpreters of a greater whole which encompassed all space and time.

4 See "At the Birth of an Age" (Selected Poetry, p. 559 ff.) for a comprehensive description of this self-torturing, eternally changing god.

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