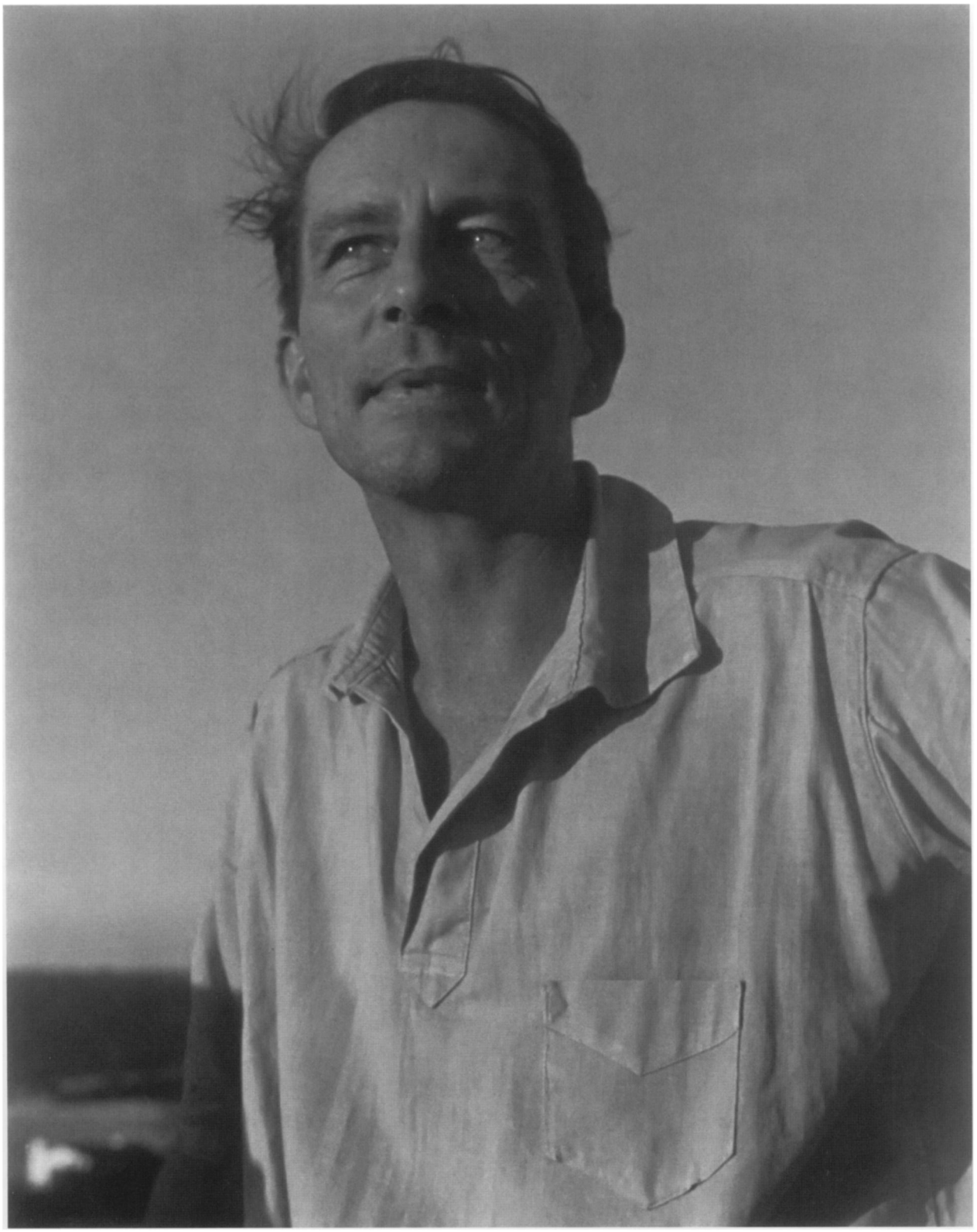
ROBINSON JEFFERS: LITERARY LEGACY

An Uncommon Voice

By James Karman

"Very like leaves / upon this earth are the generations of men," says one warrior to another in the passage from *The Iliad* that opens this introduction to Jeffers' life and work. The lines are spoken by Glaukos, a Trojan, when Diomedes, a Greek, meets him on the battlefield and asks "who are you?" Glaukos answers, "Why ask my birth, Diomedes?"—as if to say, "it makes no difference; like you, I am just a soldier here." Glaukos then speaks the lines above, in which human life is compared to the appearance and disappearance of leaves: "old leaves, cast on the ground by wind, young leaves / the greening forest bears when spring comes in. / So mortals pass; one generation flowers / even as another dies away." In Homer's luminous world there is always time to talk, even in the midst of battle, so Glaukos proceeds to tell Diomedes the story of his ancestors. As it turns out, their grandfathers once made a pact with each other, promising friendship between themselves and their descendants forever. Honoring this, the two warriors exchange armor, wish each other well, and part—each to meet his doom another day.

In truth, generations come and generations go, each with its soldiers, kings, merchants, and farmers, its men and women struggling to find their way in the world, its poets. Jeffers' generation lived through an exceptional moment in human history and passed away. Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Wallace Stevens died before Jeffers. Hilda Doolittle, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and T. S. Eliot died around the same time. Carl Sandburg, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, and Archibald MacLeish died later. All of these poets, together, extended the reach of poetry as they pursued, with freedom and daring, new forms of thought and new means of expression. "To break the pentameter," said Ezra Pound, referring to one of many innovations, "that was the first heave." As a result of their efforts, the field of poetry was completely open for the writers who came after them.



Robinson Jeffers' rugged and intense features made an impression on friends, acquaintances, and even the artists for whom he posed: "A big thoroughbred-animal face" (Lawrence Clark Powell); "a poet's face, profound, not quite of this age and place, mediaeval, with strength written all over it" (Louis Adamic). His "searching blue-grey" eyes produced a similar effect: "deeper than the sea and clearly profound" (Mabel Dodge Luhan). This portrait provides a sense of the all-knowingness of the poet's countenance, illustrating, perhaps, Edward Weston's description of Jeffers' eyes as "notable . . . penetrating, all seeing eyes."

The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; photograph by Peter Stackpole

If asked directly, Jeffers' response to the question "Who are you?" would most likely be similar to Glaukos'. Shy by nature, he tended to brush such queries aside. Preferring to avoid the spotlight, he did not contribute very often to literary journals, say much about his own verse (or anyone else's), engage in literary battles, appear regularly at readings and book-signing events, or write an autobiography. The life of a celebrity was not for him. As he says in his essay on Góngorism, "to be pursued by idlers and autograph hunters and inquiring admirers, would surely be a sad nuisance. And it is destructive, too, if you take it seriously; it wastes your energy into self-consciousness; it destroys spontaneity and soils the springs of the mind." Later in the same essay, he offers an observation about poetry that could also be applied to himself and to his life's work: "I have no sympathy with the notion that the world owes a duty to poetry, or any other art. Poetry is not a civilizer, rather the reverse, for great poetry appeals to the most primitive instincts. It is not necessarily a moralizer; it does not necessarily improve one's character; it does not even teach good manners. It is a beautiful work of nature, like an eagle or a high sunrise. You owe it no duty. If you like it, listen to it; if not, let it alone."

Those who listen to Jeffers hear an uncommon voice.

No other modern poet had a childhood quite like his—where an understanding of European civilization was acquired *in situ*; where Greek, Latin, French, German, and English were learned and used simultaneously; and where a close study of the Biblical tradition was considered routine. In adulthood, many of Jeffers' contemporaries turned toward Europe, some choosing to live there for the better part of their lives. Others turned their backs on the old world, preferring to set their artistic roots in American soil. Virtually all lived on either side of the Atlantic—on the eastern seaboard of America or in such countries as England, France, and Italy. A few lived as far west as Chicago. Jeffers alone, however, left the east coast with his parents and traveled across the continent to the Pacific, carrying, as he makes clear in such poems as "The Torch-Bearers' Race," the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition with him, taking it as far as it could go. Accordingly, he was the one poet of his generation to feel, in his bones, both the geographical "end" of Western Civilization and the closing of the American frontier.

Not only was Jeffers the only major poet of his time to reside in California—the one state in America during the twentieth century upon which the nation and the world projected its dreams—but he lived in Carmel, one of the most vibrant centers of artistic and intellectual activity on the entire west coast. When Jeffers first arrived there, Carmel was a remote, Bohemian village with no paved streets. The homestead he and his wife created for themselves—consisting of Tor House, Hawk Tower, a garden courtyard, a hillside covered with wild flowers, and a grove of trees—grew organically from the natural environment. In all his years, there was never a moment he could not hear the sound of waves breaking on the shore. Most of his contemporaries, on the other hand, lived in or near large metropolitan areas, amidst the hum of human commerce. Their daily experiences and their concerns as artists were primarily urban in character, which is one of the reasons Modernism in literature is so closely identified with city life.

Jeffers' contemporaries channeled most of their poetic energy into the lyric form—a form well suited to the expression of subjective thoughts,

The ancient quality of these trees at Cypress Point (ca. 1907) was part of the allure of the regional landscape for Jeffers and his wife, Una. The first time they saw Carmel, in September 1914, Jeffers wrote: "When the stage-coach topped the hill from Monterey 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." In his poem "Credo," Jeffers wrote: "The beauty of things was born before eyes and sufficient to itself; the / heart-breaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it."

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

memories, experiences, and emotions. They preferred to write short poems (or, in a few cases, long poems in a lyric format) that were individualistic, autonomic, and often abstruse. Such a predilection conformed to and helped articulate the feeling of fragmentation that befell Western Civilization in the twentieth century, all the more so when such techniques as collage came into play. With no overarching conceptual scheme to contain their thoughts, or with only the search for such a scheme to drive them, poets moved freely from poem to poem (even from image to image within a poem), sharing perceptions, offering insights, capturing reality in a piecemeal way. In devoting themselves almost exclusively to the lyric form, however, they abandoned the two other major modes of poetic expression—narrative and drama, once the poet's stock in trade. Not Jeffers, however. From the beginning to the end of his career, he wrote narrative poems (including epics), verse dramas, and lyrics equally. No other poet of his generation did the same.

The narrative instinct is surely as old as human consciousness. It may even predate the advent of speech, serving for eons as a mute need to make sense of existence. *Mythopoesis,* Greek for "myth-making," refers to the efflorescence of this instinct in language, where stories create order in what otherwise is a chaotic world. One aspect of myth-making might be called *geopoesis*—with reference to the means by which, in traditional cultures, the sacred history of tribal territories is made known. Naming a mountain (or any other landmark), disclosing the deep identity of an animal or bird, explaining why a wild rose has thorns—all contribute to the web that is woven, the web that binds people to their immediate surroundings, making them one with ancestral lands. Another aspect of myth-making is *theopoesis,* which involves telling the truth about living gods: their expectations and demands, their cleverness, brutality, and occasional love. Like the gossamer threads cast by human imagination upon the night sky, the ones that hold stars together in stable constellations, stories create coherence; at the mythic level they provide the only answers humans have to ultimate questions concerning life and death.

Poesis of this sort, of this magnitude, is atavistic—and Jeffers was the only poet of his generation to create it. Within the limits imposed by the lyric form, others wrote beautiful poems about nature, but no one else devoted himself or herself to bringing an entire landscape to life in verse; and no one else was so persuasive in doing so that he or she can be credited with helping to inspire the modern environmental movement. With a combination of scientific acumen and aboriginal love for the Monterey-Carmel-Big Sur coast of California, Jeffers uncovered the *terroir,* the spirit and inner life of the region—as revealed in its topography, its flora, fauna, and people. If native storytellers from earlier times, even millennia before, could listen to Jeffers

If native storytellers from earlier times, even millennia before, could see a hawk through Jeffers' eyes or hear in his rhythms the pounding surf, they would sit before him spellbound and marvel again at the world they knew.

speak of Point Lobos (where *Tamar* takes place) and all the other haunted landmarks in the area, if they could see a hawk through Jeffers' eyes or hear in his rhythms the pounding surf, they would sit before him spellbound and marvel again at the world they knew.

Within the limits imposed by the lyric form, others in Jeffers' generation wrote powerful poems employing or referring to archetypes and myths, but no one else examined—as Jeffers repeatedly did in his narratives and dramas—their mysterious operation in actual human lives. A passage in *Roan Stallion* is especially telling. After California rides to a hilltop on the back of her beloved stallion, she dismounts and lies in the grass, dreaming. Jeffers, observing her from outside and above, comments on the fire in her mind:

> The fire threw up figures
> And symbols meanwhile, racial myths formed and dissolved in it, the phantom
> rulers of humanity
> That without being are yet more real than what they are born of, and without
> shape, shape that which makes them:
> The nerves and the flesh go by shadowlike, the limbs and the lives
> shadowlike, these shadows remain, these shadows
> To whom temples, to whom churches, to whom labors and wars, visions and
> dreams are dedicate.

Jeffers demonstrated the undiminished power of these shadows in poem after poem: directly, in such works as *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and *Dear Judas*, where such foundational stories as Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War and Jesus' crucifixion are retold; and indirectly, in such works as *Cawdor* and *The Women at Point Sur*, where Fera relives the fate of Phaedra and Rev. Barclay inverts the life of Moses. At the same time, Jeffers never stopped looking at the fire inside the human mind, or soul, itself—the molten core of consciousness that lights all thought and feeling. California's ardor is taken seriously, as is that of Tamar, Judas, Clare Walker, Onorio Vasquez, Helen Thurso, Lance Fraser, Bruce Ferguson, Hoult Gore, Medea, Hungerfield, and all the rest. Like other poets before him (along with such scientists as Darwin and Freud), Jeffers was most interested in the interplay of two archetypal forces—Eros and Thanatos, the sexual instinct and the drive toward death—both of which figure prominently in his poems. No other poet of his time looked so closely at the impact "Love" has on people or considered so intently what happens when individuals, nations, and leaders, including American presidents, are gripped by "War." If, as some argue, violence (desire and destructiveness commingled) is the distinguishing feature of human life in the twentieth century—inner violence and violence directed toward animals, people, and the whole natural world—Jeffers alone gave it its due.

Again, within the limits they set for themselves, other poets addressed issues of ultimate concern—Is there a God? What happens when we die? How should we live?—and, in searching for answers, wrote poems of exquisite beauty. For the most part, however, their work in this area was static. Some great lyrics written in the vacuum created by the Death of God speak eloquently about the need for a whole new conception of reality (without ever finding one); others offer moving reaffirmations of traditional Christian faith; but most poems written in the modern era conform to a secular spirit, whereby the idea of God—any image of a Higher Power—is neither resolutely affirmed nor specifically denied. Jeffers, on the other hand, broke new ground. With a skepticism worthy of Pascal, who had doubts about the efficacy of both reason and faith, Jeffers questioned the entire intellectual and spiritual legacy of Western Civilization, ultimately rejecting two of its most important fruits: Humanism and Christianity. In the course of doing so, he did not abandon the past or succumb to the disenchantment characteristic of his age; rather, he turned Humanism inside out, claiming Inhumanism for his religion, and turned Christianity outside in, finding the suffering of God at the center of everything. The fact that Jeffers' holistic vision of existence conforms to prevailing scientific paradigms, offers a salutary code of conduct, and, at the same time, opens a new path to spiritual enlightenment, makes his achievement all the more remarkable.

In Jeffers' difference lies his distinction. Standard accounts of modern American poetry, that is, tend to identify two major camps. On one side are the poets who stand for tradition, Eliot and Pound chief among them. The literature of Greece, Rome, and all the world echoes in their work. On the other side are the poets who stand for innovation, poets like Stevens and Williams who are not so beholden to the recorded past, who seek fresh encounters with reality, and who

Jeffers never stopped looking at the fire inside the human mind, or soul, itself—the molten core of consciousness that lights all thought and feeling.

prefer an American idiom. According to this division, H. D. [Hilda Doolittle] belongs with the traditionalists, [Marianne] Moore the innovators, and so on down the line. Jeffers, however, cannot be assigned to either side. With one foot in the old world and the other in the new, he serves as a bridge between them—or as a colossus who straddles the gap. This very fact makes it possible to miss him; but still, in his *Collected Poetry* and *Collected Letters*, there he stands.

James Karman is Emeritus Professor of English and Religious Studies at California State University, Chico. A distinguished Jeffers scholar and trustee of the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation, he is the author of *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California* (1987, 1995) and the editor of *Critical Essays on Robinson Jeffers* (1990); *Of Una Jeffers* (1998); *Stones of the Sur: Poetry by Robinson Jeffers, Photographs by Morley Baer* (2001); and *The Collected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, with Selected Letters of Una Jeffers*, Vol. 1, 1890–1930 (2009); Vol. 2, 1931–1939 and Vol. 3, 1940–1962 (forthcoming).

NOTES

Caption Sources: **FROM THE EDITOR:** quoted in "Books: Harrowed Marrow," *Time* magazine, Apr. 4, 1932; Cynthia Haven, "A Black Sheep Joins the Fold: Stanford Press Champions a Poet Once Shunned in Academe," *Stanford Magazine* (November/December 2001); David Rains Wallace, "What Ever Happened to Robinson Jeffers? *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 12, 2000. **AN UNCOMMON VOICE, 6–11:** James Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed. (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1995), 24, 30–32; Tim Hunt, ed., *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 239. **ROBINSON JEFFERS: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY, 12–16:** Robinson Jeffers, Foreword, in Lawrence Clark Powell, *Robinson Jeffers: The Man & His Work* (Los Angeles, The Primavera Press, 1934), xvii; Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed.,19; Powell, *Robinson Jeffers*, quote on 28; Una Jeffers to Lawrence Clark Powell, Apr. 15, 1932, in Ann Ridgeway, ed., *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 200; Melba Berry Bennett, *The Stone Mason of Tor House: The Life and Work of Robinson Jeffers* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1966), 86; Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed., 47–48; Robert J. Brophy, "Robinson Jeffers in Centennial," in *Robinson Jeffers, Poet: 1887–1987, A Centennial Exhibition* (Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1987), 9; Robinson Jeffers to T. R. Smith [editor-in-chief of Liveright Inc.], Nov. 18, 1931, in Ridgeway, *The Selected Letters*, 185. **POET ALUMNUS OF OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE, 17–20:** Tim Hunt, ed., *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 4 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 74; unpublished selected materials, "The Big Read: Robinson Jeffers and the Ecologies of Poetry" exhibition, Los Angeles: Occidental College, 2009; "Robinson Jeffers, Poet: 1887–1987, A Centennial Exhibition" (Los Angeles: Occidental College, 1987), 7, 9–10. **THE POET AS ETHNOGRAPHER: ROBINSON JEFFERS IN BIG SUR, 22–41:** Richard Kohlman Hughey and Boon Hughey, "Jeffers Country Revisited: Beauty without Price," *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* 98 and 99 (Spring and Summer, 1996): 1–84; Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed., 44. **BIG SUR: ON THE PRECIPICE OF CHANGE, PP 44–48:** Annual Report of the Director of the Coast and Geodetic Survey to the Secretary of Commerce for the Fiscal Year Ended June 20, 1932 and for the Fiscal year Ended June (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), and Annual Report of the Secretary of Commerce, 1933 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932); Robert J. Brophy, ed., *Robinson Jeffers, Dimensions of a Poet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995); John Cloud, "George Davidson and the Point of the Beginning," *California Coast and Ocean* 23, no. 2 (2007); William F. King, "George Davidson and the Marine Survey in the Pacific Northwest," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July 1979): 285–301; NOAA Web sites: Central Library (http://www.lib.noaa.gov), the Preserve America Initiative (http:preservamerica.noaa.gov), and the Office of Coast Survey Historical Map & Chart Collection (http://historicalcharts.noaa.gov); Robert C. Pavlik, "Historical Overview of the Carmel to San Simeon Highway," in *Historic Resources Evaluation Report on the Rock Retaining Walls, Parapets, Culvert Headwalls and Drinking Fountains along the Carmel to San Simeon Highway*, California Department of Transportation, November 1966; Sean Vitousek, "On the Bridge," http://www.pelincannetwork.net. **TELLING JEFFERS' STORY, PP 50–53:** Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed., 48-49; Reader's Guide, *The Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008). **"GHOST," BY ROBINSON JEFFERS, P 64:** Leigh Wiener, *How Do You Photograph People?* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 82.

THE POET AS ETHNOGRAPHER: ROBINSON JEFFERS IN BIG SUR, BY JOHN WALTON, PP 22–41

The author is grateful to the late Jeff Norman for his wisdom and the many conversations we shared about Big Sur. He could have written the definitive history of the region and, although he did not, all who follow will feel his influence. He was the memory of Big Sur.

[1] Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (New York: New Directions Paperbook, 1957), 145.

[2] "The Coast Road" © 1938 by Garth and Donnan Jeffers, renewed 1966, in Tim Hunt, ed., *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 522–23.

[3] Twelfth United States Census, 1900, Manuscript Census, Monterey County, California; Ellen Jane Swetnam, unpublished diary, 1897–1904, Big Sur Historical Society, n.d.; Sam Trotter memoir, Big Sur Historical Society, 1937; Rosalind Sharpe Wall, *A Wild Coast and Lonely* (San Carlos, CA: World Wide Publishing/Tetra, 1989).

[4] See Edward Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1981); Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*; Richard Hughey and Boon Hughey, "Jeffers Country Revisited: Beauty without Price," *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* 98 and 99 (Spring and Summer 1996).

[5] Keith Hopkins, "Novel Evidence for Roman Slavery," *Past and Present* 138 (February 1993): 3.

[6] See Gary S. Breschini and Trudy Haversat, *The Esselen Indians of the Big Sur Country: The Land and the People* (Salinas, CA: Coyote Press, 2004).

[7] See Jeff Norman, *Images of America: Big Sur* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2004).

[8] Robinson Jeffers, *Flagons and Apples* (Los Angeles, Grafton Publishing Company, 1912).

[9] Robinson Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (New York: Random House, 1938), xv–xvii.

[10] Quoted in Melba Berry Bennett, *The Stone Mason of Tor House: The Life and Work of Robinson Jeffers* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1966), 71.

[11] Hughey and Hughey, "Jeffers Country Revisited," 13, 14.

[12] Una Jeffers to Lawrence Clark Powell, Apr. 15, 1932, in Ann N. Ridgeway, *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, 1897–1962* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), 199.

[13] Lawrence Clark Powell, *Robinson Jeffers: The Man & His Work* (Pasadena, CA: San Pasqual Press, 1940), 83.

[14] Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry*, xvi.

[15] Tim Hunt, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 409–521.

[16] Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry*, xvii.

[17] Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*, 145.

[18] Robinson Jeffers, *Californians*, Introduction by William Everson (Cayukos, CA: Cayucos Books, 1971), 69.

[19] James Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, rev. ed. (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1995), 65–66.