Poets Sing the Praises of Robinson Jeffers

January 14, 1987 | PENELOPE MOFFET | Moffet is a Long Beach writer with a special interest in poetry.

Thin-lipped, blue-eyed, without

grace or hope,

before God the Terrible, body of the

world.

Prayers are not heard. Basalt and

granite.

Above them, a bird of prey. The

only beauty.

What have I to do with you? . . .

--"To Robinson Jeffers"

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Celebrating Robinson Jeffers
May 28, 2008

The Best Fiction Of 2000
December 3, 2000

Robinson Jeffers Project
May 25, 1986

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by Czeslaw Milosz

Czeslaw Milosz, the Lithuanian-born poet who won the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, has "ambiguous" feelings toward Robinson Jeffers, a Carmel poet who died in 1962 but whose ideas spark controversy even today.

Milosz, 75, gave voice to his mixed feelings Saturday night, when he joined Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gary Snyder and poet William Everson at Occidental College on the 100th anniversary of Jeffers' birth. About 200 people came to the talk, which climaxed three days of poetry readings and lectures on Jeffers' work.

"I have an incurably European bias which I bring here," Milosz said in a voice that's still heavily accented although he's lived in Berkeley for 26 years. "Undoubtedly Jeffers is one of the great poets of this century. . . . There is in Jeffers a tremendous grandeur, but at the same time, my basic reservation (about him) is of a theological nature."

Jeffers, a Pittsburgh-born writer who moved to Los Angeles as a teen-ager, earned a bachelor's degree in classics from Occidental at 18. In later life he espoused a philosophy called *inhumanism*, which he expressed in short lyric and long narrative poems set on the Monterey Peninsula, his home from 1914

Reflection of Philosophy

In a poem called "Signpost," Jeffers stated his philosophy: "Civilized, crying how to be human again: this will tell you how. / Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity, / Let that doll lie . . ." and ". . . At length / You will look back along the stars' rays and see that even / The poor doll

humanity has a place under heaven."

But when Saturday's panelists talked about inhumanism's meaning and value, newcomers to Jeffers' poetry might have thought each speaker was describing a different poet.

Snyder said he saw in Jeffers' writing "a profound biological humanism," while Everson spoke of the poetry's rejuvenating "pantheism, a sort of adjunct to democracy."

Milosz, on the other hand, said Jeffers' view of nature was unrealistic and too romantic.

Beyond Good and Evil

"Praising beauty in nature is of course a legitimate task. But nature is beyond our human worlds of good and evil, of love and hate. Nature is perfectly indifferent to our human life. And Jeffers as a pantheist was aware of that," he said.

But, Milosz said, Jeffers was mistaken in placing the romantic nature he perceived above humanity. "Is it possible to look at the universe with the detachment, or objective view, of a god?" he asked.

His objections to Jeffers' "detachment" spring in large part from his own Roman Catholic background, Milosz said. Catholics "have a very peculiar attitude toward human weakness," he said. "There is a kind of self-irony in the Roman Catholic heritage (that results in) not taking religion completely seriously. Jeffers is always very serious. He can be sarcastic, but he is never satiric."

Milosz has written several essays about Jeffers and has translated some of Jeffers short lyric poems into Polish. He said he wrote "To Robinson Jeffers" because, "A great poet like Jeffers, who speaks his mind and doesn't use subterfuges, is a good partner for a duel. Not many poets of the 20th Century deserve that sort of duel."

Snyder, however, had another approach to Jeffers' ideas.

Currently a resident of Nevada County, Snyder, 56, said he started reading Jeffers' poetry in 1949. In Jeffers' verse, he found "insights into why science acted with such hubris and so destructively" in the August, 1945, atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Snyder said. He also felt Jeffers' poetry spoke to such issues as the ongoing destruction of Pacific Northwest forests and waters.

'Respect for the Non-Human'

Jeffers' poetry expresses "a profound respect for the non-human" rather than a contempt for humanity, Snyder said. His philosophy was that of "post-humanism, or trans-humanism, a humanism that goes beyond the human" to embrace the rest of the natural world.

Everson, 74, said that reading Jeffers' poetry profoundly changed his life.

Everson, a native Californian who now lives near Santa Cruz, discovered Jeffers' work in 1934 when he was newly married, philosophically uneasy with his own agnostic stance and a student at Cal State Fresno.

"I was in the library one day, and I picked up a book (of Jeffers') and began to read," Everson said. "And suddenly this giant hand reached out from the page and seized me. It pulled me into its belly, its gut, and devoured me. It was both a religious conversion and an intellectual awakening."

A Foe of History

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At a reception that followed, Milosz said Jeffers' work is popular in East European countries. "One reason why Jeffers appeals to (East Europeans) may be that Jeffers wanted to write in his poems about perennial subjects, which wouldn't change in 2,000 years, and so he was completely against history," Milosz said. "And because East Europeans are absolutely submerged in history, such an approach has freshness" for them.

Yet, Milosz said, "Man lives in history, in all the turmoil of human affairs. This is an illusion, that one can detach himself completely from human affairs. It's my feeling that man left alone with nature would soon be bored to death." Milosz said he didn't think East Europeans were attracted to Jeffers for political reasons because Jeffers' "political ideas are either naive or nonexistent."

Milosz was reared in Lithuania in a Polish-speaking family. During World War II he was part of the Resistance to the Nazi occupation of Poland, and after the war worked for a few years as a Polish diplomat with the new Communist government.

In 1951, while living in Paris as a cultural attache, Milosz defected to the West. In 1960 he moved to California to teach Slavic literature at the UC Berkeley. He retired from Berkeley in 1978 and now writes full-time.

Milosz still writes in Polish, but many of his books have been translated. This fall, he said, Ecco Press will publish his collected poems in English.

Isolated from the land and culture of his birth, does Milosz feel any kinship with Jeffers, who lived in a kind of internal exile because his philosophical ideas were mostly rejected by the literary community?

"Kinship?" Milosz repeated incredulously. "No, (I have) no feeling of kinship" for Jeffers, but "rather a feeling for someone who is interesting and deserving of respect, but completely belonging to a different world."

Among those attending Saturday was Nan Hunt, a Woodland Hills poet who teaches composition at Cal State Northridge.

She'd come, Hunt said, because "I've liked Robinson Jeffers' poetry for a long time. When I was young, I think I liked it because it was so full of bombast . . . and now I like the integrity of his poetry. He was a very strong individual, and I admire that."

Hollywood writer Donald Deschner, who's written several celebrity biographies, said he'd attended because Jeffers "has said so much that's affected my life, just as it has these people (the panelists)."

Deschner said that in 1960 he went to the poet's home, hoping to get his literary hero to autograph some books.

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"I was very impressed by his kind manner, his gentleness," Deschner said. "He had a sense of humor, too. Maybe someday someone will do a book on Jeffers and emphasize the humor of the man. He was Irish, and I think the Irish carry a sense of humor in ways other people don't."

Milosz overheard the conversation. "A sense of humor?!" he exclaimed, his eyebrows shooting up.

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