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# Re-living the Apocalypse: Robinson Jeffers' *Medea*

EDMUND RICHARDSON

Robinson Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* was a Broadway hit in the late 1940s. While many of Jeffers' poetic works were highly engaged with contemporary political discourses, critical opinion has been united in seeing *Medea* as fundamentally apolitical. This article offers a rather different perspective: it examines Jeffers' preoccupation with blending the past and the present, and his debt to the historical theorist Oswald Spengler, who proposed a cyclical theory of history. It sites *Medea* within a considerable body of post-Second World War literature which was engaged in polemical parataxis of ancient and modern; these works, influenced by Spengler, used narratives of the ancient world to point up the 'decline' of contemporary Western society. On close reading, *Medea* is inextricably linked to such discourses, and to Jeffers' most trenchantly political volume of poetry, *The Double-Axe*: it is a text which subtly combines Euripides with polemical commentary on the atomic bomb, American involvement in the Second World War, and the future of Western civilization.

'Poetry is not a civiliser, rather the reverse'  
—Robinson Jeffers<sup>1</sup>

When Robinson Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* opened on Broadway, on October 20th, 1947, it was immediately hailed as one of the greatest successes of the year. 'If *Medea* does not entirely understand every aspect of her whirling character,' wrote the critic for the *New York Times*, 'she would do well to consult Judith Anderson [who took the title role].'<sup>2</sup> Tours of America, and of the world, followed its sell-out season in New York, and the critical acclaim continued (only John Gielgud, who took the role of Jason, was consistently given a lukewarm reception by the critics: he agreed to take the role mostly for tax purposes,<sup>3</sup> and it seems that this came across in his performance).<sup>4</sup> The play's journey to such successes had, however, been far from smooth: written by Jeffers at the request of Judith Anderson, it had been turned down by several producers before being taken up by the newcomers Whitehead and Rea. So unconvinced were they of their production's merits that Whitehead fled the first performance to hide in the bushes outside the theatre; neither producer was on speaking terms with Anderson for the entire New York run.<sup>5</sup>

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1. *The New York Times Magazine*, January 18th, 1948. Reprinted in Bennett (1966), p. 205.
  2. *The New York Times*, October 21st, 1947, p. 27.
  3. Cf. *Variety*, October 22nd, 1942, p. 57.
  4. His direction of the play, however, received an altogether more congenial reception—and perhaps that influenced his decision to abandon the role of Jason, but remain as director, when the production toured to London and Edinburgh after the New York run.
  5. Cf. Goodman (1961), p. 17.

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Jeffers himself, a reclusive poet who lived on the Californian coast, had his widest popular—and financial—success with the production. His wife, Una, who (like Gielgud) was preoccupied with the demands of the tax-man, wrote ecstatically to Anderson: 'It has been, is, a wonderful thing for Robin's fame! (besides relieving us for a long time to come of the strain of meeting our horrible tax bills on our five acres here—a very luxurious space for a poet's income'.<sup>6</sup> Jeffers had first come to public notice in the 1920s, through a long narrative poem, *Tamar*, in a privately printed edition which he had mailed to almost every distinguished critic in America. Several took it up, and wrote some truly glowing reviews. 'Nothing as good of its kind has ever been written in America,'<sup>7</sup> wrote James Rorty in the *New York Herald Tribune*. Even then, however, Jeffers' worldview was considered to be not for the squeamish: 'If . . . you shrink from the hidden horrors of life, have nothing to do with *Tamar*. It is the strongest and most dreadful poem I have ever read or heard of'.<sup>8</sup>

Jeffers' *Medea* is generally described as a 'free adaptation'; Friar places it alongside Pound's *Homage to Propertius* and Yeats' *King Oedipus*.<sup>9</sup> While Jeffers used many of his other poetic works to make polemical—if not vitriolic—interventions in contemporary political discourses, critical opinion is united in seeing *Medea* as a fundamentally apolitical work: Everson's position, that 'the play [*Medea*] had no political overtones'<sup>10</sup> is paradigmatic. Both the critical consensus and the play deserve a re-evaluation: what will emerge is a more complex, nuanced way of reading Jeffers' agenda in *Medea*, one which transforms the play's place within the corpus of his work. This article will frame *Medea* within contemporary appropriations of the ancient world, and will show how Jeffers' carefully-crafted blending of ancient and modern sited his work within some of the widest, most acrimonious debates of the period: debates about the rights and wrongs of American involvement in the Second World War, about the future of Western civilization, and about the message that the modern world should take from the ancient.

When he came to write *Medea*, Jeffers' acquaintance with ancient Greece had already been a long one: he was taught Greek by his parents from the age of six. He had originally intended to live on the Aegean coast, rather than the Pacific, but the First World War precipitated a change of plans.<sup>11</sup> Yet, for him, the landscape of the Pacific coast was to be valued precisely because it so closely resembled archaic Greece; he had a propensity for seeing echoes of the ancient world in the contemporary:

'For the first time in my life I could see people living . . . essentially as they did in . . . Homer's Ithaca'.

—Robinson Jeffers, "Foreword" to *Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*<sup>12</sup>

Jeffers was a poet 'haunted by the past',<sup>13</sup> especially the Classical past, something which unsettled many reviewers of his work. Under the headline 'Pagan Horror from Carmel-by-the-Sea', one piece from the 1920s<sup>14</sup> labelled him a 'modern pagan giant',

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6. Una Jeffers, to Judith Anderson, November 4th 1947. Published in *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* 65 (December 1984), p. 16.
  7. Rorty, James, 'In Major Mold', *New York Herald Tribune Books*, March 1st, 1925, p. 2.
  8. George Sterling, 'Rhymes and Reactions', *Overland Monthly* 83 (November 1925), p. 411.
  9. Friar (1971), p. 202.
  10. Everson (1977), p. xii.
  11. Cf. Van Dam (1974), p. 9.
  12. "Foreword" to Jeffers (1938), pp. xv–xvi.
  13. Lutyens (1960), p. 43.
  14. *The Monitor*, San Francisco, January 9th, 1926, p. 8.

'shamefully read in Catholic homes', and warned its readers to 'watch and prevent our children from having their souls scarred by the reading of this . . . corruption'. The language is florid, but there may be some grounds for the (anonymous) critic's outrage: when Jeffers invoked the ancient world, he often did it in order to present material, or concepts, which lay decidedly outside the norms of contemporary society. Framing them within the ancient world allowed him to bypass such norms. His *Solstice*, a 1935 reworking of the myth of Medea, is paradigmatic:

'I think that a fierce  
unsubdued core  
Lives in the high rock in the heart of the continent, affronting the bounties  
of civilization and Christ,  
Troublesome, contemptuous, archaic, with thunder-storm hair and snowline  
eyes, *waiting*'

Robinson Jeffers, *Solstice*<sup>15</sup>

'Affronting' the bounties of civilization was, indeed, one of Jeffers' preoccupations as a poet. Civilization, for him, was 'the enemy of man',<sup>16</sup> and his contempt for its contemporary form was only matched by his conviction of its inherent sickness. Early on in his life, Jeffers had become a committed follower of the historical theorist Oswald Spengler, whose monumental *Decline of the West* was published in 1918. Spengler 'attempts the venture of predetermining history',<sup>17</sup> by arguing that history moves in cycles, with each civilization, as it rises, flourishes, and declines, following a similar pattern: '[the narratives of] world-history present to the seeing eye certain grand traits, again and again'.<sup>18</sup> In this pattern, the histories of the Classical world play a fundamental part. Indeed, it is primarily through reference to the Classical that Spengler constructs his vision of the fate of the contemporary world: 'The intention of this book . . . was to describe, in the light of the decline of the Classical age, one world-historical phase of several centuries upon which we ourselves are now entering'.<sup>19</sup> In a rare public speech, Jeffers highlighted the importance of such theories in his work:

'The idea of culture-ages—culture cycles—the patterned rise and decline of one civilization after another . . . has been a frequent subject in my verses'.

Robinson Jeffers, *Themes in my poems*<sup>20</sup>

Like Spengler, Jeffers was not only interested in the general theory of cyclical civilizations, but also—and especially—in using a parataxis of the Classical and the modern, in order to point up the decline of contemporary Western civilization:

'The earth has covered Sicilian Syracuse, there asphodel grows,  
As golden-rod will cover New York'.

Robinson Jeffers, *What are Cities for?*<sup>21</sup>

15. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 512.

16. Jeffers, *The Broken Balance*, in Jeffers (1991), vol. 1, p. 372.

17. Spengler (1926), vol. 1, p. 3; Spengler (1923), vol. 1, p. 3.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, author's preface to the first edition.

20. Jeffers (1956), p. 18.

21. Jeffers (1991), vol. 2, p. 418.

The events of the Second World War fed Jeffers' belief in 'the sickness of [contemporary] civilization'.<sup>22</sup> Humanity, in his opinion, was on its way out—and a good thing too:

'I think the whole human race ought to be scrapped and is on the way to it,  
ground like fish-meal for soil-food.  
What does the vast and rushing drama of the universe, seas, rocks  
condor-winged storms, ice-fiery galaxies,  
The flaming and whirling universe like a handful of gems falling down a  
dark well,  
Want clowns for?'

Robinson Jeffers, *The Inhumanist*<sup>23</sup>

Such pessimistic views were by no means uncommon at the time. After the war had been won, in marked counterpoint to the celebrations, many leading academics set to writing volumes packed with gloomy, Spengler-influenced prophecies about the future of Western society: 'Good night, children—everywhere . . . Your prospects are none too good . . . The question of your prolonged existence, whether in comfort or otherwise, has now become exceedingly problematical'.<sup>24</sup> So common, indeed, were works of this ilk that one author, Herbert von Beckerath, felt obliged to preface his book with an apologia for its existence, given 'the appearance of so many and often highly competent publications on . . . the current disturbance of our civilization'.<sup>25</sup> These were books with a cutting contemporary message, but their narratives rarely confined themselves to the modern world. Like Spengler, their authors sought to illuminate the state of present-day society through literary and historical parallels. G. Wilson Knight's *Hiroshima: on prophecy and the sun-bomb* (published in the same year as Jeffers' *Medea*) was perhaps the most wide-ranging. It mixed quotes from Shakespeare and Marlowe with up-to-the-minute military and scientific commentary,<sup>26</sup> and concluded that, 'to a rational judgement, man's chances of avoiding disaster appear slight'.<sup>27</sup> Just as in Spengler's narrative, parallels with the ancient world were especially common in these works. Lancelot Law Whyte prefaced his *Next development in man* with a quote from Plato's *Cratylus* (Plat. *Crat.* 440d–e).<sup>28</sup> Lewis Spence, author of *Will Europe follow Atlantis?*, engages in perhaps the most comprehensive, and lurid, parataxis of ancient and modern: 'The people of Germany entered upon a Saturnalia of such wild and lascivious frenzy as the world had certainly never before witnessed . . . so depraved that the whole chronicle of Roman and Byzantine beastliness could scarcely have suggested new avenues of unnatural experiment to its abandoned devotees'.<sup>29</sup>

In these discourses, the ancient world was the subject of two distinctly competitive reading strategies. The first, already touched upon, saw it as proof of each civilization's inevitable decline. The second, championed by scholars such as the Classicist Gilbert Murray,

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22. Shebel (1976), p. 16.

23. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 274.

24. Vulliamy (1947), p. 155.

25. Beckerath (1942), p. vii.

26. Wilson Knight (1946).

27. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

28. Whyte (1944).

29. Spence (1942), p. 23.

saw the ancient world as a symbol of civilization's ability to endure. Murray, delivering a lecture entitled *The anchor of civilization* in Cambridge of 1942, exhorted his audience to keep their eyes fixed upon the Classical tradition: 'Very formidable enemies are awaiting you . . . the violent desires . . . the habits of thought unconsciously inculcated by these years of barbarism; on the other side I see the great tradition, Hellenic and Christian, of which you are the living heirs'.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout the Second World War, in parallel with *Medea*, Jeffers worked on a volume of poetry which was to become *The Double-Axe*, first published in 1948. This was a work dominated by Jeffers' belief that the war had resoundingly vindicated his (and Spengler's) theories: 'For years, he had predicted, in the light of his reading of Spengler, Vico, and Petrie, that the current cycle of civilization was coming to a close; war would be the best way to eradicate vicious humanity'.<sup>31</sup> *The Double-Axe* was, in many ways, his valediction to Western civilization, one which seriously unnerved his publisher, Random House: it printed the book complete with a disclaimer, stating that it felt 'compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet in this volume'.<sup>32</sup> *The Double-Axe* was, indeed, a deeply bitter work, 'a paroxysm of anguished revulsion'<sup>33</sup> at the state of the contemporary world: its poetry articulates Jeffers' conviction that America's decision to enter the war had been a shatteringly foolish mistake; he saw the fall of Europe as inevitable and irreversible. If America did not stand aloof, it would be dragged down too:

'—we were misguided  
By fraud and fear, by our public fools and a loved leader's ambition  
To meddle in the fever-dreams of decaying Europe'  
Robinson Jeffers, *Historical Choice*<sup>34</sup>

*The Double-Axe* was a volume suffused with references to the ancient world; it was, for one reviewer, 'a quagmire of appalling primitivism from which not even a pterodactyl could take wing'.<sup>35</sup> Jeffers' project, however, is one with a clearly recognizable place in contemporary discourses: the insistent, pessimistic parataxis of ancient and modern, consistently sparked off by the events of the Second World War. The protagonist, for example, of *The Love and the Hate* is 'a boy . . . so furious at being smashed to death on a Pacific beach that he reanimates his buried corpse and returns to California to murder his old man and make lecherous advances to his mother'.<sup>36</sup> Jeffers, indeed, constructs his own poetic persona, and his relationship with contemporary society, as a modern-day Cassandra's:

'Be wise.  
No: you'll still mumble in a corner a crust of truth, to men  
And gods disgusting.—You and I, Cassandra'.  
Robinson Jeffers, *Cassandra*<sup>37</sup>

30. Murray (1942), p. 30.

31. Coffin (1971), p. 14. See also Lutyens (1960), p. 54.

32. Coffin (1971), p. 16; cf. Shebel (1976), *passim*.

33. Everson (1977), editor's Foreword.

34. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 122.

35. Fitzgerald (1948), pp. 22–23.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 121.

Cassandra was, indeed, an appropriate alter-ego, given the reception accorded to this volume: the critical damnation was almost unanimous, and *'The Double Axe* was universally consigned to oblivion'.<sup>38</sup>

Commentators who returned to the works of Spengler during the Second World War often picked up on one particular line of reasoning, which he develops in volume two of *The Decline of the West*. It is concerned with when a culture can be said to have 'died', and what impact this 'death' has on individuals: "'Historical" man . . . is the man of a culture that is in full march towards self-fulfilment. Before this, after this, outside this, man is *historyless*. Man is not only historyless before the birth of the Culture, but again becomes so as soon as a civilization has worked itself out fully to the definitive form which betokens the end of the living development of the Culture'.<sup>39</sup> Rollo Walter Brown's *There must be a new song* picks up (as the title hints) on this concept of a 'dead' culture being characterized primarily by stasis, and applies it to contemporary America: 'Here is the world of the moment in miniature. We have been trying to force spontaneous new life into certain frameworks only because they were there, instead of beginning with the fresh life and supplying its needs'.<sup>40</sup> Jeffers had long been influenced by (and attracted to) this concept of 'historyless' man, of an individual wholly detached from society. It was, in many ways, the goal of his own life, and it was one which he set at the heart of his poetics. He recast Spengler's original thesis into a doctrine which he termed 'inhumanism'. It privileged nature over culture, detachment from society over engagement in it, and saw humanity's role in the universe as slight indeed. 'It seems to me that in a degenerating society the individual has got to isolate himself morally to a certain extent or else degenerate too. He can keep his own morals; he cannot save society's'.<sup>41</sup>

This wish to become 'historyless', to detach oneself wholly from society, is at the heart of *The Double-Axe*. It was a goal which Jeffers found himself unable to attain; he felt inextricably implicated in each misguided decision, each foolish war, as the insistent use of 'we' in the following passage indicates:

'We have levelled the powers  
Of Europe, that were the powers of the world, into rubble and dependence.  
We have won two wars and a third is coming.

[. . .]

We have enjoyed fine dreams; we have dreamed of unifying the world; we  
are unifying it—against us.

[. . .]

And patriotism has run the world  
through so many blood-lakes: and we always fall in'.  
Robinson Jeffers, *So many blood-lakes*<sup>42</sup>

38. Everson (1977), p. xi.

39. Spengler (1928), vol. 2, p. 48; (1923), vol. 2, p. 58.

40. Brown (1942), p. 6.

41. Letter to Louis Adamic, May 17th, 1935. In Ridgeway (ed.) (1968), p. 226.

42. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 133.

This philosophy of 'inhumanism' fed Jeffers' deep-seated aversion to unwanted visitors, and distrust of easy sociability (indeed, he nailed up a sign on his gate which read 'Not at home', and answered so few letters that he claimed to have forgotten how to use a pen<sup>43</sup>). In a volume of poetry published in 1956, *Hungerfield*, he addresses the stone tower which he had built, in 1920, for himself and his family: 'The old granite stones, those are my people;/Hard heads and stiff wits but faithful, not fools, not chatterers'.<sup>44</sup> As several commentators have noticed, Jeffers passes on much of this world-view to his Medea.<sup>45</sup> When she first encounters the Chorus, it is with the poet's barely concealed irritation at an unwanted intrusion, and keen sense of privacy:

'I understand well enough  
That nothing is ever private in a Greek city; whoever withholds anything  
Is thought sullen or proud . . . (with irony) undemocratic  
I think you call it. This is not always just'

Robinson Jeffers, *Medea*<sup>46</sup>

The contrast with the Euripidean original is striking. Euripides' Medea insists that she has come out of her house in order to preclude criticism: ἐξῆλθον δόμων,/μή μοί τι μέμψησθ' <sup>47</sup> ('I have come out of the house, lest you find some fault with me.'). Jeffers' Medea, by contrast, does not notice the Chorus until she has been outside for quite some period of time,<sup>48</sup> and when she does notice them, instead of attempting to avert criticism, she becomes something of a critic herself, as the passage above shows. While Jeffers' Medea distances herself from the values of the Greek πόλις (city-state), Euripides' Medea makes at least a gesture towards integration:

χρὴ δὲ ξένον μὲν κάρτα προσχωρεῖν πόλει·  
οὐδ' ἀστὸν ἦνεσ' ὅστις ἀθάδης γεγώς  
πικρὸς πολίταις ἐστὶν ἀμαθίας ὑπο <sup>49</sup>

'An outsider ought to ingratiate himself with the city; I have nothing good, either, to say about the citizen who is self-willed, and, on account of his ignorance, grates on his fellow-citizens.'

Finding fault with Jeffers' Medea, Zorn comments that, more than Euripides', she is 'still a stranger to the best of Greek civilization';<sup>50</sup> he argues that Jeffers treated his protagonist with fastidious disdain. This, it should be clear, is a fundamental misreading of the poet's intentions. Medea's unapologetic otherness, and her contempt for 'civilized' society, mark her out as the poet's alter-ego, rather than—as in the Euripidean original—a 'barbarian'

43. Letter from Jeffers to Judith Anderson, October 1959, in Ridgeway (ed.) (1968), p. 374.

44. *The Old Stone-Mason*, in Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 373.

45. Cf. Coffin (1971), p. 14, Dickinson (1969), p. 137.

46. In Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 146.

47. Euripides, *Medea*, 214–215.

48. 'Someone is here? . . . I did not know I had visitors', Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 146.

49. Euripides, *Medea*, 222–225.

50. Zorn (1994), p. 11.



to be stigmatised and shunned, an anti-model for the self.<sup>51</sup> Through a relatively delicate reworking of Euripides' text, Jeffers insinuated his own poetic agenda into *Medea*. This will prove to be paradigmatic of his approach: rather than modifying the macroscopic structure of the play, Jeffers reworks Euripides' text on the level of linguistic detail, blending in his own socio-political agenda. In choosing this approach, he was following the strategy adopted by another American poet, Countee Cullen, in his 1935 *Medea*.<sup>52</sup> The two works share many key preoccupations: Corti invites us to read a great deal of thinly-disguised autobiography into Cullen's text,<sup>53</sup> but this 'interracial *Medea*'<sup>54</sup> also had some very political bones to pick with contemporary American society. Through a 'cultural synthesis',<sup>55</sup> a blending of ancient and modern analogous to that practiced by Jeffers, Cullen turned his *Medea* into a commentary on—and indictment of—contemporary American racism, and of 'peculiarly American traditions'.<sup>56</sup> Like Jeffers, he introduced this contemporary polemic into the text through subtle modifications of the language, which demand close reading to be discerned.<sup>57</sup> It is far from impossible that Jeffers—despite his studied aloofness from contemporary literature—was aware of Cullen's adaptation, and was heavily influenced by it.

If *Medea* becomes, in Jeffers' text, representative of the inhumanist, her fundamental dilemma—whether or not to kill her children—is reframed to reflect the question at the heart of *The Double-Axe*: is it possible to become 'historyless', to withdraw from society completely? Can the children be separated from Jason and all he stands for, or are they—intrinsically, through no fault of their own—tainted? Trying to persuade herself to spare the children, *Medea* invokes image-patterns long used by Jeffers, of the natural world, unsullied by human touch:

My eaglets, my golden ones! Oh sweet  
small faces . . . like the pale wild-roses  
That bloom where the cliff breaks towards the brilliant sea: the delicate  
form and color, the dear, dear fragrance  
Of your sweet breath . . .

Robinson Jeffers, *Medea*<sup>58</sup>

The image of the eagle, in particular, has strong resonance in Jeffers' earlier work: like the hawk, it provided a paradigm of that which 'was dissociated from man'.<sup>59</sup> In Euripides, *Medea* articulates her decidedly problematic compassion through scenes which tend in quite the opposite direction—towards the urban, rather than the natural world: ὦ τέκνα

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51. Cf. Hall (1989).

52. Cullen (1935).

53. Corti (1998), pp. 191–192: 'Medea may represent Cullen's own abandoned mother . . . Cullen may have identified with Medea as the spurned object of a male lover'.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

57. Corti, for example, finds an echo of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in Jason's final encounter with Medea; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 192–193.

58. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, pp. 190–191.

59. Shebel (1976), p. 22. For an example of this image pattern at work, cf. *Give your heart to the hawks*, in Jeffers (1991), vol. 2, p. 311.

τέκνα, σφῶν μὲν ἔστι δὴ πόλις/καὶ δῶμ’<sup>60</sup> (‘O children, children, you have a city, and a home.’). For Jeffers’ *Medea*, however, the children’s connections with society, with the human race, do not evoke compassion, but rather precipitate her decision to kill them: ‘Would you say that this child/Has Jason’s eyes? . . . As long as they live I shall be mixed with him’.<sup>61</sup> The ability to put aside compassion is often, in Jeffers, the benchmark of a person’s ability to put aside humanity; the ‘old axe-man’ in *The Inhumanist* ‘finds himself acting, with compassion, because “that’s the condition of being human. One cannot escape.”’<sup>62</sup>

Jeffers, in *The Double-Axe*, dwelt with singular bitterness on the violence of the Second World War: for him, Roosevelt’s ‘power-mad vanity’<sup>63</sup> was no better than the ‘crackpot dreams’<sup>64</sup> of Hitler. He did not, however, dwell on it for its own sake. He sought, rather, to use the violence of the war as a stimulus to his readers, as a way of forcing them to turn their gazes outwards, towards the natural world and the universe as a whole, towards the world of the inhuman: ‘He [Jeffers] felt that man regarded himself as a warm, compassionate and superior creature, immune to natural pressures. The hawk, and for that matter, Hitler, would show him to be otherwise’.<sup>65</sup> For Jeffers, however, this shift in perspective can never be a comfortable one (and rarely a willing one); deep emotional hurt is what will bring on the ability to look beyond—and go beyond—the purely human: ‘find the secure value/The all-heal found when a former time hurt/to the heart/The splendour of inhuman things.’<sup>66</sup> Jeffers wrote that, for him, the function of the poet was ‘to paint humanity in red enough colors to be truly shocking, to force you to stand and look on your kind as on a spreading lichen . . . then, inordinate affects cancelled, appears the true beauty’.<sup>67</sup>

A very similar process is at work in many of Jeffers’ adaptations of Greek tragedy. A horrific act of violence precipitates in the perpetrators a turn outwards, away from human society, towards ‘a cosmic unity, beyond man’.<sup>68</sup> *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* was a version of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, first staged in 1932 (with Judith Anderson as Clytemnestra). In Jeffers’ text, Orestes’ murder of his mother prompts in him not inward-directed guilt, but rather an inclination to move beyond the purely personal, beyond culture and society, to achieve a wider, inhumanist perspective on the world, and a kind of symbiosis with it; he is said to have ‘cast/humanity, entered the earlier fountain’.<sup>69</sup>

‘I entered the life of the brown forest  
And the great life of the ancient peaks  
. . . and I was the stream  
Draining the mountain-wood; and I the stag drinking; and I was the stars,  
Boiling with light, wandering alone’

Robinson Jeffers, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*<sup>70</sup>

60. Euripides, *Medea*, 1021–1022.

61. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 191.

62. Lechleitner (1948), p. 159.

63. *The Double Axe*, “The Love and the Hate”, in Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 250.

64. *The Double Axe*, “What Odd Expedients”, *ibid.*, p. 137.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

66. Jeffers (1938), “Foreword”, p. xv.

67. Cf. Jeffers (1991), vol. 5, p. 348.

68. Shebel (1976), p. 3.

69. Jeffers (1991), vol. 1, p. 178.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 177; also discussed by Van Dam (1974), p. 14.

As with Orestes, so with Medea. The murder of her children precipitates in her a turn outwards, away from the urban society in which the play was bounded, towards the inhuman. Jeffers articulates this shift in her perspective with an echo of his earlier, Aeschylean adaptation, above; our final image of Medea, like Orestes, is of a solitary figure beneath the stars: 'Now I go forth/Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars:—not *me* they scorn'.<sup>71</sup> In both texts, the image of the stars is Jeffers' own interpolation, and one which has many echoes in his wider poetics, particularly in *The Double-Axe*: one reviewer commented that it 'mingled praise for the beauty and durability of mountains, ocean and starlight compared with the transient obscenity of mankind'.<sup>72</sup> The Classicist Dudley Fitts, reviewing Jeffers' *Medea*, was unsettled by the contempt for humanity which he found in it. Trying to encapsulate the 'Hellenic' sentiment which, for him, Jeffers' adaptation had neglected, he quoted a passage from Sophocles: '*Numberless are the world's wonders, sings Sophocles in the First Ode of Antigone; and adds, but none more wonderful than man.*'<sup>73</sup>

Jeffers' *Medea*, like his *Orestes*, ends the play alone in the inhuman world—but both have achieved a union—almost a communion—with it. In Jeffers' poetics, even the most horrific acts of violence have a strong sense of the mystical to them; it might be more appropriate to say *especially* the most horrific acts of violence, since for Jeffers, 'violence is at the heart of things; it reveals God'.<sup>74</sup> Jeffers' God was not the Christian God—a deity for which he professes much contempt, seeing Christian worship as a way of shielding oneself from the inhuman<sup>75</sup>—but one whose existence could only be comprehended, or articulated, in terms of suffering, pain, and violence: 'All the prevalent religions think of God as blessed, or happy, or at least at peace . . . this conception of God as in pain is hardly admitted by the reader's mind . . . If God is all, he must be suffering'.<sup>76</sup> Human afflictions, in Jeffers' theology, may only be echoes of suffering on a cosmic scale:

'Is it possible that man's passion is  
only a reflex of  
Much greater torment; and what was shouted among the stars comes  
dwindling and tottering down  
Into human jaws'

Robinson Jeffers, *The Inhumanist*<sup>77</sup>

Appalling violence is at the heart of *Medea*, but it is reconfigured by Jeffers into a very contemporary form. Those who, like himself, saw precious little hope for humanity after the Second World War tended to place the atom bomb in the forefront of their arguments: 'Everyone should be made aware of these things [the effects of the atom bomb], for if man proceeds on his present way there is not even a shadow of security in this demented world—anywhere'.<sup>78</sup> Spengler's followers, indeed, tended to view the bombs with a kind of ghoulish fascination. Robert Morton's *Shall we live or die?* begins with a reference to 'the ex-

71. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 197.

72. Fitzgerald (1948), pp. 22–23.

73. Fitts (1951), p. 312.

74. Brophy (1972a), pp. 6–7.

75. The image of the stars recurs: '[Christian] Faith will cover your head from the man-devouring stars'. *Quia Absurdum*, in Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 213.

76. Letter to Rudolph Gilbert, November 29, 1936, in Ridgeway (1968), p. 240.

77. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 270.

78. Vulliamy (1947), p. 137.

plosion of the first atomic bomb':<sup>79</sup> his work is a familiar mixture—on the one hand, 'a catalogue of the signs of death which are to be observed in our society',<sup>80</sup> on the other, a nostalgic look back to Classical Greece.<sup>81</sup> Jeffers himself was dourly confident that a nuclear war was imminent, and made much of this expectation in *The Double-Axe*: 'We have won two wars and a third is coming./This one—will not be so easy'.<sup>82</sup> It was a preoccupation which his reviewers frequently (and acidly) commented upon: 'He feels compelled to add more than his quota of hatred and violence to the hatred and violence abroad in the world, while he sits in that improperly inhuman stone tower of his waiting exultantly for the Bomb'.<sup>83</sup>

This fear of nuclear war is also insinuated by Jeffers into the heart of his *Medea*. It is present in his very contemporary reworking of the choruses: where Euripides' text only speaks of Jason and Creusa's blindness to the future,<sup>84</sup> Jeffers' picture is an altogether wider one—the nations remember old wrongs and destroy each other'.<sup>85</sup> It is present, as reviewers found, in the language of Jeffers' *Medea* herself: 'In her horrible ecstasy of love-turned-hate, she speaks the word that haunts the world today: "Annihilation."<sup>86</sup> Jeffers, indeed, makes much of this word: *Medea* uses it three times in one line alone.<sup>87</sup> It is, however, in Jeffers' reworking of *Medea*'s revenge upon Creusa and Creon that his preoccupation with the nuclear theme comes to the surface most clearly. A reviewer of the Broadway production commented on 'the horrible death-agonies of Creusa and Creon . . . strangely foreshadowing . . . the effects of nuclear fission on the human body'.<sup>88</sup> That was no accident. Jeffers subtly reworked the Euripidean original in order to echo contemporary accounts of the effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. While, in Euripides, *Medea*'s two victims are dead by the time the messenger leaves them,<sup>89</sup> Jeffers keeps them alive—and foregrounds the fact that he has done so, with the Nurse's halting speech demanding that the action pause, and the audience reflect, on this question:

NURSE: They lie there.  
 Eyeless, disfaced, untouchable, middens of smoking flesh laced with  
 molten gold . . .  
 MEDEA: Had they died when you came away?  
 NURSE: I am not able . . . have mercy . . .  
 no: the harsh tides of breath  
 Still whistled in the black mouths.

Robinson Jeffers, *Medea*<sup>90</sup>

79. Morton (1946), p. 5. On the same page, he acknowledges his debt to Spengler.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

82. *So Many Blood-Lakes*, Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 133.

83. Rodman (1948), pp. 13–14.

84. παισῶν οὐ κατειδῶς/ὄλεθρον βιοτῆ προόγεις ἀλόχῳ τε/σῆ στυγερόν θάνατον ('All unwitting you bring destruction upon your children's life and upon your bride a dreadful death') Euripides, *Medea*, 992–994.

85. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 182.

86. Gilder (1950), p. 670.

87. 'Annihilation. The word is pure music: annihilation. To annihilate the past—' Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 163.

88. Gilder (1950), p. 672.

89. κείνται δὲ νεκροὶ παῖς τε καὶ γέρων πατήρ ('The bodies lie there, the daughter and her old father.') Euripides, *Medea*, 1220.

90. Jeffers (1991), vol. 3, p. 189.

The image of horribly burned, yet still living victims was one which would have resonated all too closely for many in the audience of *Medea*. John Hersey's description of Hiroshima, in the immediate aftermath of the atomic bomb, had been published just before the Broadway production opened, initially in the *New York Times Magazine* then, due to demand, in a mass-market Penguin edition.<sup>91</sup> When its descriptions of the survivors are juxtaposed with Jeffers' text, it is almost impossible to tell the two apart: Hersey tells his readers of 'a naked living woman who seemed to have been burned from head to toe',<sup>92</sup> of people 'whose faces were wholly burned, their eyesockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks'.<sup>93</sup>

Jeffers' blurring of the boundaries between past and present was picked up on by many reviewers. A writer for the *Commonweal* commented that 'Jeffers's severe slow accents . . . seemed to me current history'.<sup>94</sup> Classicists were often less impressed; Dudley Fitts complained that 'it is . . . false to treat them [the Greek tragedians] as though they were creatures of our own unbelieving suicidal age'.<sup>95</sup> For Jeffers, however, and for many followers of Spengler at the time, this was the only way to engage with the ancient world. Jeffers did not approach *Medea* as an alien text from a distant culture, something which would have to be squeezed to fit a contemporary purpose. From his readings of W. M. Flinders Petrie, another historical theorist, he had taken the belief that his own circular theories of history were widely held in the ancient world.<sup>96</sup> Even before he had begun to write *Medea*, in a 1941 lecture entitled 'The Poet in a Democracy', he argued that the Second World War should be seen as a Spengler-esque replay of the Peloponnesian War:

'The conflict between democratic Athens and totalitarian Sparta . . . finally ruined all Greece, as a similar conflict is ruining Europe'.

Robinson Jeffers, *The Poet in a Democracy*<sup>97</sup>

It should, perhaps, be unsurprising that, while Jeffers was engaged in writing *Medea*, he developed a strong sense of affinity with Euripides, and began to supply him with many elements of his own world-view:

'Euripides remained a private man, a disillusioned student and man of letters . . . as many honest men have done since his time, Euripides chose to stay aloof from public life'.

Robinson Jeffers, Introduction to Decca's recording of *Medea*<sup>98</sup>

In writing *Medea*, Jeffers, argued, Euripides was motivated by a 'modernist sentiment'.<sup>99</sup>

*Medea* and *The Double-Axe* are far from being polar opposites; indeed, they should properly be read as a pair. The one's isolationist politics, and the other's isolated protagonist, are two sides of the same coin, fed by the same philosophy. *Medea*, as a close read-

91. Hersey (1946).

92. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

94. Phelan (1947), p. 94.

95. Fitts (1951), p. 312.

96. Petrie (1911), p. 9. For Jeffers and Petrie, cf. Coffin (1971), p. 14.

97. Jeffers (1991), vol. 4, p. 401.

98. Quoted in Bennett (1966), p. 217.

99. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 218.

ing shows, is intimately engaged with Jeffers' political project; it is a far cry from the text with 'no political overtones'<sup>100</sup> which critical opinion has constructed. Indeed, it seems that Jeffers had intended to present it and *The Double-Axe* to the public as a single entity: 'It [the Random House edition of *Medea*] will be out very soon now. Robin would have been content to save it to include in his next book [*Double-Axe*]'.<sup>101</sup> When read side-by-side, the two works shed new light on each other: *Medea's* Hiroshima is much more comprehensible when it is considered concurrently with a volume of nuclear-obsessed Second World War poetry featuring Cassandra. Both volumes have, essentially, the same methodological strategy for engaging with contemporary political discourses: parataxis of ancient and modern. *The Double-Axe* foregrounds the modern, but keeps the ancient in the back of the reader's mind; *Medea* does the opposite. Both, however, insist upon the same conclusion: our time is up, and believing otherwise is simply an exercise in naivety.

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100. Everson (1977), p. xii. Such critical studies—like many reviewers' responses to the stage production—may well have missed Jeffers' agenda for the text because they focused on the wider, macroscopic structure of *Medea*, rather than the microscopic, linguistic detail, the area which seems to have preoccupied Jeffers in his decidedly subtle reworking of *Medea*. This is understandable, given that Everson and his compatriots were working, it seems, from translations of Euripides, rather than the original Greek; Jeffers, by contrast, could read ancient Greek with some considerable fluency.
101. Letter from Una Jeffers to Judith Anderson, March 16th, 1946, in Ridgeway (ed.) (1968), p. 305.

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