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What Ever Happened to Robinson Jeffers?

THE COLLECTED POETRY OF ROBINSON JEFFERS, Volumes 1-4 Edited by Tim Hunt; Stanford University Press, 2,192 pp., $75 each

October 29, 2000 | DAVID RAINS WALLACE | David Rains Wallace is the author, most recently, of "The Monkey's Bridge: Mysteries of Evolution in Central America." He is a recipient of the John Burroughs Medal for Nature Writing

I

Asked to name France's greatest poet, Baudelaire is said to have replied: "Victor Hugo, unfortunately." If this irony was apt to 19th-century France, it perhaps applies as well to 20th-century California, whose greatest poet, unfortunately, was Robinson Jeffers. Like Hugo, Jeffers has slipped into literary limbo. His reputation has fallen so far since his death in 1962 that when I recently asked about Jeffers in a Berkeley bookstore, the clerk had barely heard of him. This was not always the case.

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Most early 20th century critics saw greatness in Jeffers. In 1928, the Herald Tribune said he was "writing the most powerful, the most challenging poetry in this generation." Dwight Macdonald agreed in the 1930 periodical Miscellany: "Alone among his contemporaries has Jeffers written poetry to which the adjective great can be applied. It is, indeed, my opinion that his poetry is the best which this country has so far produced. Not only is he the most brilliant master of verse among contemporary poets, but his is incomparably the broadest and most powerful personality." Time magazine put him on its cover in 1932. Even in mid-century, when Jeffers was politically controversial, his detractor, Kenneth Rexroth, said in the Saturday Review that he had only one serious rival (Yvor Winters) "for the title of 'California's leading poet.' "

For the Record

In an Oct. 29 review of "The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers," Baudelaire was mistakenly quoted as answering "Victor Hugo, unfortunately!' when asked to name the greatest French poet of the 19th century. It was Andre Gide who actually said "Victor Hugo, alas!" We are grateful to Richard Howard for bringing this to our attention.

Rexroth's backhanded endorsement recognized that Jeffers had drawn philosophical conclusions from narratives about contemporary life, but Rexroth thought the narratives "shoddy and pretentious" and the philosophy "nothing but posturing." It is easy enough to think so. Jeffers' stories can seem grotesquely melodramatic, and the life they describe can be so bizarre as to hardly seem contemporary at all. His first great narrative, about a Carmel ranch family's disintegration after the daughter, Tamar, commits incest with her brother, contains stirring evocations not only of the fundamental taboo but also of necromancy, necrophilia and telepathic visions. By the poem's end, beatings, murder and the family's fiery annihilation seem almost mundane. Yet Jeffers' dark dramas are not gratuitous horror a la Stephen King and don't end in the same staleness. They arise from a radical understanding of California history, and they retain a power to shock.

Indeed, it is hard to see how anyone can read Jeffers' best poetry and not perceive greatness. His narrative verse rivals Wordsworth's or Byron's. It is electrifying; the skin prickles. The publication by Stanford University Press of the fourth and final volume of Jeffers' collected poetry and prose is most welcome. Beautifully printed and bound, this edition is an occasion for celebration and a reconsideration of the work and the man.

Jeffers sought to express in his poetry the often-ignored continuity between modernity and the past. He wanted to defy the Whitman-esque denial of history's gifts and burdens, as though electricity and democracy could simply erase millenniums of starlight and tragedy. Thus he chose the apparently marginal subject of Big Sur ranch life. "[F]or the first time in my life," he wrote, "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 the ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they had done for thousands of years, and will 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."

Jeffers didn't really draw a philosophy from this, although his poorer work gets windy. At best, his thinking was a philosophical attitude--a poetic apprehension of the fact Darwin realized in the 1830s but which still fails to penetrate normal consciousness. Jeffers saw, as few artists have, that people are evolved beings, as much the stuff that apes and trees are made of as stars. He called this attitude "inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man," and he saw it as the basis of a new ethics--"the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence."

"It seems time that our race began to think as an adult does, rather than like an egocentric baby or insane person," Jeffers concluded. "This manner of thinking is neither misanthropic nor pessimist . . . . It involves no falsehood and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. If offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate, and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty."

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Jeffers' attitude would have been mildly interesting if his poetry had been an evolutionist eclogue, a celebration of sturdy ranchers and their magnificent coast. But he was not saying simply that the biological and cultural past lives in the present. How could he, in California, where the present has not simply denied the past but liquidated it? Jeffers valued rural life and stoic detachment, but he was not stupid. He understood that his ranch families had built their houses on an unprecedented amputation of natural and human continuity and that they were typically Californian in the complacency with which they carried on as though entirely different ancient worlds had not been there a century before.

They have done what never was done before.

Not as a people takes a land to love it and be fed,

A little, according to need and love, and again a little; sparing the country tribes, mixing

Their blood with theirs, their minds with all the rocks and rivers, their flesh with the soil; no, without hunger

Wasting the world and your own labor . . . .

Oh as a rich man eats a forest for profit and a field for vanity, so you came west and raped

The continent and brushed its people to death. Without need, the weak skirmishing hunters, and witbout mercy.

Well, God's a scare-crow: no vengeance out of old rags. But there are acts breeding their own reversals

In their own bellies from the first day . . . .

-- "A REDEEMER"

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Jeffers was not a cultural relativist or even much interested in Native America, but he had a sense of justice and fate. He saw that an amputated past not only starves the present but poisons it. The phantasmagorias of his narratives are the fevers and exhalations of that poison, a corpse gas that pervades and phosphorescently illuminates the coast's "magnificent unspoiled scenery:"

The year went up to its annual mountain of death, gilded with hateful sunlight, waiting rain.

Stagnant waters decayed, the trickling springs that all the misty-hooded summer had fed

Pendulous green under the granite ocean-cliffs dried and turned foul, the rock-flowers faded,

And Tamar felt in her blood the filth and fever of the season. . . .

-- "TAMAR"

"Tamar's" climax does not come, as in a horror thriller, when the sinful girl is burned alive. It comes when she miscarries her brother's child after being raped while trying to communicate with a dead (and also incestuous) aunt by imitating a Native American fertility dance. She is raped by the ghosts of Costanoans and their animist gods, whom Jeffers conjures up as burlesques of Whitman's beefy pioneers, cowboys or mountain men:

. . . none but the idiot

Saw whether a God or a troop of Gods came swaggering along the tide-marks unto Tamar, to use her

Shamefully and return from her, gross and replete shadows, swaggering along the tide-marks

Against the sea-gleam . . . .

-- "TAMAR"

Jeffers' narratives were an early indictment of the Whitman ethos of carelessly lethal side-effects--of motorcar-driving Walt "whizzing over an unwary red Indian," in D.H. Lawrence's caricature. Unlike Helen Hunt Jackson and John Steinbeck, Jeffers didn't sentimentalize or romanticize Indians and Californios. He matter-of-factly described their subjection and isolation on the white ranchers' coast and their resentment and explosions of anger. In "Roan Stallion," the mestiza protagonist shuts her drunken Dutch immigrant husband in a corral, shoots his dog and watches a horse trample him to death. For all its coldness, Jeffers' evocation of the wound at California's core is forceful, and he manifested some daring in writing of such things when they were prevalent and little discussed.

II

Jeffers' oeuvre is of Hugo-like proportions: a dozen lengthy narrative poems and verse dramas, a multitude of shorter lyrics. ("The Collected Poetry's" four volumes contain some 2,000 pages.) More important, it is of considerable originality. As editor Tim Hunt observes in his introduction to Volume 1, Jeffers developed a modern poetry without being a modernist. "Chance and decision led him to an alternative model to Pound's, one that owed more to Milton, Wordsworth, Darwin, and modern astronomy than to Coleridge, Mallarme, Pater and Hulme . . . . And if these attitudes placed him distinctly at odds with his modernist contemporaries and made his work, finally, technically more conservative than theirs, it may be that his sense of the interplay of culture and nature was in many ways more radical and forward thinking."

Starting unpromisingly, Jeffers moved suddenly some time in the 1920s from the Edwardian diction of his early poems to a style that remains remarkably undated, a leap plainly expressed at the start of his first major work:

A night the half-moon was like a dancing-girl,

No, like a drunkard's last half dollar

Shoved on the polished bar of the eastern hill-range . . . .

--"Tamar"

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Jeffers developed a new style not only to break with the old but also to say significant things. He set forth his artistic goals with clarity. Deciding that poetry should "reclaim some of the power and reality that it was so hastily surrendering to prose," he undertook 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."

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Jeffers succeeded in reclaiming power and reality for poetry. His best narrative verse reads as well as good prose, although his language is full of tropes and imagery. He never indulges in the masturbatory wordplay that makes so much poetic writing, both prose and verse, tedious. Often, the language's brilliance drives the story, which seems as good an indicator of great literature as any. His narratives are seldom obscure, although they sometimes seem a pioneering version of magic realism, as when the mestiza of "Roan Stallion" tries to drive a carriage across a Big Sur creek in a winter storm:

actually said "Victor Hugo, alas!" We are grateful to Richard Howard for bringing this to our attention.

I can't. But this time you'll go through it." She climbed into the seat and shouted angrily. The mare

Stopped, her two forefeet in the water. She touched with the whip. The mare plodded ahead and halted.

Then California thought of prayer: "Dear little Jesus,

Dear baby Jesus born to-night, your head was shining

Like silver candles . . . .

Dear baby Jesus give me light." Light streamed: rose, gold, rich purple, hiding the ford like a curtain.

The gentle thunder of water was a noise of wing-feathers, the fans of paradise lifting softly.

The child afloat on radiance had a baby face, but the angels had birds' heads, hawks' heads,

Bending over the baby, weaving a web of wings about him. He held in the small fat hand

A little snake with golden eyes, and California could see clearly in the under radiance

The mare's pricked ears, a sharp black fork against the shining light-fall. But it dropped; the light of heaven

Frightened poor Dora . . . .

-- "ROAN STALLION"

Whitman clearly influenced Jeffers' move to reclaim poetry from insulation and obscurity, but the younger poet followed his own direction. He used self-invented meters instead of free verse, and he challenged the expansive Yankee ethos Whitman had celebrated: technology, growth and democracy as solutions to the human condition. (When Whitman wrote about California, it was a paean to redwood logging.) Jeffers warned that the ethos would become deadly hubris if it transgressed the limits of a natural order, and although the warning became a commonplace, denied and then forgotten in the technology-mad fin de siecle, it echoes:

Our sardine fishermen work at night in the dark of the moon . . . .

How beautiful the scene is, and a little terrible, then, when the crowded fish

Know they are caught, and wildly beat from one wall to the other of their closing destiny the phosphorescent

Water to a pool of flame, each slender body sheeted with flame, like a live rocket

A comet's-tail wake of clear yellow flame . . . .

Lately I was looking from a night mountain-top

On a wide city, the colored splendor, galaxies of light: how could I help but recall the seine-net

Gathering the luminous fish? . . .

-- "THE PURSE-SEINE"

Jeffers' life was a principled expression of his stand against easy Whitman-esque optimisms. During World War I, he moved to a windswept headland near Carmel and built a fortress-like home, without electricity or other amenities, which he named Tor House. Shunning the academic limelight in which contemporaries like Frost and Eliot basked, he remained there until his death five decades later, a living reproach to the nation's boosterism. "That portion of California . . . belongs as absolutely to Robinson Jeffers, poet of Tragic Terror, as Wessex belongs to Hardy," said a 1929 newspaper article.

There's another historical sense in which Jeffers is California's great poet. As a socio-geographic entity that a poet might represent--a tribal mosaic overrun by Hispanic and Anglo empires--California is a thing of the past. No poet today can set California to verse as Jeffers did; it would be like someone in 3rd-century Italy trying to be the poet of Rome. Like post-Augustan Italy, 21st-century California is changing too fast for a single poetic imagination to encompass, and poets don't try. Jeffers' greatness resembles Virgil's in this latter historical sense, and this is where the "unfortunately" comes in. As there is in Virgil, there is a element of fakery in him.

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Jeffers didn't try to legitimize the Anglo empire by contriving a myth linking it to heroic Greece: There's no Aeneas in his narratives. On the contrary, he used his knowledge of the classics to chastise the "perishing republic," both in his poems and in his adaptations of Greek drama, which were even more popular. But that also implies pretension. Did this scion of a well-to-do Pasadena household merit the mantle of Homer? Rexroth, who knew as much Greek, thought not: "His reworkings of the Greek tragic plots make me shudder at their vulgarity, the coarsening of sensibility and the tawdriness of the paltry insight into the great ancient meanings."

Rexroth was unfair. Jeffers had a sense of drama, and his adaptations are stirring. "When many people together see and hear the thing--if it is fierce enough and the actors and author can make it beautiful--it cuts deep," he wrote in 1948. "The average person may even forget his education and delight in it, though it is poetry." One of his most stirring plays is the one-act "At the Fall of an Age," about the exiled Helen of Troy's attempt to claim sanctuary from Polyxo, Queen of Rhodes--for whose husband's death in the Trojan War she was responsible. It is tautly eloquent, and its chorus, a ghostly troop of Greek myrmidons, also killed in the war, is a brilliant device.

Yet Jeffers' dramatic imagination does have a tawdry strain. Polyxo revenges her husband by lynching Helen, nude, on stage: "...the daughter of God, hangs like a lamp," cries the chorus, "high in the dark, quivering and white./ The breasts are thrust forward, and the head bows, the fleece of gold/ Shakes on the straining shoulders, writhes to the long white thighs . . . ." Such grandiose sadomasochism would not have seemed out of place in a Cecil B. DeMille epic. It is not so surprising from a man who came of age in early silent-era Los Angeles, covertly as licentious as Hollywood would become.

III

Jeffers' imagination reflected a life which was not as stoic as he made it seem. At 26, he figured as a pseudo-bohemian layabout in a scandal that could have made a naughty three-reeler for the pre-code market. As a graduate student at USC a few years earlier, he had met a beautiful young woman, named

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Una, who would be the love of his life. Unfortunately, Una was married to the financier Edward Kuster. The Feb. 28, 1913, Los Angeles Times called the consequent divorce case "a story so remarkable as to almost defy parallel" and linked Jeffers to it as follows: "John Robinson Jeffers, poet, Kuster states to be the cause of his former wife's adherence to the tenets of the mystic, preached by cultists who profess to believe that those things which conscience permits are right." A follow-up article, headed "Parents Wash Hands of It," featured movie-poster portraits of the adulterers and quoted sardonically from the "melancholy poems of passion" in Jeffers' first book, "Flagons and Apples."

Ah, how sweetly the day passed

Our day, our one sweet day that would not last,

Altho' we did not see the sun go down,

Nor knew till darkness that the sun was gone,

Because our eyes were blind, while my lips drank

Oblivious love at yours. . . .

-- "ON THE CLIFF"

Jeffers was a faker in casting a heroic mantle over an unheroic reality. Of course, fakery is integral to art, vide Plato and Tolstoy, but Jeffers was an unusually equivocal artist. "Another formative principle came to me from a phrase of Nietzsche's," he wrote. " 'The poets? The poets lie too much.' I was nineteen when the phrase stuck in my mind; a dozen years passed before it worked effectively, and I decided not to tell lies in verse. Not to feign any emotion that I did not feel, not to pretend to believe in optimism or pessimism, or irreversible progress; not to say anything because it was popular, or generally accepted, or fashionable in intellectual circles, unless I myself believed it; and not to believe easily." Jeffers would have written little if he'd held to this principle, however. He knew, and said elsewhere, that poets don't write what they decide to but what comes to them. Whether they feel or believe it is a question that arises after the fact and remains problematic even then. The "Nietzsche principle" did more to hide the sources of Jeffers' poetry than to form it.

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As James Karman's brief biography, "Poet of California," shows, Jeffers had embarrassing things to hide. A beautiful first child, he grew up in one of the tenser Oedipal triangles in American literary history, with a seductive mother two decades younger than a charismatic domineering father. Various sources called the socialite mother "beautiful . . . charming . . . vivacious;" the Presbyterian minister father "stooped . . . severe." (Jeffers recalled that his father "began to slap Latin into me, literally with his hands" when he was 9.) He developed an obsession with incest and its permutations. The anti-hero of his most ambitious narrative, "The Women at Point Sur," is a failed clergyman named Barclay who, in the process of establishing a Jonestown-style suicide cult, seduces his daughter. In the poem "At the Fall of an Age," Helen, who grows old without losing her beauty, is an archetypal matriarch-whore. Jeffers addressed his "Flagons and Apples" love lyrics to "Helen."

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Jeffers tried to put an impersonal mask on his complicated obsession, professing an affinity with the sexless granite of Tor House, even protesting that he didn't have a sister. He explained that the incest theme symbolized "racial introversion," an overvaluing of the human world at the expense of the non-human. But human self-absorption is not a tabooed deviation like incest. Jeffers' obsession manifested a personal introversion, not a racial one. "He says that it is necessary to get the human mind uncentered from itself, but he diagnoses in the universe the sickness that is original in him." Rolf Humphries observed in a 1932 issue of Poetry: "I consider Jeffers guilty of letting himself be taken in by himself more than an honest artist should."

Jeffers didn't begin to write original poetry until he harnessed his obsession's energy in the mid-1920s. In his more successful narratives such as "Tamar," incest makes a kind of sense, because the ingrown lives of their Big Sur ranch families embody the closing of the frontier. The ranch, mythically purifying, liberating and productive--often otherwise--is a nexus of Western tragedy. In the end, however, the obsession blunted Jeffers' critique of the Whitman ethos' potential for hubris. Even in his more successful narratives, incest's prominence is puzzling. In others, such as "The Women at Point Sur" or "The Love and the Hate" (about a World War II soldier who returns from a Pacific grave to rape his

adulterous mother), the spuriousness of the "racial introversion" metaphor becomes evident. Daughter-seducing clergymen and mother-raping servicemen are not apt symbols of overconfidence in technology, growth and democracy.

Jeffers' personal introversion also blunted the other main thrust of his challenge to the Whitman ethos: evocation of a natural order. Although he wrote of letting the "doll" of humanity lie and loving organic wholeness, "not man apart from that," Jeffers privately never let the doll lie. He lived with or near his parents until motherly Una Kuster detached him, then moved from one tight-knit family to another without much real experience of solitude, ducking Una's occasional absences with alcohol and womanizing. Jeffers' life was tame for a poet who wrote so much about wildness. With an inherited income, he might have explored the world or at least the West, but his forays were limited to adolescent knapsacking in the San Gabriel Mountains and en famille trips to Europe and New Mexico.

IV

Jeffers is a great nature poet. Even a cursory glance through his lyrics demonstrates this:

I will go down to the lovely Sur rivers

And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders.

I will find my accounting where the alder leaf quivers

In the ocean wind over the river boulders.

I will touch things and things and no more thoughts,

That breed like mouthless May-flies darkening the sky,

The insect clouds that blind our passionate hawks

So that they cannot strike, hardly can fly . . . .

-- "RETURN"

Such lines have a Wordsworthian resonance, and Jeffers' education in biology gave him a wider scope than Wordsworth's. As William Everson observed, he welcomed "the tendency of science to displace humanity from the center of things," and his perceptions of the Big Sur landscape and its seasonal changes were deeply felt and scientifically accurate. When naturalist Loren Eisleley wrote that the "sea-beaten coast, the fierce freedom of its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him," there was truth in it.

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Yet Jeffers' vision of nature was not as profound as it might have been if he'd experienced more of it. Like Wordsworth, he had a certain homebound lack of curiosity. When settled in Carmel, he didn't explore the Big Sur coast extensively. Although almost every poem describes oceanscapes, he showed limited interest in what is in the Pacific at a time when marine biology was flowering in Ed Ricketts' Monterey lab. Jeffers also failed to explore the vast Santa Lucia Mountains inland from Big Sur, using its fir-covered ridges mainly as a backdrop. He acknowledged this in his equivocal way. When a photographer asked if he could call a book "Jeffers Country," he agreed, then later wrote that he didn't really deserve the eponym because: "I have only sat on its doorway and written verses about it."

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Like Wordsworth, Jeffers made the nonhuman conventional. Nature for him was surf, cliffs, redwoods and hawks--not sloughs, soil, coyote bush and wren tits. The conventionalization is not decorative--it helps to drive the narratives--but a certain detachment prevails, even in short lyrics. He vows to "... touch things and things and no more thoughts, / That breed like mouthless may flies," but the vow is a measure of his detachment. He seldom evokes the whole sensory range of a landscape as Keats does in "Ode to Autumn." To Keats, insect swarms are part of "the soft dying day," an actual place and time: "Then in a wailful choir, the small gnats mourn / Among the river sallows, borne aloft / or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." To Jeffers, they are a device. The paradox of this conventionalization is that humanity seldom is displaced from the center of his work.

There are exceptions to Jeffers' detachment. In a poem written after Una's death, when he was much alone, he makes a discovery:

... I clambered down the steep stream

Some forty feet, and found in the midst of bush-oak and laurel,

Hung like a bird's nest on the precipice brink a small hidden clearing,

Grass and shallow pool. But all about it there were bones lying in the grass, clean bones and stinking bones,

Antlers and bones: I understood that the place was a refuge for wounded deer; there are so many

Hurt ones escape the hunters and limp away to lie hidden; here they have water for the awful thirst

And peace to die in . . . .

-- "THE DEER LAY DOWN THEIR BONES"

The poem's active pursuit of its subject is rare, however, as are its olfactory and tactile images. The remainder lapses into familiar preoccupations. Jeffers doesn't question his conventional interpretation of the place as an animal graveyard. He wishes his bones were with the deer's because his life is "empty since my love died," but decides to keep to a "thirty year decision" against suicide because "even in the bitter lees and sediment / New discovery may lie." The prospect of discovery seems faint, however, in the "lees" that the aged poet was said to have consumed--a bottle of whiskey and a half gallon of wine a day.

Jeffers also resembled Wordsworth in his equivocal attitude to the human relationship with nature. He despised cruelty and sprawl--the "beautiful places, killed like rabbits"--but he let the sadistic George Sterling use ground squirrels for target practice on his Carmel property, and when the town wanted to buy part of it for a park in the 1950s, he subdivided the land. Jeffers' desire for rural isolation had an element of pose. He wrote about Carmel in 1914 as though it was the last frontier, but it was already a popular resort. He could have moved away as it grew suburban. He stayed, complaining, and spent his energy building stone walls on his once-wild headland.

Jeffers' choice of a home evidently arose from a wish to be admired as well as to live apart in a beautiful landscape. Avowedly inimical to visitors, he was adept at fascinating them. He and Una had polished routines for doing so, including some imaginative material, as when they told Lawrence Clark Powell that Una was "an Irishwoman" (she was from Michigan), and that they'd just spent "a year" in Ireland and Scotland (they'd spent four months). "I felt in his presence," Loren Eiseley gushed, "almost as though I stood before another and nobler species of man." Of course, vanity--even more integral to art than fakery-- also motivated his work. A prevalence of prophets and saviors in his less successful dramas and narratives shows he spoke from experience when he attributed a "private impurity" to them. More than just a theatrical setting, Tor House was a personal shrine.

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Unfortunately, Jeffers' flaws seem to have cost him an audience. I learned, in the 1980s, of a prospective biographer who got a major grant but returned it from dislike of the subject. Comparison with two other California writers whose careers have become literary industries is instructive. Although not without vanity and poses, John Muir was the real thing when it came to letting the doll of humanity lie and to loving organic wholeness. His writing has a sense of discovery that Jeffers' lacks and has helped convince society to love organic wholeness in some places by making them national parks. Vain, posturing F. Scott Fitzgerald reached for the doll of humanity with complete absorption but also with complete candor, so that, when the doll dragged him down, his work became a testament of the courage in extremity that Jeffers preached. His candor brought to life the doomed producer Monroe Stahr, even the hack screenwriters of "Crazy Sunday" and the Pat Hobby stories.

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"When I read Thoreau," Fitzgerald reflected, "I realized how much I have missed by excluding nature from my life." Jeffers said in a letter that he had read Thoreau and in an interview that he hadn't read Thoreau. His lack of candor was monumental and, for all the poetic genius he brought to his narratives and dramas, it contributed to a puppet-like quality critics see in his characters. Of course, artistic value doesn't always depend on candor, but there is a connection. Muir's and Fitzgerald's unequivocal lives are inspiring. If Jeffers had challenged the Whitman ethos from a similar integrity, he would have had more fortunately!' when asked to name the greatest French poet of the 19th century. It was Andre Gide who actually said "Victor Hugo, alas!" We are grateful to Richard Howard for bringing

Still, inspiration is only one side of the artist's ethical role. Stirring but equivocal artists like Jeffers demonstrate the formidable psycho-social obstacles that can bar even the best minds from personal integrity. In this sense, they have more to teach than the Muirs and Fitzgeralds, because their lessons are as numerous as our own capacity for equivocation. Their most disturbing lesson is that the world becomes like their art. The Manson Family and the Rev. Jim Jones stepped right out of "The Women at Point Sur," and much of California looks more like a Jeffers narrative than a Muir or a Fitzgerald one. The gated subdivisions up and down the coast have something in common with his lonely ranches and with Tor House.

We will lose something of value if we let Jeffers slip away, for he, above all other poets, expresses California's peculiar ambience with unsurpassed vividness:

This was the high plateau of summer and August waning; white vapors

Breathed up no more from the brown field nor hung in the hills; daily the insufferable sun

Rose, naked light, and flaming naked through the pale transparent ways of the air drained gray

The strengths of nature; all night the eastwind streamed out of the valley seaward, and the stars blazed.

--TAMAR

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ALSO MENTIONED IN THIS REVIEW:

ROBINSON JEFFERS Poet of California by James Karman; Storyline Press: 182 pp., $12 paper

ROBINSON JEFFERS The Man and His Work by Lawrence Clark Powell; Haskell House: 215 pp., $75

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