



Edited by
ShaunAnne Tangney

The Wild That Attracts Us

 *New Critical Essays on Robinson Jeffers*



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Edited by SHAUNANNE TANGNEY

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*To all those in Minot
who weathered the storm*

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While it may be unusual to acknowledge one's editor and one's contributors, in this specific case, I feel strongly that it must be done. This project began with the start of a sabbatical, in January 2011. In June of that year, my husband and I lost our home to the flood that devastated Minot, and we spent the next eighteen months living with friends and then in a FEMA trailer, the last eight months of which we were also rebuilding our home. Time and time again, I had to push this project back, and back again, and every time I did so, the contributors to this volume and Elise McHugh at the University of New Mexico Press continued to hang in there with me and the book. Without the extraordinary patience of all of those people, this volume would not have come to fruition.

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Introduction

*“The wild that attracts us”—in the World
and on the Page*

SHAUNANNE TANGNEY

In the fall of 1993 I was a newly minted PhD candidate in the English department at the University of Nevada, Reno. In my first semester there I took a class called “The Literature of the Wild,” taught by Cheryll Glotfelty (the first ever academic appointment in the field of ecocriticism), and in that class we read Robinson Jeffers’s collection *The Double Axe*. I had never read Jeffers before, and I was, quite frankly, blown away. My field of study was modern and postmodern American literature, and I was preparing to write a dissertation on apocalyptic literature. In this initial encounter with Jeffers’s poetry all I could think was, why haven’t I ever read this before? Why, over the course of two academic degrees in English, haven’t I ever encountered Jeffers’s poetry? Perhaps most especially, given my predilection for apocalyptic literature, why had no professor ever introduced me to Robinson Jeffers? While I did not know it at the time of my introduction to Jeffers, I was certainly not the first to shake my head at the quietude—both academic and critical—surrounding Robinson Jeffers. In 1953 Horace Gregory asked in his review of Robinson Jeffers’s *Hungerfield*, “A man from Mars, or less remotely, a visitor

from Europe might well ask those who talk of poets and poetry in the United States a pertinent question: ‘Why does so much deep silence surround the name of Robinson Jeffers?’” (qtd. in Karman, introduction to *Critical Essays* 19). It is troubling that Gregory had to ask this while Jeffers was still alive and publishing, and it remains a troubling question for Jeffers scholars to this day. In 1992 Dana Gioia complained that “no major American poet has been treated worse by posterity than Robinson Jeffers” (47). Things have changed since then but a real dilemma still exists.

Jeffers is a major American poet. His collected poetry fills five volumes and runs to over three thousand pages. When complete, the three volumes of his collected letters will run to over three thousand pages as well. He was on the cover of *Time* magazine. A U.S. postage stamp bears his likeness. He maintains a vigorous public audience. But within academia, Jeffers has never received the attention he deserves. Although critical work on Jeffers steadily increased throughout the latter half of the twentieth century beginning with two seminal works, William Everson’s *Robinson Jeffers: Fragments of an Older Fury* (1968) and Robert Brophy’s *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems* (1973)—further boosted by the growing environmental movement in the 1970s and again with the advent of ecocriticism in the 1990s—the conversation has never been quite as loud or had quite as many participants as Jeffers scholars would like. And indeed, Jeffers scholarship has seen some setbacks of late, a fact perhaps most notably evidenced in the removal of Robinson Jeffers from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. This book—indeed, any single book—cannot wholly remedy the situation, but it can become a strong voice in an ongoing conversation, most importantly by bringing new people into the conversation to reinvigorate it. The collections of essays on Robinson Jeffers that precede this one have been important—crucial—and this one does not pose itself against them, but rather as the logical next step in a continuing critical exploration of Jeffers and his work.

This is a critical juncture in Jeffers scholarship. There is a real need to advance and embolden the scholarly conversation about Robinson Jeffers, who is undoubtedly one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. There hasn’t been an edited collection of

critical essays on Jeffers published in twenty years, and a great deal has changed in the critical landscape since then. Since the mid-1990s, when the last edited collection was published, we have seen the full advance of ecocriticism, the reimagining of regionalism as place studies, the cultural studies shift and reshift, a reemergence of formalist poetics and criticism, the reciprocal influence of science and the humanities, a reconsideration of modernism and modernity, and other critical sea changes, and I mean for this volume of essays to reflect these changes as they are relevant to Jeffers scholarship. A new collection is warranted simply to keep the critical conversation lively and ongoing, but also to bring Jeffers into the position of prominence he should hold in twentieth-century American literature. Bringing Jeffers to prominence is especially important because while Jeffers has always been popular, his critical reputation has not been solidly established, a problem this collection will address.

Perhaps one of the most interesting changes to the critical landscape since the publication of the last anthology of Jeffers essays is the intersection of science and literature.¹ Although critics and casual readers of Jeffers alike have long considered Jeffers in terms of nature (and this volume includes a series of considerations of Jeffers as a “nature writer”), the actual science inherent in Jeffers’s work was often glossed over. Jeffers was an astute amateur scientist. Having studied medicine and forestry, he was well versed in the science of his day. His brother, Hamilton, was a well-known astronomer working at Lick Observatory, and although the brothers’ relationship was sometimes rocky (as Jeffers rather grimacingly notes in a letter to George Sterling: “My brother, who is an astronomer but disagreeable, and pervades the house with damned radio experiments, is stopping here on his way to Lick Observatory” [*CL* 1:465]), we know that Jeffers gleaned much from the work his brother did at Tor House. Indeed, we know that Jeffers

believed that “a scientific basis is an essential condition” of thought. “We cannot take any philosophy seriously,” he argued, “if it ignores or garbles the knowledge and view-points that determine the intellectual life of the time (*SL* 254). Accordingly, he accepted the “big Bang” theory of creation, which holds that our present universe

exploded into existence some 20 billion years ago. (Karman, *Robinson Jeffers* 90)

But while Jeffers himself was keen on scientific knowledge, Jeffers scholars have done very little work on the science evident in his poetry.

Perhaps most notable in the critical exploration of the scientific aspects of Jeffers poetry is volume 8, issue 1 of *Jeffers Studies* (2004). The volume features essays by myself on catastrophic geology, by George Hart on Jeffers and other geologically inspired poets, by Robert Kafka on Jeffers's geologically driven hiking expeditions, and by Ron P. Olowin on Jeffers's observation of the Draconid meteor shower of 1946. In his editor's note, Hart says that "the main concern of this issue is to consider Jeffers in the context of earth science" (v), but he also reminds readers that "he was also a poet who looked to the stars—and did so with a knowledge of astronomy just as accurate and informed as his understanding of geology" (iii). Hart's editorial choices for this issue are not surprising, given his own recent and extraordinarily important contribution to Jeffers scholarship, *Inventing the Language to Tell It: Robinson Jeffers and the Biology of Consciousness*. As Hart's book is brand new at the time of this writing, its full impact has yet to be felt but will be significant. As he notes in the introduction, he draws on "contemporary neuroscience to understand and assess Jeffers's interest in consciousness [. . . and uses] neuroscience and the philosophy of the embodied mind to clarify Jeffers's struggle with the biology of consciousness" (2). The book traces Jeffers's own struggle with the material/mystical dualism—as Hart reminds us, "the biology of consciousness is at the core of Jeffers's work, but it is not all of it. Getting a better sense of why it was so important to Jeffers will allow us to see better the total achievement of his work, the development of a sacramental poetics that expresses a holistic vision of a divine cosmos" (2). Critical considerations of Jeffers's development of a sacramental poetics and his holistic vision are many; Hart's introduction of neuroscience and the philosophy of the embodied mind to the critical conversation are strikingly new and powerfully vital.

In this volume, two essays continue in the stream that Hart has forged. In "Robinson Jeffers and the Contemplation of Consciousness,"

Christopher Damien, like Hart, perceives that Jeffers's poetry is "palpably scientific and passionately imaginative" (2); also like Hart, Damien seeks to trace Jeffers's struggles with consciousness. But in a perceptive addition to the conversation, he carefully reads the formal characteristics of the poem "Consciousness" and shows how they foreground the poem's scientific and mythical registers. Damien argues that in its entirety "Consciousness," composed of three sonnets, reveals that Jeffers was well aware of "the inability of humanity to contemplate consciousness in an ordered and conclusive way but encourages contemplation nonetheless" (15). The second part of Damien's essay deals with "De Rerum Virtute," which he claims resembles "Consciousness" "but with the addition of a newfound confidence in consciousness as an intrinsic characteristic of the universe" (19). In juxtaposing the two poems, Damien suggests that "we can see how [Jeffers's] understanding of human consciousness developed from an alienating quality to an opportunity of communion with the universe through being aware of its beauty" (19). It is a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay that should encourage a continuation and enlivening of the conversation regarding Jeffers and science.

J. Bradford Campbell's essay, "The Neurasthenic Logic of Robinson Jeffers's Antiurbanism," diverges a bit from the kind of neuroscientific explorations Damien makes. Noting a letter from Una about the infamous San Francisco trip to shop for an upcoming European journey that left Jeffers in "'such a state of misery & gloom [. . . it] sickened him. He actually gnashed his teeth & groaned half the night' (*CL* 1:817)" (26), Campbell fashions a theory that Jeffers's profound dislike of cities is not driven by any kind of romantic legacy; rather, it is "a hard-won, deeply felt, teeth-gnashing realization that the city is a threat to personal and poetic vitality: it robs the poet and the man of precious, limited energy, leaving him the victim of what Jeffers and his contemporaries would have recognized as a kind of neurasthenia" (27). Campbell goes on to carefully outline how pervasive the diagnosis of neurasthenia was in the early twentieth century, and he traces many references to it—outright and covert—in Una's letters and Robinson's poetry. Campbell traces Jeffers's references to neurasthenia from very early poems, such as "Ruth

Allison,” wherein a “‘young man of the city, who in these hills / Had dwelt a twelvemonth for his weakness’ sake’ (CP 4:89)” (32), to the later “Such Counsels You Gave To Me,” which features the “hapless Howard Howren [who] is described bluntly as a ‘neurasthenic / Desire-eaten boy’ who has, in his own words, ‘cracked up’ (CP 2:570)” (34). By focusing on the now-discredited diagnosis of neurasthenia that was nevertheless accepted in Jeffers own time, Campbell contributes to the ongoing conversation as to just what Jeffers meant by his admonishment to “become inhuman” and the well-known phrase’s connections to wholeness and health.

Campbell also claims that “neurasthenia became an important literary trope for modern writers” (28), and while he uses that claim to set up the prevalence of the neurasthenia diagnosis in the early twentieth century, with it he also points toward something that has been somewhat lacking in Jeffers scholarship: a consideration of Jeffers as a distinctly modern writer. While Frank Kermode was apparently confident enough in 1968 to say, “everybody knows what is meant by modern literature, modern art, modern music” (qtd. in Brooker 1), that confidence has eroded a bit in recent years. Or rather, as we move further away from the acknowledged era of high modernism—the first half of the twentieth century—we encounter the necessity of reconsidering modernism. By 2003, Marianne Thormählen was able to bring forth *Rethinking Modernism*, and therein to problematize the very term. The designation “modernist,” she asserts, “has had two unfortunate consequences: works on which the label has not seemed to fit have been unfairly neglected, and the area of applicability has been stretched to (and sometimes beyond) the limit of meaningfulness” (6). She could be speaking specifically about Jeffers, especially in terms of the first consequence. And while Jeffers, rather brashly, claimed that as early as 1914 he made his “final decision not to become a ‘modern’” (CP 4:386), Tim Hunt has long been aware that to take this statement at face value means to “conclude that [Jeffers] is in some way a writer without a literary context” (“Robinson Jeffers” 245), a dangerous move indeed.

Hunt begins his essay for this volume, “Constructed Witness: The Drama of Presence in Jeffers’s Lyric Voice,” by comparing the poetic “I” as it appears in Jeffers and Eliot. The “I” in “The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock” is certainly not Eliot, nor is the “you”—“Let us go then, you and I”—the reader; they are both constructions. In Jeffers’s “Point Joe,” however, the “I” seems to be “an authoritative witness to the scene” (42) and “addresses us as the reader as if we could be present as an actual ‘you’ to the speaker” (43). But Hunt cautions us not to mistake this as either naïveté or antimodernism. Hunt highlights Jeffers’s struggles not to be “confessional,” and concludes that

for Jeffers, the authority of the self who writes is suspect; what matters is the authority the poet can construct, since this authority (and the poem enacting it) can be partially freed from the private (and compromising) need that is its occasion. For Jeffers, what matters is the way the piece of writing, the poem, functions as a mediation to the Nature beyond the writing self. (52)

This is not Jeffers wholly cut off from modernist poetics, but rather quite engaged in it. As Hunt says, “If the ‘I’ that speaks the typical Jeffers lyric is nearer to Jeffers himself than Prufrock is to Eliot, both are, nonetheless, constructions operating as devices within implicitly dramatic structures, and both ‘Point Joe’ and ‘Prufrock’ (even with their major and important differences) are dramas of consciousness” (63), something that “underscores the modernity of both” (63).

Robert Zaller’s contribution to this volume tackles Jeffers’s “modernism” in a different way. “Jeffers, Pessimism, and Time” begins with an allusion to Harold Bloom’s notion of the “strong poet,” which, arguably, owes some debt to Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Zaller asserts that Jeffers derives from, among other sources, “Freudian thought, particularly his Oedipal construction of human character and destiny; and his situation within the literary and artistic tradition of the sublime” (65). Zaller’s work on Freudian influence and on the sublime is well known; in this essay, he pushes it a step further to include “another and perhaps more encompassing tradition to which [Jeffers] also belongs[:] . . . pessimism,” (65) especially as represented by “Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in modern times (and to Freud himself)” (66). Clearly, Zaller means to locate Jeffers in a very modern conversation.

Zaller's essay is sprawling, but convincing, and is firmly seated in a thoroughgoing explication of the pessimistic tradition, from which he develops an argument concerning cyclical time and transgressive heroes. Jeffers's transgressive heroes are those who recognize that "to have evoked the violence of natural process, to have plumbed human depravity and to consider that 'the brave sun [will] / Die blind and blacken to the heart' ('To the Stone-Cutters,' *CP* 1:5); and yet to affirm the world as universal value, is no small or superficial feat. Pessimism does not necessarily lead to despair, but, rightly understood and accepted, may fortify resolve instead" (107). Zaller also argues that Jeffers's Inhumanism derives from pessimism, suggesting that "between happiness, which one cannot expect, and tragedy, which one does not seek, Jeffers offers consolation instead: the love of beauty; the disinterested quest for knowledge" (110). Zaller's is also strong work, and it situates Jeffers in a historical-cultural way that is unique in Jeffers studies.

Anthony Lioi takes on Jeffers and another school of philosophy—Stoicism—in his essay, "'Knocking Our Heads to Pieces against the Night': Going Cosmic with Robinson Jeffers." Lioi compellingly traces the connections between Stoicism and the role of nature in Jeffers poetry in his essay, and in it he relies not just on close reading of Stoicism, but also on a sharp understanding of ecocriticism. The full advance of ecocriticism has undoubtedly had the most impact on our thinking about the representation, contemplation, and construction of nature in literature. Succinctly defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment" (xviii). However, we must not forget that the human being is a part of the environment, as Greg Garrard reminds us when he says that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (qtd. in Lynch, Glotfelty, and Armbruster 16).

Ecocriticism is now well established (perhaps somewhat to the chagrin of its practitioners) within the halls of academia, but as Peter Quigley astutely points out, in important ways Jeffers's poetry and philosophy did much to prepare the way for ecocriticism:

Without the poetic efforts of Jeffers, there would be no vision, no courage, and no imaginative thrust taking us toward nature and beyond the range of human bias, beyond human self-serving delusion. . . . To fully consider Jeffers's contribution . . . it is instructive to re-read Glotfelty's comment in 1996 and compare it with Jeffers's statement regarding his poetic project:

[W]e are now considering nature not just as a stage upon which the human story is acted out but as an actor in the drama.

(Glotfelty xxi)

. . . my love, my loved subject:

Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees
Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic
interpreters—(*CP* 3:484) (Quigley 14)

Jeffers's purposeful decentering of the human being does indeed prefigure the establishment of ecocriticism, but the establishment of ecocriticism is largely responsible for the resurgence of Jeffers's popularity, within academia, and in the general public as well.

Lioi begins his essay with reference to Jeffers's connections to ecocriticism, citing Dana Gioia's declaration that the poet is "the unchallenged laureate of environmentalists" (118), but moves quickly to his claim that

Jeffers is a Stoic . . . a descendent of the classical school of philosophy whose ethics and cosmology anticipate "The Inhumanist." The Stoics thought of their philosophy as a therapy for what ails the species, and two of its aspects—the doctrine that the universe is a living, divine whole and that humans must conduct our lives as part of a cosmos—anticipate the claims of Inhumanism by millennia. (118)

Climbing the ladder from hawk to stars to God in Jeffers's verse, Lioi hypothesizes that stellar imagery therein reveals "Jeffers's Stoic project to remedy human violence by bringing human nature into harmony with universal nature," and that "the stellar imagery suggests a *scala naturae* through which humans reconnect with the divine reason of the universe

by ascending up the levels of being to the parts of the universe almost as large as the whole, the stars and galaxies" (124). The essay presents not only a provocative reading of Jeffers, but also a challenge to ecocriticism itself, for as Lioi notes, "however serious its expansive claims relative to classical humanism, ecocriticism has failed to go cosmic" (132). Lioi's essay begins to address this concern, and in doing so reminds us of the importance—concerning poetry and critical tactics—of taking "seriously the need to practice a change of vision, a conscious scaling up of our perspectives, a cultural technology of going cosmic" (137).

The title of my own contribution to this volume belies its thesis: "'The mould to break away from': An Ecofeminist Reading of 'Roan Stallion.'" An offshoot of ecocriticism, ecofeminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of nature, and suggests that these are a result of the patriarchal inclinations of Western culture and society, patriarchal inclinations that give rise to troubling dualisms like mind/body, reason/emotion, subject/object—all deriving from the male/female dualism. As I say in the essay, "While Robinson Jeffers would not have self-identified as an ecofeminist or even as a feminist (neither term was in use during his lifetime), it is arguable that inherent in both his poetry and his philosophy is an understanding that dualism as well as Western patriarchy are bad for both women and nature" (146). Jeffers challenges dualism in many poems (indeed, Inhumanism itself can be seen as a challenge to dualism) but in "Roan Stallion," where we have "the story of a brutal marriage and a woman's fight for identity and self-rule" (142), we see Jeffers making a clear, if unacknowledged, critique of patriarchal dualisms. In the essay, I draw on "Janis Birkeland's androcentric premise, against which both feminism and ecofeminism pose themselves, especially the aspects of instrumentalism [things or people valued only for their utility], polarization [the elevation of masculine traits and values], and power over [connections between masculinity and power over others]" (148) to draw out the ecofeminist aspects of the poem. As I say in the essay, "Roan Stallion" is not completely successful as an ecofeminist critique; nevertheless, "[t]he rape, abuse, and debasement of California does stand analogous to the rape, abuse and debasement of the planet, and even though 'Roan Stallion' does not undo the

dualisms that remain in much of ecofeminism itself, it does point out the dualisms that remain in Western patriarchal culture and society, and without blinking” (158).

It is arguable that the advance of ecocriticism also spurred the re-imagining of regionalism as place studies. Shaking off the pejorative whiff of the parochialism and obsolescence of regionalism, place studies is founded in the many definitions of sense of place. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan coined the term *topophilia*, which indicates “the affective bond between people and place or setting” (4), and much of place studies follows from that. Sociologist David Hummon develops the affective aspect of topophilia when he says:

By *sense of place*, I mean people’s subjective perceptions of their environments [and] their more or less conscious feelings about those environments. Sense of place is inevitably dual in nature, involving both an interpretive perspective *on* the environment and an emotional reaction *to* the environment. . . . Sense of place involves a personal *orientation* toward place, in which one’s understanding of place and one’s feelings about place become fused in the context of environmental meaning. (qtd. in Cross, “What is Sense of Place?”)

Hummon’s definition adds dimension, considering the intersections of perception, feeling, interpretation, understanding, and meaning; like ecocritics, he recognizes that place studies deals necessarily with reciprocal relationships among various human and nonhuman players. Bryon Williams is also aware of these reciprocal relationships, as evidenced in his essay, “Praxis, Gnosis, Poiesis: Inhabitation as Performative Myth in Thoreau and Jeffers.” For Williams, “inhabitation” is a “dynamic cycle” wherein doing, living, and artistic expression are interdependent, and specifically, “what [Jeffers and Thoreau] *say* arises out of what they *do* in concert with the elements of their natural environments” (162). Williams might just as well emphasize “*in concert*” for as he says later in the essay, “Inhabitation begins with living, with putting one’s hands and body in contact with a place. Patient and practiced interaction with place leads to privileged insight and intensive identification with the

place and its particular powers. Only through such practice may the initiate be granted insight and voice” (167). Many scholars have made comparisons between Jeffers and Thoreau, but in developing inhabitation as the progression from living to doing to saying, Williams sheds new light on how writer and place can be seen as active collaborators in artistic production.

The work of Robert Kafka defies easy categorization. Part place studies, part cultural studies, part biographical study, his work might even be called “literary anthropology,” especially as it employs tactics very like Clifford Geertz’s “thick description.” Thick description requires the anthropologist to explain a given culture by presenting as many details, structures, and interpretations as possible; it is opposed to “thin description” which presents only facts without interpretation. Noted sociologist and communications professor Norman K. Denzin neatly summarizes “thick description”:

[A] thick description . . . does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (qtd. in Ponterotto 540)

This is exactly what Kafka does in his own work on Jeffers, including in the essay in this volume, “Jeffers’s 1907 Hike in the San Bernardino Mountains: A Closer Look.” With a staggering amount of detail from a mind-boggling number of sources (and including truly spectacular end-notes), Kafka recounts the hike mentioned in the title, upon which Jeffers and his Occidental College schoolmates “Robert Glass Cleland . . . and Dan Hammack, and an acquaintance from the USC medical school where he had recently enrolled, John Wilson Nevius, who was also a close friend and perhaps a cousin of Hammack’s” (194) scale San Geronio,

the highest peak in Southern California at 11,499 feet. Kafka weaves together first-person accounts, later biographical accounts, third-person reminiscences, photographs, newspaper stories, and of course, Jeffers's poetry, namely "Stephen Brown" and "Homer Lea," their subject matter drawn from incidents on the hike. Consistent with "thick description," the sum of Kafka's essay is more than its parts. Kafka interprets the hike within the context of the "outback" culture of the San Bernardino Mountains and Jeffers's emerging sensibilities as a poet, giving the reader a deep understanding of place as context, authenticating Jeffers's work rather than theorizing upon it.

As no small amount of Jeffers scholarship focuses on his relationship to a very small and highly localized and specific place, we can forget that the world itself is a place and that Jeffers's impact upon it radiated far from the Central California coast. In "The Warm Reception of Robinson Jeffers's Poetry in Cold War Czechoslovakia," Czech scholar Petr Kopecký tells us that even as Jeffers's literary reputation reached its nadir in the United States, it was approaching its zenith in Communist Czechoslovakia, where "Jeffers gradually gained the status of one of the most famous American poets in Czechoslovakia" (224), a popularity he continues to enjoy in that country. Kopecký notes that "the symbolic value of powerful images including rock, tree, beast, ocean and mountain, but also abstract notions such as freedom, exoticism, and wild(er)ness" (224) in Jeffers's poetry was particularly attractive to a Communist audience. According to a biography by "exclusive translator Kamil Bednář," Jeffers slides under the radar of censorship by "condemn[ing] 'the aberrant tendencies to which the Western civilization began to yield'" (228). While Jeffers did often criticize Western culture as decadent, in Czechoslovakia, Kopecký notes, such an interpretation of Jeffers was "an inevitable move in the game Jeffers's Czech mediators played with the ideological supervisors in order to obtain the approval for publication" (228). Once the approval was given, however, Czech readers were able to find in Jeffers the same power and substance as readers did the world over. Kopecký spends considerable time in his essay explaining how Jeffers's treatment of the nonhuman landscape had a strong impact on his Czech audience. It was the "unusual shift in emphasis,

this ‘unhumanizing’ and somewhat exotic trait of Jeffers’s poetry that enchanted readers in one of the most humanized land(scape)s on the globe, [in Czechoslovakia]” (235), and Kopecký carefully delineates the Czech response to specific natural elements—tree, beast, rock and stone, ocean, and mountain—that allow us a more worldly understanding of Jeffers than we would have without this insightful essay.

As we know, the languages and literature of Europe were familiar territory to Jeffers. By the age of twelve he was reading, writing, and speaking German, French, and Italian, and “had acquired control over Greek and Latin” (Karman, *Robinson Jeffers* 11). These capabilities served him well as a poet, perhaps most notably in his adaptations of Greek tragedy, and most famously in his version of *Medea*. In his essay “Robinson Jeffers, Translation, and the Return of Narrative,” David J. Rothman carefully considers the connections between translation and narrative poetry. Rothman notes that “[f]or much of the second half of the twentieth century, critical consensus held that with the deaths of Frost and Jeffers the narrative strain in American poetry also died out” (255), but he goes on to make a convincing argument for the lasting impact of Jeffers on narrative poetry, most especially due to Jeffers’s adroitness with translation. The fantastic sales of narrative poetry in translation, Rothman argues—poems such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*—demonstrate that Americans do read narrative poetry, and he makes cunning connections between Jeffers’s skills as a translator and the translations by other poets of those classical narratives that we still buy and read by the millions. Narrative didn’t die, Rothman says: “It migrated into translation, where some of our best poets produced creative, popular, and critically successful retellings of great narrative poems for a contemporary audience, translations which continue to exert influence” (278). Specifically, Jeffers’s contribution to this “migration” was to be “exceptionally skilled at creatively synthesizing his modern poetic vision with the past,” which Rothman sees as “not . . . distinct from his achievement in writing original work, but rather inseparable from it” (267). Most provocatively, Rothman works to follow the trail from Jeffers to contemporary translators and narrative poets, even going so far as to engage directly with them, providing a lively and fascinating conversation about the role of

translation and the place of narrative poetry in both the popular and academic realms.

In sum, then, this volume aims to bring Jeffers scholarship into the twenty-first century. When I first encountered Jeffers in graduate school in 1993, we were two years away from the two most recent collections of critical essays. And while the Robinson Jeffers Association has held annual conferences since 1994, and *Jeffers Studies* has been publishing since 1997—both key factors in the growing critical conversation about Jeffers and his work—no book-length collection of critical essays has been published in almost twenty years. This volume aims to fill that gap. The heart of my intention lies in the words that provide the title for this collection:

In literature it is only the wild that attracts us. Dullness is only another name for tameness. It is the untamed, uncivilized, free, and wild-thinking in *Hamlet*, in the *Iliad* and in all the scriptures and mythologies that delight us,—not learned in the schools, not refined and polished by art. A truly good book is something as wildly natural and primitive, mysterious and marvelous, ambrosial and fertile as a fungus or lichen. (qtd. in Eiseley 185)

These are not Jeffers's words, but Henry David Thoreau's (from "Walking"). In his essay "Music of the Mountain" Loren Eiseley juxtaposes Thoreau and Jeffers in a way many readers of Jeffers will recognize, noting the "identification of the poet with his environment" (185). I did not borrow my title from Thoreau to reiterate that oft-made observation about Jeffers's fierce connection to his environment. I chose it instead to mine a rich paradox. I did learn Jeffers and all his wildness in school, in graduate school no less, that hotbed of erudition and edification. And I do know something more of wildness from reading Jeffers's poetry—and all the scholarship about it—in books. Jeffers was, if not at home with, at least well-versed in this paradox. Consider "Sign-Post": "Civilized, crying how to be human again: this will tell you how. / Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity" (*CP* 2:418). The second line is the way most people think of Jeffers, urging his

readers to recognize the “astonishing beauty of things,” to look toward the nonhuman world, admonishing human beings to assume their correct place in the cosmos. And certainly that is true, but don’t mistake or read over the opening line of the poem: if you want to be human—as opposed to civilized—this will tell you how, this being a poem. The poem—the human artifact—and the wild coexist, and in the poem, the wild and the human inform and reinform one another. I trust this volume will do the same.

Notes

1. The previous collections of essays on Jeffers and his work are: James Karman, ed., *Critical Essays on Robinson Jeffers* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1990); Robert Zaller, ed., *Centennial Essays for Robinson Jeffers* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1991); Robert Brophy, ed., *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet* (New York: Fordham UP, 1995); William B. Thesing, ed., *Robinson Jeffers and a Galaxy of Writers: Essays* (U of South Carolina P, 1995).

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Robinson Jeffers and the Contemplation of Consciousness

CHRISTOPHER DAMIEN

Human consciousness has for at least the last century been the ground over which the grand battle has raged for ideological authority on what it means to be human. Whether because human consciousness truly is unique in comparison to the sentience of our closest evolutionary relatives, or because the embattled ideological systems thusly engaged consider concession to be defeat, it seems that the conflict hinges on the assumption that if one can define human consciousness, then one can define humanity. Exceeding the antiquated caricature of the natural sciences versus the humanities, this subject has elicited passionate responses from physicists, philosophers, theologians, biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and many other representatives from a diverse range of disciplines. Indeed when studying human consciousness, traditional academic disciplines virtually dissolve into one another, a blending of perspectives that can result in both valuable discovery and collaborative ideation. Some researchers in the humanities have focused their effort on artifacts that contemplate consciousness through creative expression. Two such artifacts by

Robinson Jeffers, the poems “Consciousness” and “De Rerum Virtute,” are the focus of this essay.

This essay aims to reveal how Jeffers’s work is particularly relevant to scholars engaged in the study of artifacts of consciousness and to contemporary work in sacramental poetics. Granted the opinion that his poetry is in the threshold between registers that are palpably scientific and passionately imaginative, this essay argues that Jeffers’s work is of particular value to those seeking to culturally interpret our growing scientific understanding of human consciousness. Jeffers is a poet who deliberately dramatizes the human struggle with consciousness in the poem unit, particularly its form, as well as one who utilizes a scientific register to afford this struggle directness and continued relevance. It is perhaps safe to say that Jeffers was the most comfortable among the modernist poets in approaching human consciousness by way of the scientific register, while maintaining that human consciousness is uniquely accounted for in the visceral emotion of poetry. Taken together, these facts endow his philosophy of consciousness with a complexity rare for both his time and our own. Furthermore, Jeffers’s poetry is a means through which to exercise consciousness, specifically one’s own experience of subjectivity, while not betraying the progress science has made in defining its substrates; for Jeffers poetry may be a medium through which one considers the claims that contemporary science makes about the machinery of consciousness, a form that excludes neither the mythic nor the imaginative processes it gives rise to. Furthermore, it may be that for Jeffers poetry was sacramental.

Yet it is also important to note that Jeffers’s poetry is painfully aware of the sense of limitation, if not the tragic sense of impossibility, which haunts the study of human consciousness. For him, human consciousness eludes our attempts to both define and systematize as a result of our being within the sentient system. Any attempt at defining consciousness fails, suggest the poems, so long as such attempts utilize a method that arrests objects in contrast. The assertion of the integrity of all things, present in Jeffers’s poetry, is due in part to his philosophical materialism, which was thoroughly naturalistic. It is also a product of his unique theology of the divinity of nature. Both of these perspectives

require objects, with all their apparent differences, to be ultimately and intimately related and his poetry strives to bear witness to this conviction. This essay considers an often overlooked poem, "Consciousness," in comparison to the more popular "De Rerum Virtute," in hope to reveal how Jeffers contemplated human consciousness through poetic form and prove that he had treated this complicated subject with impressive ability in both his early and late work.

"Consciousness," considered to be among the *Tamar* work, was first published in the *The Carmel Cymbal* in December 1926 and again in Sidney S. Alberts's *A Bibliography of the Works of Robinson Jeffers* (1933). However, it has been little spoken of among critics, save for the work of George Hart, considered later in this essay. This neglect is somewhat puzzling considering how the poem so directly evaluates a subject of enduring import to Jeffers, asking: "Then what is this unreasonable excess . . . this unrequired / Exception in the world, this consciousness?" (CP 1:7) That Jeffers here considers human consciousness to be unreasonably excessive and exceptional in the world is characteristic of his philosophy of Inhumanism, according to which he did not shy away from considering humankind and its salient characteristics—especially our complex consciousness—to be both excessive and unrequired with respect to the biophysical system of life. While Jeffers was not alone in this thinking in his time, the ongoing endeavor of distinguishing human consciousness from other forms of apparent sentience in the biophysical system has produced an increasing number of similar thinkers unto the present day.

In "The Human Difference," paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould uses the term "golden barrier," defined as the "firm criterion to mark an unbridgeable gap between the mentality and behavior of humans and all other creatures," as the ultimate puzzle for the philosophy of mind. Indeed "Consciousness" utilizes a similar method, characteristic of Jeffers, of using the nonhuman to contrast and define the human, but here it is directly relevant to Gould's golden barrier. It is important to note that Jeffers was not necessarily alone among modernists in contrasting the nonhuman with the human in hope of better understanding consciousness. In *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern*

Consciousness, Sara Ford argues that the dramatization of subject-object relations played a crucial role in self-definition for modernists: “Once the distinction between self and object breaks down, we find a self that is defined at any given moment according to its relationship to the object” (10–11). According to Ford, in working through the subject-object dialectic many modernist writers attacked the illusion of “independent self-hood” and utilized the subject-object dialectic as a “stage for a moment of self-hood to be performed” (11). Such performances rarely resulted in harmonious syntheses, as is most often the case with Jeffers. The fierce beauty of the natural world is powerfully present in the poetry of Jeffers, a beauty that he does not consider humanity to be included within, because we humans tend to have such a hard time imagining ourselves to be in anything other than a dominant relationship with nature. It is domination, arrogance, hubris, and anthropocentrism arising from awareness of our otherness that characterizes consciousness for Jeffers. Although Gould understands that the quest to establish a golden barrier—a criterion of difference—is essentially problematic and perhaps impossible, he, like Jeffers, suggests that while a barrier appears to exist it most likely is not golden.

“Consciousness” is composed of three Shakespearean sonnet variants, which contain three different registers: scientific, mythic, and contemplative. While the three sections (noted I, II, and III in the poem) are certainly sonnets in that they are composed of fourteen lines and are undoubtedly Shakespearean in their rhyme scheme, they contrast slant rhyme with true rhyme enough to be considered variants (see appendix). These lesser exceptions of poetic form pale in comparison to the greater “Exception” (*CP* 1:7) of human consciousness, but both subvert historic systems of order and replace them with mystery. Jeffers manipulates Shakespearean sonnet form and foils the reader’s anticipation of ordered rhyme, by placing slant rhymes in key positions, and eliding sentences over line breaks in disorienting ways to emphasize the disharmony that plagues any attempt to systematize the understanding of human consciousness, whether by hubristic scientific empiricism or anthropocentric mythic theogony.

A traditional Shakespearean sonnet has the rhyme scheme ABAB-