

“Battle is a burning flower”: Natural Beauty as the Basis for Jeffers’s Opposition to War and His Commitment to Political Neutrality

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***Abstract:** This essay confronts the difficulties associated with Jeffers's treatment of violence and war. Many readers have assumed Jeffers to have promoted an acceptance of and even glorification of warfare and violence. By placing Jeffers, however, firmly within the neutrality movement in America during the 30s, a different picture emerges. Such positioning also establishes clarifying connections between his representations of war and the way in which he approaches other, better known aspects of his treatment of natural beauty. In addition, this approach challenges what some critics have suggested is a contradiction in Jeffers's poetry. Jeffers strongly promoted his sense of Inhumanism, of a magnificent and dwarfing universe, but also inserted his own individuality and passions in his poetry. Instead of contradiction this essay argues that this was a productive poetic tension dramatizing the poet's attempt to wrestle with the polarizing habits of mind and action. Further, the essay explores Jeffers's unique treatment of beauty by not only connecting it with his commitment to neutrality but also examining the way Jeffers used natural beauty to assess aesthetics (landscape representation) and politics (imperialism). In fact, Jeffers counters traditional landscape beauty, governed by romantic aesthetics that leans towards "fatherland politics," with a new sense of beauty that carries within it political neutrality and what would become a 20th-century sense of environmentalism.*

***Keywords:** Imperialism— isolationism—landscape—neutrality—World War II—Inhumanism—America First Committee—Asian aesthetics—romanticism—polarization—Roosevelt*

Striking is the lowly position ascribed to man: not the centre of creation, not a colossus in the landscape, but rather a small figure in the great sweep of natural things. The insignificance of men, as formulated by Jeffers finds perfect expression in Chinese landscape painting, where tiny figures are set down amid the magnificence of nature, mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes, clouds and waterfalls, trees and flowers. (Cotterell, 112)

One's reaction to the implications of Robinson Jeffers's vision has always seemed to determine the critical appraisal of Jeffers. The "lowly" position either offends one's values or validates one's assumptions. Prescribing a lower position is seen by some as a refreshing corrective, a sobering, de-centering, Asian humility in the face of a beautiful and magnificent natural world; another reaction is disgust and sees such depiction as cowardly pessimism, a failure of nerve, eschewing as it does the potential promise and perfectibility of humankind. When it comes to the place of humans in the universe, it seems that one is either a Copernican or a Ptolemaic thinker, a Platonist or Sophist/Aristotelian, a subscriber to Parmenides's changeless world or Heraclitus's river that is never the same from one toe dip to another, a Christian or a Darwinian, a believer in the "word" or an undoer of text, a nationalist/fascist or an anarchist, a believer that the scene was made for "man" or that humanity is one actor amongst many in nature.

The tendency, as easily witnessed by history, is for humans to choose the more comforting route. Humans, certainly the majority, seem hard-wired to need a story, a final resolution, a purpose, a logos and center that tie all together. We rush to identify with a team, a nation, a uniform, a creed, a sect, a race, a camp, or a theory. Religions clearly are one of the ways things are resolved, settled, organized and put to rest. Some religious and spiritual practices, however, are designed to undo this will-to-finality. For instance, meditation practices and some versions of zen focus on an intentional dissolution of will and desire in perception and action. There are less formal or religiously practiced methods for letting go as well (alcohol, drugs, and other social and cultural "distractions"). For the purposes of this article however, I am interested in a small percentage of thinkers who have always been able to challenge the comfortable, self-serving, human-biased vision of our wish for central importance. And, it is important to note, I am particularly interested in how this approach has been deployed without the assumed negativity and pessimism that is so often ascribed to "non-believers." More specifically still, I am interested in how such a joyful approach to life without the need for finality, resolution, or ultimate references to

truth translates into a particular political practice. American culture once embraced a political position and practice that embodied these qualities, a practice that was once embraced by American culture but has surely been forgotten, especially given the examples of polarizing rhetoric embraced by American political culture during the last 50-60 years.

Robinson Jeffers established his position in this discussion about foundational and final truth systems by praising Darwin and Copernicus for much more than their scientific advances. When, in *The Double Axe*, the Inhumanist is asked why he stacks his stone monuments (an allusion to Hawk Tower and Tor House built by hand by Jeffers), he gives a revealing answer:

“To whom this monument: Jesus or Caesar or Mother Eve?
No,” he said, “to Copernicus: Nicky Kupernick: who first pushed man
Out of his insane self-importance and the world’s navel, and taught him his Place.
And the next one to Darwin.” (C:3, 274)

The response offered by the Inhumanist contains the dominant set of “answers” humans traditionally cling to in order to assert the meaning and purpose of life as well as humankind’s place in the order of things. Jeffers rejects the traditionally self-congratulatory answers. In addition to rejecting the narrative of human history and power (Caesar) and the androcentric religion of Christianity, Jeffers also vehemently rejects the war of sides indicated by juxtaposing Jesus next to Caesar. Therefore, whether a self-serving tale of redemption and resurrection or a heroic narrative of power and conquest, Jeffers discards both and attempts to define something more complicated.

In poems such as “Star Swirls,” “Margrave,” *The Double Axe*, and in the following untitled poem, Jeffers, using the context of an infinite universe, re-emphasizes his critique of the narcissistic human delusion:

There is nothing like astronomy to pull the stuff out of man,
His stupid dreams and red-rooster importance: let him count the star-swirls.
(C:3, 476)

Robinson Jeffers dedicated himself to a way of knowing that would not “pretend to believe in optimism or pessimism or irreversible progress” (Shebl 11). In short, he adopted a method of seeing, thinking, and representation that resisted the imposition of ideology and wish fulfillment onto existence. In other words, he wanted a world he could honor, love, admire,

and pay tribute to without the attendant, flaming desire to possess it and without the self-interested payoff of salvation or eternal life. In sum, he wanted a beauty that would present to him a higher calling as a human being and as a result he wanted a world, to echo John Lennon, where a pacifist politics would emerge because of the recognition that there is really nothing to kill or die for.

Jeffers's political vision can be missed because it is so easy to fixate and be distracted by the powerful and challenging vision he offers. Even supporters have veered away from topics such as politics and violence because these issues have been too overwhelming or confusing. For instance, what should we think of a poet who says he'd rather be a "worm in a wild apple than a son of man"? And how is it possible for Jeffers to be opposed to World War II? How could Jeffers really mean that he'd rather accept the penalties, and kill a man rather than a hawk? And how could he dwarf us in an unimaginable, limitless, spatial void surrounded by beautiful but meaningless spiral galaxies drifting, drifting further and further out into blackness?: "The flaming and whirling universe like a handful of gems falling down a dark well" (C:3, "The Inhumanist," 274).

Lawrence Buell's comments on Jeffers, in *Writing for an Endangered World*, are typical of the knee-jerk response that recoils from Jeffers. Although his previous book (*The Environmental Imagination*) was complementary regarding Jeffers, Buell is more willing to catalogue Jeffers as a pessimist in *Writing in an Endangered World* as he observes that Jeffers "took pleasure in imagining himself dead" (154). In the first book, Buell was establishing an eco-ethic opposed to human-centric concerns, and so, he said of Jeffers, that with him "if anywhere, the Emersonian dream of nature as humankind's counterpart seems to have been purged of its theistic residue and to have assumed the status of an environmental ethic." Buell goes on to characterize the force of Jeffers's contribution: "At the manifesto level no postromantic assault on homocentrism has been more extreme than the 'inhuman' of Jeffers" (162). In this first book, Buell finds Jeffers's contribution significant and compelling. He actually wishes Jeffers would have gone further and feels it necessary to chastise him for not completely relinquishing the "I" in his poetry: "he does not allow his speaker to engage in the relinquishment of self that he preaches" (163). Buell continues this refrain in *Writing for an Endangered World* when he says that "the speaker has to keep reminding himself ... to see through the enticing appearances ... Presumably because inhumanism is such hard work" (155). Buell is

bothered by the persistence of an “I” in Jeffers; however, since we are no doubt hard wired for it, talking oneself out of selfish, biased, self-serving egotistical and anthropocentric thinking is indeed hard work and provides poetic drama in Jeffers. Buell is concerned that Jeffers is contradictory by talking about selflessness without practicing it in his poetry. And yet in *The Environmental Imagination*, a few pages after suggesting Jeffers is divided, Buell practices a bit of this himself by saying “It is hard not to care more about individuals than about people, hard not to care more about people than about the natural environment” (167). The fact is, Jeffers moved in and out of a perspective that given the mood or the intent calibrated his poetic lens to foreground or background the significance of his individuality, the significance of war, and even of existence. Often these two approaches collided in one poem creating, from my view, interesting and engaging tension, or, from Buell’s perspective, inconsistency and unresolved issues. Who amongst us hasn’t oscillated back and forth between intense self-interest only to later contextualize such passions in a larger context of space and time? Who hasn’t moved between “My life, it matters and must be preserved at all costs,” to, “in the great drama of space and time, all is dust”? Who hasn’t tried to seek balance between those polar positions?

In his second book, Buell is waxing towards a trendier multicultural theme and has to dismiss Jeffers as bleak and isolationist and not progressive and engaged. Jeffers, Buell asserts, is part of a group of writers who “follow the convention of banishing humankind to the edges for the sake of concentrating on the nonhuman landscape” (153). In this second book, Buell also mistakenly characterizes Jeffers’s commitment to anti-anthropocentrism as so vehement that for Jeffers “history is nothing more than an epiphenomenal swirl in the cosmic process” (153); as a result, Buell allows the “ecofascist” label to drop. His footnote to the term simply refers to Jeffers’s definition of inhumanism and ignores the more unsavory aspects of the term. It is interesting to see that which is thought of as bold and daring in one context becomes politically incorrect in another. Certainly the ahistorical rap Buell levels at Jeffers could as easily be associated with Snyder, whom Buell privileges over Jeffers. Snyder actually uses images of whorls and swirls (this is the language Buell uses to describe Jeffers’s sense of history) when talking about human activity as it is caught up in cosmic forces. Jeffers was an avid, astute, and attentive student of history as titles of his poems demonstrate.

Buell’s second book possesses an appeasing nod at the politically correct approach to eco-writing and, therefore, is predictably harder on Jeffers and

other writers who sought out nature as a solution and a pivot point against anthropocentrism as opposed to an “engaged” political approach, advancing issues in race, gender, class categories. Essentially, Buell moves away from what he perceives as nature writers who are not “progressively” focused. He particularly abuses and misreads Jeffers, in *Writing for an Endangered World*, when he, not so subtly, characterizes Jeffers as an apolitical nature writer: “To shrink bombers into horseflies, cities into fossil rain-prints, and World War II (a plague on both their houses) into a dot on the disk of history was enough to appall even an admirer like the Polish exile-poet Czeslaw Milosz” (195). Notice how Buell sarcastically characterizes Jeffers’s contempt for either side of the conflict, missing the fact that Jeffers was in tune with and reflecting much of the historical moment from which he was writing. Buell dehistoricizes Jeffers, separating him from a long-standing debate in American culture regarding political neutrality. Buell characterizes such “distancing” as a weakness and claims that in other (better) moments Jeffers “knows he should disapprove” of such a position (195).

Jeffers consistently imaged the uncomfortable and unconventional to shift the reader (and himself!) out of a comforting, delusional, myth-making complacency. Here I agree with Buell; this *IS* hard work and worthy of poetic depiction and worthy of human meditation. Sometimes this took the shape of depicting and foregrounding rock, hawk, spiral galaxy, and ocean; sometimes it took the shape of reminding us, and himself, that we all die. In sum, Jeffers was committed to helping himself and his readers remember that individuals are part of a species under evolutionary pressure, remember that nations come and go and that in the context of the wide and forever universe, we are dust on a point of light. He meditated on this not to seek escape but to recontextualize our energy, choices, and values. He worried that “we have all this excess energy.” He asked, “what should we do with it?” He hoped that with enough contemplation of spiral galaxies we might calm down and “take a walk, for instance, and admire the landscape: that is better than killing one’s brother” (C:4, 419).

Jeffers is hardly an apolitical poet, however, which a quick review of his titles will verify. More specifically, though, and to advance the argument of this paper, the desire to see the events of humans as not earth-shaking in the least is meant 1) to decenter the importance of these events; 2) to provide an angled perspective on these things that are supposed to demand our respect and allegiance; 3) to foreground nature; and 4) to provide a means to pursue a position of social and political neutrality and peace.

Politicians, saviors, true believers, and others are always ready to sacrifice a new generation of hopeful youth; they are always ready to “fix” the problem with an invasion, an atom bomb, the “just” war, or a final solution of one kind or another. They want us on their side. Bush, of course, comes to mind with his threatening dictum “you’re either with us or against us.” At some point in our thinking, all of us have asked ourselves, “To what end all of this endless conflict?” As Jeffers states in “Advice to Pilgrims,” “let demagogues and world redeemers babble their emptiness / To empty ears” (C:3, 118).

In this essay I will 1) explain the distinctiveness and importance of his view of nature as a means to 2) answer the questions about Jeffers’s “odd” political stance and then 3) move on to the larger question of “What political program acknowledges and pivots off from such flow, such lack of finality, such infinity, fluidity, and lack of hierarchy or human centeredness?” Some readers have enjoyed and celebrated Jeffers’s galactic views, especially as this has caused a redefinition of humankind’s place in the scheme of things, but even sympathetic readers have struggled with explaining such things as his opposition to World War II. Sympathetic readers have had to simply say that Jeffers was a part of a conservative Carmel isolationism. As Zaller catalogues in *The Cliffs of Solitude*, when Jeffers let himself go in *The Double Axe*, the critique of World War II was more than critics could bear: “Of all the works in the canon, it is the one his admirers have most regretted. Frederic Ives Carpenter calls it a nightmare; Robert Brophy, ‘tasteless,’ and even Everson finds it ‘gruesome’” (185). Zaller himself finds Jeffers’s attitude toward war “ambivalent.” Although Zaller mentions that Jeffers attempted to remain neutral and that this attitude “was a prime cause of his desertion by the critics” (178), he leaves it there allowing us to believe that Jeffers saw this as “a personal choice, not a historical alternative” (177). More importantly therefore, Zaller, as others, misses Jeffers’s treatment of nature. Zaller, as Buell, sees Jeffers moving back and forth between distancing himself—“admire it then; you cannot prevent it” (C:3, 131)—from war and the world, and headlong plunging into personal anger and historical involvement. Although Zaller is almost alone in mentioning the word “neutrality,” he falls short of seeing Jeffers’s use of nature and beauty as a means to align himself with a strong historical moment dedicated to political neutrality. Ultimately, Zaller’s interest was focused on how World War I called up “deeply repressed Oedipal conflicts” (68), or how World War II “painfully rekindled ... Oedipal fantasies” (185). This focuses Zaller away

from a more politically precise discussion, away from firmly planting Jeffers and his poetry in the actual historical discussion regarding neutrality which was so much a part of those decades. This paper will present clear evidence that clarifies these issues and connects Jeffers's views with a political program that is uniform and even mainstream for the times.

In poem after poem, Jeffers lays out his critique and complaints regarding destructive human passion. Most readers see the critique ("so many blood-lakes; and we always fall in" [C:3, 133]), but they miss the sympathetic sentiment and trajectory in lines such as the following: "Oh future children ... Moderate kindness / Is oil on a crying wheel: use it ... Mutual help / Is necessary" (C:3, 304). The problem for Jeffers is not a lack of optimism; it is the sense he possesses of the force and strength of modernist energies. In "Rearmament," Jeffers admits again to his painful acknowledgement regarding the inevitability of war:

I would burn my right hand in a slow fire
To change the future I should do so foolishly. The beauty of modern
Man is not in the persons but in the
Disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the
Dream-led masses down the dark mountain. (C:2, 515)

Note the expressed agony regarding the contemplation of human suffering; note also the association of beauty with modernist movements. He would like things to be other than they are. He rails against the violence and the suffering and the stupidity of it all. By appearing to accept what he sees, some readers mistake this gesture as approval of or a Nietzschean indulgence of violence and obliteration. On the contrary, I submit that Jeffers is teaching himself to deal with what he can't change and what he can barely tolerate to watch and witness. He is attempting to deal with large forces, to admit to, acknowledge, and come to terms with the inevitability of things as they are, while still acknowledging his personal pain and his opposition. This has to be the psychopolitical attitude of anyone in a politically aware but neutral position.

Dealing with "things as they are" sounds defeatist to many who label themselves progressive liberals. But progressive liberals have been responsible for a good deal of interventionist policies (having the "answer" and not accepting "things as they are") that can be seen as questionable at best. In fact, Jeffers ran into considerable opposition from his Random House editors, who were supporters of FDR and the World War II effort, because

of his anti-war stance. James Shebl, in *In This Wild Water*, does an admirable job describing the suppression and censorship of many of Jeffers's poems that were to be included in *The Double Axe* volume. As opposed to a world-saving interventionist positioning, Jeffers had another solution to world ills that was embraced by many and rejected by many more within the heated ideological period before and during the war. In addition, settled opinion about the "good war" has further muffled what Jeffers was up to at the moment.

Jeffers exhibits several different kinds of responses to violence in the world. To stay sane, to keep the faith of another day, Jeffers attempts to come to terms with and school his mind regarding humanity's cruelties and nature's star-swirls. In the same way that Jeffers engages with star-swirls to calm his fears regarding his own personal death and dissolution, he also figures and responds to world events in a way that accomplishes similar ends: to achieve a balance in the face of certain forces. Jeffers is attempting to negotiate a world as he finds it, not transform it into something he wishes it would be, and thereby adding to the pain.

Usually, those who see beauty in the world are, as mentioned before, getting some payback such as immortality or gauzy comfort. Perhaps this kind of story-telling is a comforting refuge, a kind of evolutionary hard wiring that protects most humans from despair, a kind of whistling in the dark. We do like happy answers. Beauty, handled by the romantic imagination, is a reconciling delusion. Others who look at the world without the hope of romantic pleasure or salvation tend to see nature as red in tooth and claw. In other words, the main approaches towards defining nature are 1) reflexive, self-confirming, calming and congratulatory, or 2) frightening, threatening, alienating. As opposed to the romantics who emphasize a rewarding beauty and mystery and as opposed to the naturalists/realists who emphasize the brutal indifference of nature, Jeffers explores a space in between both positions.

Jeffers looked more directly at the world around us, its bizarre, beautiful, brutal, and overwhelming features. Instead of turning away, turning to comforting mythology, turning to romanticism, drugs, alcohol or religion—"The little chirping Sirens" (C:3, 4)—, Jeffers rose above human fear and saw intense power and beauty in an "unhuman nature" and "its towering reality" (C:3, 369). Jeffers echoes the *Tao Te Ching* in this way by positing an inhuman universe and a refusal to be seduced by human ideology. As Lao Tzu put it:

Heaven and earth are inhumane;
 they view the myriad creatures as straw dogs.
 The sage is inhumane;
 he views the common people as straw dogs ... (63)

It is not necessary to see Lao Tzu (or Jeffers) as denigrating humanity in these verses. Most of us, I would assume, have had this insight at one moment or another; we don't persist with it for 24 hours, but we have it now and then. It is the feeling a certain contemplation of the stars brings about at 3 a.m. And in a quite different register, it is the sentiment expressed by John Lennon when he suggested that there was nothing to kill or die for. When we relieve ourselves or are relieved from our various illusions, faiths, mythologies, we see that we are all insignificant in the face of an endless universe. From this vantage point, one can see both Lao Tzu and Jeffers offering a corrective, a less biased perspective. Lao Tzu continues in this poem in a way that echoes Jeffers's impatience with constant human chatter, arguing, posturing and taking sides:

Hearing too much leads to utter exhaustion;
 Better to remain in the center. (63)

In fact, according to Jeffers and much that is in Asian thinking, taking sides is seen as just another way to add to and enhance suffering and hatred. In "Quia Absurdum," Jeffers notes the insulating nature of any human ideology: "Choose the Christian sheep-cote / Or the Communist rat-fight: faith will cover your head from the man-devouring stars" (C:3, 213). In "Intellectuals," Jeffers rejects familiar crutches:

Is it hard for men to stand by themselves,
 They must hang on Marx or Christ, or mere Progress? (C:2, 283).

e.e. cummings framed the problem regarding violence a little differently. Where Jeffers suggests that our cultural codes, information sources, myths, and ideologies cause us to see things dialectically in opposites, cummings suggests there is a good argument against war but, alas, according to cummings, such reasoning is to no avail. Despite all of the information which argues that war and violence are horrific and futile, humans go to war anyway, ignoring all the sage advice passed down through the centuries:

plato told
 him: he couldn't
 believe it (jesus
 told him; he
 wouldn't believe
 it) lao
 tsze
 certainly told
 him, and general
 (yes
 mam)
 sherman;
 and even
 (believe it
 or
 not) you
 told him: i told him
 (he didn't believe it, no
 sir) it took
 a nipponized bit of
 the old sixth
 avenueel: in the top of his head: to tell him ... (qtd. in Kennedy 392-393)

Both e.e. cummings and Jeffers decry the kind of propaganda that inspires hatred and that promotes violence as a solution. Jeffers's analysis is more penetrating since he sees that the narratives themselves, all of them, are structured to bring on a binary, X vs. Y, style of thinking. Jeffers assesses the structural nature of binary energies in war and peace, love and hate, us and them. cummings, on the other hand, simply laments the failure of arguments against violence. Derridean poststructural philosophy categorized this polarizing quality of our language system as binary systems. It is the very nature of our myths, stories, laws, and narratives to be structured with good/bad, right/wrong, high/low, dirty/clean, etc.

In *The Double Axe*, Jeffers makes his position on these issues very clear. The long poem is divided into two clear parts, Part I which is called "The Love and the Hate" and Part II which is called "The Inhumanist." The first part demonstrates that human interest, human passion, regardless if it is love or hate will end in entanglement and destruction: "whoever loves or hates man is fooled in a mirror" (3: 304). Only a position of calm, of the suspension of the will to impose master narratives, of Inhumanism, will keep unnecessary and unbecoming violence from occurring. In the published version of the "Preface" to *The Double Axe*, Jeffers makes it clear

what he has in mind when he uses the term Inhumanism. He wanted to present a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism,

a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; 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. This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist, though two or three people have said so and may again. It involves no falsehoods, and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. It 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. (C:4, 428)

The period of *The Double Axe* seems to have been particularly tough on Jeffers. This period creates one of his therapeutic responses to violence: "Let them play." Jeffers has been warning about war for years as he did World War I and it finally did emerge, as predicted, in the form of World War II. His response is bitter and angry. Imagine this scenario: after pleading with your roguish roommates about the consequences of wrestling and fighting one another, one of them inadvertently lands a blow on your cheek. What's the response? "OK, fine. You want to fight? Go ahead!" One's role moves from arbitrator and go-between to one who sees that understanding will only be gained, if at all, on the other side of the violence. Perhaps the poem dramatizes the results of the heat and passion of polarizing thought?

Let them play

Let the guns bark and the bombing plane speak its prodigious blasphemies ...

But writing poems as a form of petulant therapy is only part of the story. Even when he strikes a pose of someone who has turned his back on all of it, there is hope as he looks at the historical patterns. Perhaps, the same old habits, he thinks to himself, these old tendencies to engage in violence and death, will create a few years of peace and humility: "old violence is not too old to beget new values" (C:3, 25). Perhaps these acts of war can, as in the past, allow for new values, new re-appreciations for peace and "boring" tranquility. Most important for this discussion, however, is noting Jeffers's general determination to not get involved, to not take sides, to remain neutral and balanced. Let *them* play. Zaller was right, of course; this

is a personal choice, but it was also a legislative, historical, and national choice for years.

Even in such an angry poem as "Let Them Play," Jeffers, who has been accused of unrelenting pessimism, is more optimistic than Cummings is in "Plato told him." With Cummings, nothing convinces except death. In a similar fashion Melville leaves little room for release from the cycle. One recalls Melville's powerful poem about the Civil War, "Shiloh: A Requiem." Two soldiers from opposing armies find themselves mortally wounded after the battle. Because of their wounds, they are able to shed their previous ideological seductions. The two men,

Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:
(What like a bullet can undecieve!) (482)

Melville, like Cummings, assumes the only possibility for reappraisal will occur with a bullet.

Jeffers at least holds out the possibility that narratives of patriotism and belief will exhaust themselves for a while. Throughout Jeffers's work, there is the suggestion that although culture is powerful, it is possible for nations and individuals to get glimpses of alternative perspectives. Acknowledging the power of culture and politics while holding out the possibility for a modicum of change and insight, is the sign of a realistic but still hopeful thinker.

But I want to suggest that Jeffers was even more hopeful than this. My proposal flies in the face, therefore, of the more commonly accepted notions of Jeffers's view of the possibilities for human peace. In a 1938 pamphlet entitled *Writers Take Sides*, put out by the American Writers League, the question asked of writers of the day was: "Are you for or are you against Franco and fascism?" Jeffers responded, "You ask what I am for and what I am against in Spain." Part of his response was as follows: "I would not give a flick of my little finger to help either side win" (in Ridgeway 266-267). This is the Jeffers some critics love to hate; and this is the Jeffers that those who have not read or studied him carefully assume to be the essence of his vision. Jeffers, it is assumed, his ability to love the sea and the cliffs of Big Sur notwithstanding, built a tower, turned his back on humanity, and waited for the end of times. However, it's not the case that Jeffers was unconcerned or removed or unsympathetic. The sentence prior to the one quoted



above illustrates this point: "I would give my right hand of course to prevent the agony." Such a position is echoed in many places in Jeffers's work. It is my position that this is the language of a particular kind of political engagement that was strong in American culture but has been lost. Jeffers embraced the language of the day in that sentence: the language of neutrality.

It is important to remember the political realities of the times Jeffers wrote in. At first, it is easy to believe the misanthropic labels that Jeffers has been saddled with over the

years. As stated previously, his opposition to World War II seems odd to late 20th century and early 21st century readers. Critics like Buell quickly label Jeffers as ahistorical and unconcerned with humans and human history as a result. A casual look at the titles of Jeffers's poems easily documents that there has probably not been a more politically focused poet. And with a more careful look, one finds Jeffers squarely within a vigorous public debate taking place in the street as well as the legislative houses of the United States. For instance, Jeffers belonged to the largest anti-war movement in U.S. history. "The America First Committee boasted 800,000 members. Its members ranged from patricians to populists, from Main Street Republicans to prairie socialists. John F. Kennedy was a donor; his future brother-in-law Sargent Shriver was a founder, as were Gerald Ford, Potter Stewart, and Kingman Brewster. Many of the finest writers in America sympathized with (or joined) 'America First'—Sinclair Lewis, Edmund Wilson, *Robinson Jeffers*, e.e. cummings ... The anti-war movement of 1940-41 was essentially libertarian: in favor of peace and civil liberties, opposed to conscription" (http://www.amconmag.com/2004_09_27/review.html). Bill Kaufman, in *America First*, outlines the extent of this movement and especially the involvement of writers like Jeffers. Kauffman is amazed that

the anti-war movements of “1960s and 1990s pay no homage to America First, which was broader, more inclusive, and far more populist than the admirable but often one-note opposition to Vietnam, Central American, and Gulf wars” (Kauffman 21).

Jeffers was opposed to war in general, but he had specific arguments against World War I as well as the Spanish Civil War as noted above. The country, too, had decided that no involvement in foreign disputes and intrigue was the best policy. As usual (and as Jeffers puts forth in “Let Them Play”), this realization came at the end of a brutal war, World War I. “Polls taken in the late fall of 1941 found that the vast majority of Americans—as much as 80 percent—were against our entering the European war as combatants, even though there was substantial support for ... aid short of war” (Kauffman 21-22). The demand for an official legislative position came from the fact that many Americans still believed that entry into World War I was a mistake and that the level of corruption relative to the war was intolerable. The Neutrality Act of 1935 (altogether there were four neutrality acts in the late 30s) responded specifically to these issues. After the initial legislation passed, additional legislation was passed forbidding loans and other activity that would give anyone an incentive to profit from war (<http://www.answers.com/topic/neutrality-act>).

Additional amendments were made to keep the U.S. out of civil wars, specifically such as the one in Spain. Echoing Jeffers’s sentiment regarding taking sides, these Neutrality Acts considered both sides of the conflict as “belligerents”: “I would not give a flick of my little finger to help either side win,” Jeffers stated. More partisan and aggressive legislation, such as various Alien and Sedition acts and the more recent Patriot Act, re-emphasize an “us and them” polarizing mindset. Taking sides, according to Jeffers, solves nothing (certainly true in the long run), creates unimaginable suffering, enriches the few, and causes more wars in the future. Jeffers even imagines a kind of metaphysical protest (oddly foreshadowing demonstration in the 60s) in *The Double Axe* as the dead young soldiers march on Washington:

Think of the
Stinking armies of semi-skeletons marching on Washington. (C:3, 217)

In another poem in *The Double Axe* collection, Jeffers uses this same theme:

The old gentlemen shout for war, while youth,
 Amazed, unwilling, submissive, watches them ...
 for a coming time it means mischief. The boys have memories. (C:3, 108)

Jeffers does not support this vision of dialectical opposition; he merely reminds us that this is what we should expect in binary systemization. Entrance into such wars sows the seeds of empire and a predictable reaction from thoughtful citizens. The resemblance to our current predicament is irresistible.

Jeffers's poetry exhibits strong support for the popular and widely held position of neutrality. As shown already in his letter about the Spanish Civil War, Jeffers displays a hatred and contempt for binary rhetoric and thinking. He was convinced that taking sides was more emotional, self-serving, and primitive than it was a solution of any kind. In "Fantasy," Jeffers imagines binary forces of us and them being dissolved:

On that great day the boys will hang
 Hitler and Roosevelt in one tree,
 Painlessly in effigy ...
 While the happy children cheer (C:3, 109)

By understanding that Jeffers was attempting to critique the use of binary thinking, this allows one to see this poem (censored by Random House) in a different light. War, violence, and murderous ruination of cities are all unfortunate and he rails against these. He is conscious of doing so. He says he will have to "pile on the horrors" in his poetry but he also assumes, given the power of ideological seduction, he "will not convince you" (C:3, 114).

In "Pearl Harbor," Jeffers objected to World War II suggesting that, as opposed to the popular spirit of neutrality which had gained wide favor in previous decades, this war is one that a few connivers "have carefully for years provoked" (C:3, 115). In "Historical Choice," he laments that we were not "Strong enough to be neutral" (C:3, 122) but insisted on involvement and engagement: "we chose / To make alliance and feed war" (C:3, 122). Towards the end of the war, Jeffers writes, in "The Neutrals," that it is time to "commend the neutrals" (C:3, 136). He admires the neutral countries for being "honest enough / Not to be scared or bought" (C:3, 136).

How similar all of this is to current events with Iraq. Regarding Iraq, half of America wanted to remain calm and neutral as disarmament was pursued. The public was reluctant, and our European allies even more so,

to be any more involved; there was not an interest in war. As Bill Kauffman puts it regarding World War II: "Then came that December day in Hawaii (whose annexation the populists and isolationists of the 1890s had bitterly opposed; how the fates play their little jokes)" (Kauffman 22). Today, the press is filled with stories about connivers and provocateurs who prodded us into this current conflict and who profited (Halliburton, for example). Lies about Weapons of Mass Destruction, about nuclear programs, about connections with 9/11, all are reported (albeit sheepishly), but the die is cast. An event like Pearl Harbor (in our case, 9/11) forced the issue, shaped the debate and the general response and tolerance of the "people."

Jeffers tried desperately to redirect humans away from their self-serving obsessions; therefore, in "Sign Post," he tells us to "Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity" (C:2, 418). In "Carmel Point," Jeffers writes: "We must uncenter our minds from ourselves" (C:3, 399). This is his advice for general humanity, but also Jeffers is giving counsel to himself. He is attempting to find a way to deal with the suffering, the cruelty, the warfare, and the stupidity of it all. For the rest of us, he hopes that his view of Inhumanism will help us live differently and create a different world. In the published version of the "Preface" to *The Double Axe*, he finds it important for this discussion to describe the benefit of Inhumanism as providing a "reasonable detachment" but also that it "neutralizes fanaticism" (my emphasis). A reasoned neutrality is hard won in American culture as well as in the life of an individual. It requires a determined kind of meditation provided by Jeffers in his poetry. In the original version of the "Preface" to *The Double Axe*, Jeffers makes the options clear:

But we have all this excess energy; what should we do with it? We could take a walk, for instance, and admire the landscape: that is better than killing one's brother in war or trying to be superior to one's neighbor in time of peace. We could dig our gardens ... We could, according to our abilities, give ourselves to science or art; not to impress somebody, but for love of the beauty each discloses. We could even be quiet occasionally ... (C:4, 419)

Shortly after this passage, Jeffers makes his point about sides and polarizing thinking:

To sum up the matter: 'Love one another' is a high commandment, but it polarizes the mind; love on the surface implies hate in the depth ... as the history of Christendom bitterly proves ... (C:4, 420)

The original version of the "Preface" is much harder hitting and clearer about the issue of choosing sides ("we must always be prepared to resist intrusion" [C:4, 419]) as well as alternative activities that reflect unpolarized thinking. He is not overly optimistic about our abilities to take him up on his viewpoint: "Well: do I really think that people will be content to take a walk and admire the beauty of things? Certainly not." But whoever "can minimize" these pressures in their own life should do so. "Thoreau's life was not a bad one; nor Lao-tsze's" (C:4, 419). It is important to emphasize that although he suggests that we "turn outward" as an antidote to discharging energy on each other, this position is qualified. In the original version of the "Preface" he says "Turn outward from each other, so far as need and kindness permit" (C:4, 420)! Turning outward is not turning away.

Beyond human passion and self-preserving delusional obsession, there lies a world of (neutral) beauty:

And this is bitter counsel, but required and
 Convenient; for, beyond the horror,
 When the imbecility, betrayal and disappointments become apparent,—
what will you have, but to have
Admired the beauty? (C:3, 132, "Invasion," my emphasis)

Here he clearly seems to be equating nature with neutrality. Don't get involved in the binary games of human intrigue and one-upmanship. To survive, and to see the best in the world, Jeffers expands his vision beyond human definitions and conventional understanding. But as I have been arguing, the technique includes more than seeing beauty in nature. Seeing beauty in nature is part of the solution since this can cause the cessation of the will to power. Seeing the size of the universe has a calming and perspective-changing impact. To remain neutral and balanced in the face of the tribal brutality of humans, Jeffers sometimes sees the event itself as beautiful. He lays out his political/poetic strategy in "Invasion" by telling himself to "admire the vast battle ... Give it the emotion / That you give to a landscape" ("Invasion," C:3, 132). Not to escape, but to endure and face the issue square, Jeffers looks right at the violence as he would a spiral galaxy, in a way that allows him to accept, to grow, to move beyond sides:

We shall have to perceive that battle is a burning flower or like a huge music ...
 ("Battle," C:3, 21).

In order to see both opposing forces as belligerents and to avoid taking sides, he must transform the event into a non-dualistic phenomenon. He does the same thing with nature so as to remove the temptation to indulge fear while acknowledging his own insignificance.

As Buell suggested above, such an event of removal is not easy and it is complicated. In the 30s, when the Neutrality Acts kept being passed over a period of years, the aim was to keep America out of another war such as World War I. As a result, if a foreign war was declared, no American could "sail on a belligerent ship, or sell or transport munitions to a belligerent, or make loans to a belligerent" (Bailey 830). After World War I, there was an overwhelming political desire to not get sucked into that situation again. Most Americans felt that World War I was fueled by the arms manufacturers and dealers. The legislatively enforced refusal to join sides came at some cost however. Like Jeffers demonstrated with "give my whole hand to prevent the suffering" regarding the Spanish Civil War, many Americans felt extremely conflicted about refusing involvement. It was a "painful object lesson" (Bailey 830) in the practice of neutrality. Although the U.S. managed to stay out of the war as planned, it had to sit back and watch a fragile democracy overtaken by a dictator. Surely, under these conditions,

We shall have to perceive that battle is a burning flower or like a huge music ...
("Battle," C:3, 21).

Jeffers makes this appeal in many poems in many different ways, but no poem transports to the neutral, the inhuman and defamiliarizing better than "Natural Music." In this early poem, Jeffers is listening to the sounds of nature, the sounds of neutrality, or as he called it, Inhumanism. Listening to the rivers and the ocean, Jeffers suggests that although the sounds are from different throats they sum as "one language" (C:1, 6). In the same way that Jeffers has learned to listen to nature without fear or wish fulfillment, in this poem he advises that we see the world of man as just another natural sound. At first this looks like a repugnant, aesthetic, distancing; and many readers have chosen to see it this way. But hopefully now one can more easily see that Jeffers was a) seeking a higher perspective, an oddly ethical arrangement beyond good and evil, us and them; b) that Jeffers was responding poetically to the political climate of neutrality. In "Natural Music," he was hoping to listen to the "storm of sick nations" without "desire or terror" (C:1, 6). If this were possible, then instead of getting sucked up

in the mob's need for good against evil, "us" opposed to "them," instead of the old binary trap, Jeffers hopes these "voices" could also be "found / Clean as a child's; or like some girl's breathing who dances alone / By the ocean-shore, dreaming of lovers" (C:1, 6). This is the language of neutrality. This is the act of giving into beauty and not fanaticism; he is not without knowledge, but he is without love, hate or other imperial or fascist passions of possession and destruction. This approach allows a country to not get involved, but it also helps Jeffers tolerate the pain. It is in this vein that Jeffers instructs himself and us to "Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away from humanity" (C:2, 418). The force of the line "Turn away" may disturb some readers. However, one needs to see this as a strong antidote measured properly against the degree of seduction offered by the ideology of righteous positioning ("God is on our side"). I would submit, again, that he is still "looking," that turning outward is a different kind of looking. It is not easy for us to find alternative responses because we are so hard wired to take sides, impose order, seek pleasure, comfort, and delusion. So:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;
 We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
 As the rock and ocean that we were made from. (C:3, 399)

If this can be achieved, Jeffers at least can relieve himself from the pain of the world's incessant battles; at the most, the world could be freed from the polarizing wheel of conflict and the illusions of devils and demons.

It is important to note a distinction between isolationism and neutrality. Isolationism turns away in an unconcerned and retreating fashion. Neutrality is a position that comes with full awareness of world events and is also deeply engaged in providing aid and conflict resolution. Certain countries come to mind here such as Switzerland, Sweden, Austria, Ireland, Costa Rica, and Finland. Jeffers spent considerable time in schools in Switzerland, giving him specific experience in such a country. It is certain that this experience coupled with the neutrality movement in the U.S. shaped his view of things profoundly.

One of Jeffers's most interesting poems on the subject of landscape and warfare was one of his last poems: "Carmel." In this poem, he opens with a scene in Carmel where

All the little wives have their gardens,
All the retired old gentlemen labor in them,
And the better for it. It is rather beautiful ... (C:3, 451)

After setting the scene, Jeffers then does something quite odd; he calls these people "Neolithic." He does so because they are "planting flowers, not to eat but to look at" (451). These folks "do not feel hunger now" so "they plant roses" (451). Jeffers has always been critical of Americans who are losing their edge, their desire for freedom. Because staying awake is a full time job and crucial so as to avoid seduction, Jeffers didn't think much of the mob that was easily put to sleep by modern civilization's many opiates. This poem is important because it draws a distinction between two different kinds of art, two different kinds of nature, two ways of seeing, and two different outcomes for a culture that chooses one path as opposed to another.

Jeffers draws a distinction between Neolithic people and pagan people for a reason in this poem. Neolithic people are agrarians, and this invokes skygod systems of worship. As Max Oelschlaeger documents in *The Idea of Wilderness*, it was this change in culture which set in motion a whole new notion of humanity's relation to nature: a subordinate role for nature. By setting up a permanent living space and refusing to follow seasons, and by planting seeds to "force" food from the ground as opposed to foraging, Oelschlaeger argues that this moment represents a profound refusal to acknowledge humanity's relation with the rhythms of the earth. Since the earth is no longer thought of as master or Mother, humanity looked to the sky to bring the spring, the rains, and the return of the growing season. This can be thought of as a transition from the body to the head, from feeling a connection to the Earth to the emergence of ideology, instrumentalist reason, and a determined, destructive wish fulfillment. By planting seeds and tilling the soil, agrarian culture penetrated Mother Earth as well as demanded that food emerge from her. The earth became an object, something to contemplate, gaze at, control. Note that the possibility for landscape art, for an art that gazes at the land, is now present. So what is the connection between warfare, Neolithic culture, and landscape? First of all, the consequences of agrarian culture are 1) staking out land ownership and 2) the production of offspring (leading to Armies and overpopulation) to protect and guard the land: modernism. For these reasons, Jeffers establishes a connection between Neolithic consciousnesses and a landscape art that makes a mockery of nature by creating ornamental representations to gaze at: they

plant flowers not to eat “but to look at.” Juxtaposed to this view of nature, a nature subordinate to humanity, are the winter storms that, “every winter” wash the “thousand tons of fertilizer and top-soil” brought in for the gardens “out to sea” (451). Here, nature literally washes the crap of contrivance and artifice out to sea.

The connection with empire is close in the poem. In a last iteration, the poem makes a final connection between landscape art and Neolithic consciousness. These Neolithic people who arrange nature, teaching it how to grow in a manner that suits them, also “know that Russia and America are watching each other, / For the weak moment and all those missiles fall” (451). He follows these lines and ends the poem by repeating, “It is rather beautiful.” Caught in their mutual moments of empire, the rose-loving nations are poised for the culmination of the cultural logic of empire. Jeffers sees it as beautiful. This is a different, more difficult kind of beauty than the one referenced early in the poem. The two kinds of beauty are to be juxtaposed in the reader’s mind for thought and contemplation.

And, as it turns out, there is an odd and long connection between landscape painting, which in this case is the equivalent of the rose, and imperialism. The existence of Chinese landscape counters the claim of a unique status for European perceptual habits (as claimed by Kenneth Clark; see Mitchell, 8-9); but it is important to note that this form flourished in China “at the height of Chinese Imperial power and began to decline in the 18th century as China became itself the object of English fascination and appropriation” (Mitchell 9). And further, extrapolating into the 20th century, one cannot help consider the suggestive connections between romanticism, landscape production, and the Third Reich’s interest in environmentalism.

This is not to suggest a direct, reductive, mimetic, relationship between landscape and empire. Mitchell takes great pains to layout the complications with his argument: “Landscape ... does not ... declare its relation to imperialism in any direct way; it is not to be understood ... as a mere tool of nefarious imperial designs ...” (9-10). In fact, Mitchell asserts that some manifestations of landscape might be characterized as imperial and anti-colonial all at once (10). However, the close proximity between the rise of landscape art within countries whose imperialism is similarly peaking, causes, at the very least, provocative questions. And Mitchell’s assertion that nature, or in this case landscape, discloses both “utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unexpressed resistance” (10) is extremely useful. I contend

that both of these features exhibit themselves in Jeffers and that this is just another way to get at the complications in his representations which I have tried to unveil here.

Jeffers links a subordinated, ornamental view of nature, a landscape mode of art, with imperialism. As a result, he also asks us to consider another kind of beauty, a more sophisticated and hard beauty. His beauty is not of the well-trained rose or the quaint, picturesque couple laboring in a garden; this is conventional, comforting and human biased beauty. This human biased world spawns binaries and polarizing camps. Another more difficult kind of beauty is a larger picture, an inhuman view. This perspective can see beauty in an inhuman nature as well as the beauty in the domestic patterns of human life. In nature, Jeffers sees the stormy ocean not the rose; and he sees the star swirl not the romantic moon shimmer on the water. Similarly with humanity, Jeffers sees that the beauty of modern

Man is not in the persons but in the
Disastrous rhythm, they heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the
Dream-led masses down the dark mountain. (C:2, 515)

Recall also that Lao Tzu stated that

Heaven and earth are inhumane;
they view the myriad creatures as straw dogs.
The sage is inhumane
he views the common people as straw dogs. (63)

In addition to this inhumanist position, Jeffers would add that "it's rather beautiful." This larger view exposes the narrowness, selfishness, and self-serving destructiveness inherent in a less encompassing viewpoint. Only a proper view of nature, a Paleolithic view, which puts humanity within nature, not as an observer of nature, could possibly keep America out of a binary Cold War trap. It is the only way to "neutralize fanaticism," as Jeffers writes in the "Preface" to *The Double Axe*.

In sum, Jeffers took strong lessons from an un-romanticized but beautiful and powerful nature. He saw in nature a reflection of what he hoped America could adopt in its world affairs: an informed but determined and wise, neutrality. It is heartening to note that a book like Kauffman's *America First* has recently been published, and the connection between neutrality,

Jeffers, and his sense of nature is recognized. This suggests there is hope for a re-understanding of Jeffers's views as well as an understanding of the role of provocateurs in American foreign policy.

In this paper I have argued that Jeffers's position on violence in human history and the vacuous, stunning, empty beauty in nature has been misunderstood. More specifically, in the arena of politics, I proposed that Jeffers has been unfairly treated because of this misunderstanding. Instead of seeing Jeffers as someone who was contemptuous of the concept of human dignity; as someone who got too much distance on or enjoyment from human suffering and misery; as someone who developed a philosophy of Inhumanism that validated the impression that he was a misanthropic pessimist, I argued here that he was so sensitive to the arrogance and violence of humankind that negotiating with these forces became one of the most central tensions in his poetry. More importantly however, I assert that his view of Inhumanism is part of a personal philosophy of stoicism as well as a practice meant to embrace a position of political neutrality. Directing us to the star swirls that gleam through infinite space is equal to the sentiment that allows the belligerents to pursue their futile path of conflict. "Let them play," is his counsel to himself in "The Bloody Sire." "Yours is not theirs," he directs himself in "Be Angry at the Sun." When all is said and done, the Christians and the Communists will both be empty-handed, the warring belligerents will have nothing. What does Jeffers seek for himself in the bargain?:

... what will you have, but to have
 Admired the beauty?
 (C:3, 132 "Invasion")

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