

The Prophet as Confessionalist: The Place of the Personal in the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers

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Like the Modernist poets of his generation, Robinson Jeffers sought to discover an original style in which to write verse. Though he aligned himself with his Romantic predecessors, he rejected what appeared to him to be the solipsism central to the paradox of Romanticism—the desire to escape one’s isolated human consciousness and meld with the world’s divinity while at the same time writing poetry that extols one’s individual selfhood and one’s emotions. Such a Romanticism placed the experience of individual human consciousness at the core of one’s art, a position which Jeffers in both his prose and his poetry claimed to oppose. The critic Al Gelpi writes: “For Jeffers . . . original sin consisted in a fall into ego consciousness, which sets mind against nature and individuals against one another” (440). In a 1929 letter Jeffers made his position clear: “It seems to me wasteful that almost the whole of human energy is expended inward, on itself, in loving, hating, governing, cajoling . . . It is like a new born babe, conscious almost exclusively of its own processes . . . As the child grows up its attention must be drawn from itself to the more important world outside it” (*SL* 159).

As Jeffers’s poetry matured, so did his theory of poetic practice, which evolved into the much-discussed philosophical attitude he called “Inhumanism”: “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence” (*CP* 4:428). Though Jeffers wrote many poems that do live up to his inhumanist credo, it seems to me that his most interesting lyric and narrative works are also deeply personal. That he was moved to write poems rooted in autobiographical experience, poems that failed to transcend the author’s self-consciousness, was a problem that impelled Jeffers to do much poetic rationalizing. In section II of “Apology for Bad Dreams,” an early *ars poetica* that first appeared in the 1927 *A Miscellany of American Poetry*, Jeffers’s authorial speaker warns:

This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places: and like the passionate spirit of humanity
Pain for its bread: God’s, many victims’, the painful deaths, the horrible transfigurations: I said in my
heart,

“Better invent than suffer: imagine victims
 Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you
 Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place.” And I said,
 “Burn sacrifices once a year to magic
 Horror away from the house, this little house here
 You have built over the ocean with your own hands
 Beside the standing boulders: for what are we,
 The beast that walks upright, with speaking lips
 And little hair, to think we should always be fed,
 Sheltered, intact, and self-controlled? We sooner more liable
 Than the other animals. Pain and terror, the insanities of desire; not accidents but essential,
 And crowd up from the core”: I imagined victims for those wolves, I made them phantoms to follow,
 They have hunted the phantoms and missed the house. (*CP* 1:209–10)

In this passage Jeffers seems to suggest that by “imagining victims” he would placate the fates, immunizing himself and his household from the tragedies—the violent emotions—which, given his personal history, might threaten to erupt and once more destabilize his life. How prophetic such lines seem, considering the nearly tragic events that occurred in Taos in the summer of 1938.

The poem conflates literary and divine creation as it moves to distance itself from the merely autobiographical through the ritual devices within its dramatic monologue. The poem is told by an authorial speaker who in the poem’s first section observes a woman, with the help of her son, cruelly whipping a horse—one of Jeffers’s imaged victims?—while the animal is tied to a tree by its tongue with a rusty chain. The concluding lines of this section suggest that this woman is the authorial speaker’s invention: “What said the prophet? ‘I create good: and I create evil: I am the Lord’” (*CP* 1:209). According to Robert Brophy, these lines appropriate Isaiah 45:7 (“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.”) In *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in his Narrative Poems*, Brophy argues that the biblical language is “used in the tone . . . of the reverent believer (in Jeffers’ creed) who sees that God has made a sacrificial universe where ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are to be understood in relation to an endless cycle from suffering to death to rebirth and then to suffering again. Both are part of beauty, are necessary to it” (259). Parallel to this exterior universe is the poet’s interior one, where through representing the ritual of suffering the poet/Creator strives to gain an epiphanic perspective whereby the poet can achieve his own peace. The representation of suffering that induces in the poet’s consciousness the pain suffered by his “victims” constitutes for the poet the sympathetic magic of ritual sacrifice.

The implication is that the poet’s self-tormenting act of literary creation produces in the poet an enlarged consciousness of God’s own self-tormented, continuous creation and destruction of the universe. Jeffers certainly found

material in the exterior world of the Big Sur coast that he could transform into the ritual figures needed to populate the interior world of his poems. He also introduced his own presence into many poems as an authorial narrator who in effect becomes one of the poem's characters. Jeffers often drew upon his own personal experience for his poetry. Una Jeffers testifies, in a 1932 letter to Lawrence Clark Powell, that the woman in Jeffers's poem was indeed real "and she did just that" [tortured the horse] (*SL* 199). To lend the text the necessary ritualized authority, the authorial speaker in this second section addresses himself as "you" as well as, seemingly, addresses the reader. The tone is that of a warning. "Better invent than suffer: imagine victims / Lest your own flesh be chosen the agonist, or you / Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place" (*CP* 1:209). Here Jeffers's strategy is to bifurcate the voice of the authorial speaker, splitting it into first and second person—subject and object—in effect splitting apart the authorial ego to speak the poem's crucial lines.

In the poem's third section, Jeffers encloses the authorial speaker within the realms of both history and the natural world—and at a further remove from the autobiographical self—by invoking the coast's Native American inhabitants, "All the soil is thick with shells, the tide-rock feasts of a dead people" (*CP* 1:210). This version of the self, as Tim Hunt suggests, "is not a personality . . . but a self that struggles to assume the role of a voice in nature that would, by virtue of becoming part of nature, speak with an authority prior to and beyond ego" (98). Thus, Jeffers argues "to forget evils calls down / Sudden reminders from the cloud: remembered deaths be our redeemers; / Imagined victims our salvation" (*CP* 1:210). The epigrammatic language and collective voice in these lines recalls Old Testament prophets.

By the fourth and final section, the poem's authorial speaker is reframed in the third person in a further attempt to repress the autobiographical self:

He brays humanity in a mortar to bring the savor
From the bruised root: a man having bad dreams, who invents victims, is only the ape of that God.
He washes it out with tears and many waters, calcines it with fire in the red crucible,
Deforms it, makes it horrible to itself: the spirit flies out and stands naked, he sees the spirit,
He takes it in the naked ecstasy; it breaks in his hand, the atom is broken, the power that massed it
Cries to the power that moves the stars, "I have come home to myself, behold me.
I bruised myself in the flint mortar and burnt me
In the red shell, I tortured myself, I flew forth,
Stood naked of myself and broke me in fragments,
And here am I moving the stars that are me." (*CP* 1:210–11)

The poem here continues the prophetic arc begun in section two. Brophy offers this reading of the poem:

The poet's ritual insight seems to be that by his rehearsing in the creative fantasy what happens in the world of reality—by imagining, instead of directly suffering, pain and terror and insane desires, he is able to imitate God, thus participating in reality in a unique but valid way. . . . Thus the internal process of the poet's imagined tragedy is calculated to mirror the external and universal sacrifice (the world we know) which to God is internal self-torment. Imaginary sacrifice then could effect a certain immunity, freeing the artist from the necessity of being drawn into external pain, horror, violence, and the rest. (278)

The authorial speaker as poet/Creator, represented as “a man having bad dreams, who invents victims,” also clearly operates as a *Doppelgänger* for the poet's Nietzschean self-construct. Jeffers was strongly influenced, as we know, by his readings of Nietzsche. The deific figure who “brays humanity in a mortar” is not only rehearsing a “creative fantasy” but enacting Jeffers's own poetic project for the reevaluation of values and the will to power: “I flew forth / Stood naked of myself and broke me in fragments, / And here I am moving the stars that are me.” Though not an overtly personal poem like those Jeffers wrote in later life, “Apology for Bad Dreams” contains autobiographical elements that Jeffers's poetic stratagems do not fully mask.

One can read in several poems that Jeffers wrote before 1920 the impulse toward the confessional. Two of the most notable, “Fauna” and “Mal Paso Bridge,” included in the 1925 edition of *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*, appear to tell of a love affair the poet may have had with a beautiful “dark woman” when he returned alone to Carmel to find a house in the winter of 1917 while Una was still recovering in Pasadena from the birth their twin sons. James Karman in his biography *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California* corroborates the suggestion that Jeffers behaved recklessly during this period. Karman writes: “That he was predisposed toward this behavior is suggested by a line in one of his poems. Referring to his early years of manhood in ‘The Truce and the Peace,’ he admits to ‘wasting on women's bodies wealth of love. . . .’ In Carmel, it is likely that Jeffers met several women who reinforced his need to live without constraints” (80–81). Though the fact of Jeffers's alleged affair is nearly impossible to verify, William Everson speculates “at the approach of the war [World War I] Jeffers had thrown himself into an extramarital love affair, and in the Mal Paso poem had spelled it out with naked explicitness” (170). Certainly “Mal Paso Bridge” contains lines that would seem ostensibly confessional. In section one, the poem's speaker reports seeing a dark-eyed woman and her three-year-old child standing under the bridge at Mal Paso Creek during a storm. The speaker, after disclosing that he found her body and face beautiful, says:

I trembled when she turned her eyes upon me.
Turbulent loveliness did you know then,
Or only a fortnight later the full storm
Of male desire? You are the shallow creek-mouth
The surf of all my seas converged upon. (CP 4:252)

In section two, the speaker alludes to the turbulence not only in his own life but in the lives of draft-age men whose lives are caught up in the uncertainty of war:

This is the year when young men cannot guess
From night to night what bed they'll sleep in.
But I in yours dark beauty of new desire,
Yours under Santa Lucian hills
Near the rough water; but beyond that nor moon
Nor guess candles the remnant nights.
Therefore I swore to drink wine while I could,
Love where I pleased, and feed my eyes
With Santa Lucian sea-beauty, and moreover
To shear the rhyme-tassels from verse. (CP 4:253)

Here, the speaker conflates the exuberance of an illicit sexual liaison with artistic freedom. In Jeffers's own life this was a turbulent time. As a poet he was trying to break with the artificial and stilted verse he had been writing and to find an original voice. Also he was getting over the deaths of his father and his first child Maeve who died at birth, and trying to deal with the disturbing passions that the World War stirred up in him. He was also a new father to twins. As William Everson suggests, in "Mal Paso Bridge" both Eros and Thanatos—the life and death instincts—were surging through Jeffers's psyche. Everson writes:

In the "Mal Paso Bridge" affair he had touched something ruthless in himself never before known, and he was shocked into self-understanding, because it was his reaction to the approach of death. For perhaps the first time he experienced the inflexible sensation that what one finds oneself doing is wrong . . . but is nevertheless, as a deed, unmistakably actual—not right, but incontrovertibly *real*, a truth that is more primal than morality and hence assumes precedence over it, something which cannot be touched without some awful contradiction of the guts, the archetypal force that was to emerge as the source of Jeffers' power. . . . in "Mal Paso Bridge" the poet at last got the message. The struggle between Eros and Thanatos had advanced to an actuality that begins to directly inform the verse (176).

In the seventh and penultimate section of “Mal Paso Bridge” one reads the speaker’s regret for his reckless impulsiveness, “the awful contradiction of the guts,” that archetype which the speaker’s promiscuity seemed to have invoked:

Dark pearl, rose of the hills, star of the sea,
Dark star, angel of hell, I am mad for your body,
I am sick for the smell of your hair, I have burning for heart
And the sun for my hatred, and you. (CP 4:255)

In his more mature work—except after Una’s death—Jeffers rarely allows such conflicted personal material to enter the poetry. However in 1937, with the impending conflagration of the Second World War dominating the news from Europe, the tension between Eros and Thanatos once again began building strongly in Jeffers. Several poems in the book he published that year, *Such Counsels You Gave to Me*, speak of his premonitions about war. He writes of “These grand and fatal movements toward death” (CP 2:515) in “Rearmament.” In “Hellenistics” he writes of the coming new age of barbarism. “The age darkens, Europe mixes her cups of death, all the little Caesars fidget on their thrones, / The old wound opens its clotted mouth to ask for new wounds” (CP 2:527). In 1937 Jeffers turned fifty. Random House asked him to put together a volume of *Selected Poems*. And he was having premonitions of death. In April 1938, Jeffers was to take a plane trip with his brother Hamilton to Death Valley and had a dream that he would die on the trip. According to James Karman, “No doubt the destination, Death Valley, and the date, Easter, helped loosen subconscious fears” (124). Karman quotes the letter Jeffers left on his desk for Una: “On account of a dream I had in London—for no one knows what previsions the human mind is capable of—and a ‘hunch’ I have here, it seems possible that we may crash on the way to Death Valley in spite of Hamilton’s flying experience” (SL 265).

Jeffers was also having a prevision of another sort. His old wound was opening, the divided self he had so thoroughly disciplined by twenty years of daily writing poetry and laboring to construct Tor House and Hawk Tower was resurfacing. The awful contradiction of Eros and Thanatos was again working its way through him. Jeffers had become restless and despairing. He was having trouble writing, and tourists in Carmel were almost daily impinging on his privacy. Moreover, his psyche seemed to be experiencing the old feelings of ambivalence and rebellion toward the maternal figure that for him Una had become. Those contradictory feelings found their way into the long narrative poem Jeffers was writing, “Such Counsels You Gave to Me.” In the poem’s penultimate section, Jeffers’s protagonist, Howard Howren, chooses to commit suicide after poisoning his brutal father with his mother’s complicity. But before he acts, he asks his mother to show him her breasts, a strange final gesture that he says will

allow him to find his life's meaning. She complies and then asks "Do you want . . . all, dearest? Nothing's to hide nor forbidden / Among the dead.' He whispered, 'It's your beauty . . .'" (CP 2:598–99). After she offers herself to him, he calls her a whore and refuses the consummation he apparently has sought his whole life.

Though not strictly confessional, the Howard character's narrative arc represents, I would argue, the surfacing of Jeffers's deeply buried erotic longing for the maternal archetype, which he seems to have transferred to Una. In the poem's last section, Howard speaks with his *Doppelgänger*, "the simulacrum of himself / That stands watching the house" (CP 2:602). Howard's hallucinatory double replies:

. . . "My twenty years
Of watching are at last ending. Why did you not
Complete your cycle? You returned to the breasts of infancy,
Not to the womb of birth." Howard said "I loved her.
I hate all women." It said "You are typical: your fever
And your failure from the one fountain. You wanted discovery
And then refused it, desired and yet not-desired, loved and yet hated,
The tension of the divided mind drove you on
And brought you down . . ." (CP 2:602)

The text here constructs for Jeffers a kind of shadow autobiography. ("Rather invent victims lest your own flesh become the agonist.") After twenty years of writing, Jeffers was afraid he could not complete the cycle; that his own divided mind had brought him down. He also felt he was facing once again the end of Western civilization—as he prophesized—as word of further war preparations in Europe filled the newscasts.

Such was Jeffers's mood in 1938 as he prepared for the family's summer sojourn to Taos. Once again, the Jefferses were to be hosted by Mabel Dodge Luhan, who had hoped Jeffers would replace D. H. Lawrence and produce at her urging a literary monument to Taos. But in the summer of 1938 Jeffers felt empty and exhausted. He was not only unable to write but felt sickened by his work, thinking it had all been a failure. It was the start of the next profound crisis in his life. Mabel Dodge thought she had the cure to what ailed him. To renew Jeffers's energy and inspire him, she decided to facilitate a passionate friendship between Jeffers and an attractive young woman named Hildegarde, a refugee from her marriage to the editor of a university press back east, and another of Mabel Dodge's houseguests. Mabel Dodge, known to be as much a meddler as literary patron, thought that what would revive Jeffers was a new muse. Somehow, she understood instinctively the awful contradiction in him,

and had helped set loose the same reckless erotic energy that Jeffers had to suppress (presumably with Una's help) twenty years earlier.

Una became unhinged when she discovered her husband's infidelity. Jealous by nature, she reacted as much to her perceived loss of her position as Jeffers's muse as she did to her husband's emotional betrayal. Despairing that she could no longer inspire Jeffers's poetry, she climbed into the now-famous bathtub at Mabel Dodge's house and shot herself in the left breast with his .32. The bullet miraculously deflected off her ribcage and exited through her back. Anyone familiar with Jeffers certainly by now knows the story. She lived. Jeffers wrote a short, strangely chastising letter to Una shortly after the incident, which opens with the complaint "Una, *I can't write*" (SL 269). In the letter he reminds Una that writing has become one of the conditions of his life and that he expected to resume writing again, it was just a matter of time. He connected his erratic behavior to his inability to write poems, suggesting that Una was insensitive to the pain the crisis in his writing life had caused him:

I believe I'll have a new birth in course of time—not willing yet to grow old at fifty like Wordsworth, and survive myself—something will happen—and *life through this hell come home to me*—something will change, something will happen.

It is a little like my extravagances of 1917 to '19, except that I was uncritical then, and able to keep myself fairly quiet by not writing a lot of foolishness. (Now I know too much.) After that we began to make Tor House—and *that was worthwhile*,—quite aside from the accidental new birth of my own mind.

Something like that will happen again. You were insensitive in Taos.—You thought too much about yourself,—as I am doing now. Either person of a pair of lovers ought to think of the other—.

(Do you understand?—Our love is something different from the love of people that live in apartments. You might have thought about our own peace here—.) (SL 269)

Though there is recent evidence to suggest that this letter in the Ridgeway edition may have been written in 1939, not '38, the reference still indicate Jeffers's narcissistic concern with the health of his own poetic powers as opposed to his sympathy for Una's distress.

When the Jefferses returned home, Karman tells us in his biography, Una's physical wound healed quickly, but she needed several months to recover psychologically:

She cried frequently and withdrew into herself. But with Robinson's help, she soon recovered her emotional and physical strength. The comforting rhythm

of life at Tor House restored her and signs of trauma quickly disappeared. “As for my wound,” she says in a letter written to a friend a few months later, “it’s all right. It makes a thrilling scar and gives me no trouble but wasn’t that an awkward thing to happen” (*RJN* 51). (Karman 125–126)

Despite the momentousness of these events in their lives, Jeffers never wrote a poem directly referring to Una’s attempted suicide or to the events in Taos that precipitated it. Indeed, he wrote few poems that overtly bore any scars he may have carried with him from Taos. However, he did include two poems addressed to Una in his 1941 collection *Be Angry at the Sun*, “My Dear Love” and “For Una,” which leave little doubt as to their autobiographical subject.

“My Dear Love,” an uncharacteristic formally rhyming poem, represents a dialogue between a female beloved and an autobiographically constructed speaker—her cosmologically minded lover/husband. Read as a confessional poem, it charts the condition of the Jefferses’ marriage. The dialogical positions of the two figures are established quickly in the first stanza:

“Look up my dear at the dark
Constellations above.”
“Dark stars under green sky.
I lie on my back and harken
To the music of the stars,
My dear love.” (*CP* 3:27)

The woman’s lines set up her husband/lover’s replies by either making a seemingly naive statement or by posing a naively ironic question in the first two lines of each of the poem’s five six-line stanzas: “You and I, my dear love, / Shall never die, never die” in stanza two. “Why do you never lie / On my breast, my dear love?” in stanza three. “Is that the law of this land, / Each one of us on his own?” in stanza four. “What, a law in this land / That breast can never meet breast?” (*CP* 3:27–28).

The woman’s lines and the lover/husband’s replies, though not openly confessional, can be read as an oblique reference to the Jefferses’ marital crisis. In the second stanza, after the woman asserts that the couple shall never die, the lover/husband curiously answers:

“Not again my dear love.
Lie on your back and hark
The music of moon and stars,
My dear love.” (*CP* 3:27)

His answer can be read to imply two things. First, that the couple has already died, though the woman is unaware of it. And second, that their relationship, though troubled, will not die, although it has cooled. The third stanza begins with the cunningly enjambed lines “Why do you never lie / On my breast, my dear love?” (CP 3:27). The question of lying may seem ironically self-serving for the Jeffers persona. In the Foreword to his 1938 *Selected Poetry* referring to Nietzsche’s remark that “the poets lie too much,” Jeffers vowed to his readers that he would never lie in his poems (CP 4:391–92). But the line could also be read ironically, the woman knowing that the lover/husband has lied to her. Also, the lines constitute a sexual reference, the woman asking why the couple has ceased being intimate. The lover/husband’s response is once again figurative and furtive:

“Oh, that was another sky.
Here, each of us on his own,
Each on his own back-bone,
My dear love.” (CP 3:27)

The stanza foregrounds the separateness of the couple “each of us on our own.”

In the fourth stanza, the woman’s question, “Is that the law of this land, / Each one of us on his own?” (CP 3:27), seems sarcastic and carries with it a tone of regret. The husband/lover’s reply identifies that the space the couple now occupies is underground, but in an underground of Celtic mythology:

“Oh yes, we are underground
With the elves and fairies: lonely
Is the word in this country,
My dear love.” (CP 3:27)

Here the reader may be tempted to locate the couple in a dream world of Celtic myth, occupying the same space as the magical figures of the unconscious. Literally, as the final stanza insists, the couple find themselves in the shadow world of the dead. It is a world where intimacy is impossible, a hell of separateness. That is the space, I would argue, where Jeffers found himself in the first months after returning to Carmel from Taos. In the final stanza, Jeffers’s husband/lover patronizingly responds to the woman’s ironic question:

“What, a law in this land
That breast can never meet breast?”
“After while you will understand.
The mole is our moon, and worms

Are the stars we observe,
My dear love.” (CP 3:28)

In the text, the husband/lover asserts that the space the couple occupies is the grave.

Just as during the time of the First World War, Jeffers found himself experiencing a crisis of the imagination. He was caught again in the grip of the awful contradiction between Thanatos and Eros. The archetypal tensions, which seized Jeffers in 1917 and which seemed then to enlarge his poetry, in 1938 only caused his imagination to seize up. The horror had not been kept away from the house. He could not imagine victims; his own flesh had become the agonist. He could not write. And Una had acted out the drama that Jeffers certainly must have believed represented another sign of humanity’s cyclical downward plunge into chaos, war, and darkness—a descent which his poems had predicted. Thanatos energy was everywhere gathering itself around him—in his marriage and in the world.

It would appear that the gloom Jeffers felt over the deteriorating political and military situation in Europe was matched by the gloom he seems to have felt about his marriage and the difficulty he was having writing. Though “My Dear Love” is uncharacteristic of the poems Jeffers published during the war years, he included one other strikingly personal poem, “For Una,” in his 1941 collection *Be Angry at the Sun*. In the poem’s first section, the autobiographical speaker, in ballad meter, remembers building Hawk Tower for Una and anticipates outliving her:

I built her a tower when I was young—
Sometime she will die—
I built it with my hands, I hung
Stones in the sky.

Old but still strong I climb the stone—
Sometime she will die—
Climb the steep rough steps alone,
And weep in the sky.

Never weep, never weep. (CP 3:33)

Curiously, the second line in both the first and second stanzas is “Sometime she will die.” Though Jeffers had expected Una would outlive him, the poem foresees Una’s death and Jeffers’s bereavement. Had Jeffers put the events of Taos behind him? I would argue that even if he had, the possibility of Una dying lin-

gered in his imagination. Jeffers's own sense of both his and his wife's mortality, for whatever reason, certainly seemed to have sharpened after 1938.

It would be reductive to account for Jeffers's morbidity by suggesting he was simply responding to the Thanatos energy released into the world by the world's slide into war. It would be similarly reductive to blame the slowdown in his literary production on the fact that he had reached the age of fifty, had subsequently published his *Selected Poetry*, and felt that the wellsprings of his poetry had gone dry. If one reads "For Una" as a conventionally constructed confessional poem, one can see in the text that the relationship between the speaker's personal distress and his prophetic vision is contingent. Jeffers's autobiographical speaker connects his apprehension (in both senses of the word) of Una's death with his struggle to write the next long poem and his dejection over the war, embodied in the London Blitz. In the poem's second section Jeffers writes:

The heavy sky over London
Stallion-hoofed
Falls on the roofs.

These are the falling years,
They will go deep,
Never weep, never weep.

With clear eyes explore the pit.
Watch the great fall
With religious awe. (CP 3:34)

The poem, addressed to Una, directs her—and the reader—to "explore the pit." But the great fall the text refers to is not only civilization's fall. The poem here also asks to be read as reflexive, the speaker directing himself to examine the personal hell he has come to inhabit. Jeffers's prophetic persona, having forecasted, then witnessed the next stage in civilization's decline, is in the poem's third section clearly witnessing a decline within himself:

It is not Europe alone that is falling
Into blood and fire.
Decline and fall have been dancing in all men's souls
For a long while.

Sometime at the last gasp comes peace
To every soul.

Never to mine until I find out and speak
The things that I know. (CP 3:34)

Jeffers's own sense of decline, we can only presume, manifested itself in his inability to write, which left him vulnerable to Mabel Dodge Luhan's meddling and to her friend Hildegard's charms. What Jeffers did not foresee, and what in the two poems "My Dear Love" and "For Una" seems to trouble his imagination, was the effect his "decline"—and consequent behavior—had on Una.

The poem's speaker enjoins himself to "speak the things that I know," so that he might at the last gasp have some peace. But apparently he is having difficulty speaking those things. In the fourth and final section of "For Una" he refers to the trouble he is having writing the long poem "Mara," which appears at the end of *Be Angry at the Sun*. Here again, the speaker leaves little doubt to his identity as Jeffers's autobiographical persona: "To-morrow I will take up that heavy poem again / About Ferguson, deceived and jealous man / Who bawled for the truth, the truth, and failed to endure / It's first least gleam. That poem bores me . . . being in some ways / My very self but mostly my antipodes" (CP 3:34–35). Readers who were Jeffers's contemporaries would perhaps find such unabashedly confessional address disconcerting. Of the high modernist poets, only the later Williams and occasionally Hart Crane allowed their poems to be so overtly personal. There's only a little distance between Jeffers's lines "Tonight, dear, / Let's forget all that, that and the war, / And enisle ourselves a little beyond time, / You with this Irish whiskey, I with red wine / While the stars go over the sleepless ocean" (CP 3:35) and Robert Lowell's "Tamed by *Mil-town* we lie on Mother's bed; / the rising sun in war paint dyes us red . . . All night I've held your hand, / as if you had / a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad . . . / Oh my *Petite*, / clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve: / you were in your twenties, and I, / once hand on glass / and heart in mouth, / outdrank the Rahvs in the heat . . ." (*Life Studies* 87).

But the finest examples of Jeffers's confessional poetry are not these. Those works would lie ahead. Through the forties, Jeffers wrote some of his most compelling political poems and translated Greek drama for the stage, as well as further advanced the concept of Inhumanism. The awful contradiction in his imagination between Eros and Thanatos he seems to have once again pushed into a realm where it could be more manageably contained. It would take the actuality of Una's death in 1950 and Jeffers's bereavement to bring the personal again into the foreground in Jeffers's writing. We can read the great text of Jeffers's bereavement in the first 86 lines of "Hungerfield." In writing "Hungerfield," a poem that is unabashedly personal, he seems to have found a way to mourn Una while at the same time presenting a prophetic narrative, framed by a clearly autobiographical monologue, the text in which he works

through his grief to finally accept his wife's loss and reconcile himself to the cycles of life and death in the universe. But that's another essay.

Let me close by saying that the confessional poems Jeffers wrote during and after World War One, as well as the few he allowed himself to compose following the near-tragic events of 1938 in Taos, opened the way for "Hungerfield" and the later confessional lyrics of Jeffers's old age. Those poems, I would assert confidently, represent some of the most compelling personal poetry written by a male American in the anxious years of the mid-twentieth century.

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