
**“...As the Rock and Ocean
That We were Made from”:
Ecocentrism in Robinson
Jeffers’s Poetry**

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Notable poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) remains as one of the very few American Modernists to write on the concerns about ecology, fostering a personal philosophy of “inhumanism”. The speaker in most of Jeffers’s lyric poems is characteristically solitary, musing outdoors on the contrast between the calmness, longevity, and beauty of natural phenomena and human vulgarity, ugliness, and self-indulgence. That’s why he gives his philosophical stance the name of “inhumanism”, which propels us to shift our emphasis from the human to the non-human. The core of inhumanism is the utter rejection of anthropocentrism, and a goal of what might as well be called an ecocentrism: one in which Nature grabs pivotal position, not as a stage for human activities and narratives, but as itself, on its own inhuman terms.

Jeffers explicitly describes inhumanism in the “Preface” to *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948) in this way:

“a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the

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trans-human magnificence...This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist...It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy...it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty.” (Jeffers xxi)

Jeffers’s own personal philosophy is very similar to deep ecology. Deep ecology is a philosophy dealing with an environment and society with the strong belief that humanbeings must radically change their relationship with Nature. He should stop thinking about Nature’s utilitarian value to human beings. He should believe that Nature has an inherent value and identity. The phrase “deep ecology” was first used by Arne Naess (Norwegian philosopher) in 1972. Deep ecology has a slight difference with environmentalism and anthropocentrism. Environmentalism (with its “shallow ecology”) talks about various environmental issues such as population explosion. Anthropocentrism views humanity as the conqueror of Nature. On the other hand, deep ecology deals with ecocentric (ecology-centred) and biocentric (life-centred) worldviews, whereas the biosphere becomes its core focus of concern. During the early 1970s, Naess suggested that the “environmentalist movement needed to do much more than conserve and protect the environment. He held that a radical reevaluation of the understanding of human nature was needed” (Britannica n. p.).

Of late, Jeffers has secured his significant position in the ever-expanding field of eco-poetry. His rigid poems celebrate the persisting beauty of sea, sky and stone and the freedom and fierceness of wild animals. He nurtures a futuristic vision when he will be able to witness a version of the world in which human role is questioned and even de-centered. His career embraced the epoch of the two World Wars, the dawn of the atomic age, and the ecological holocaust. The humanity was threatened not only by weapons of mass destruction but by the general interference of humanity on the habitat that fostered it. American poet Robert Hass calls Jeffers an “early environmentalist”, as he was “perhaps the first American poet to grasp the devastating extent of the changes human technologies and populations were wreaking on the rest of the earth’s biological life”(“Jeffers and

American Culture”, *NEA*, p. 6). Jeffers’s poems are very much relevant to our present scenario of environmental crisis. Some other American Modernists were eager to represent Nature after having undergone the shock of modernity. But what distinguishes him from his contemporaries is a genuine empathy for his fellow beings, a compassion that includes even non-human beings and things. Jeffers wishes to protect a version of Nature by excluding certain types of people and things. It is precisely for his empathy that we discover his firm focus on the man’s cruelty, and his nation’s excessive greed for empire-building.

The term ‘ecology’ (from Greek ‘*oikos*’ meaning “house” or “dwelling”, and ‘*logos*’ meaning “science” or “study”) was first put into use by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), who was also an ardent supporter of the famous British naturalist, geologist and biologist Charles Darwin (1809-1882). Ecology refers to the inter-relationship of organisms with their environment. The ecological thought rose on the tidal wave of Darwinian evolutionary science at the turn of the century, which also served to undermine principles of organicism. Ecocritical theory probes the overall ecological crisis of our planet by way of correlation between the gestures of the human beings and the physical environment. Ecocriticism has a close association with ecology: “Ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology” (Garrard 5).

Some of Jeffers’s notable poems where we find strong ecological resonances are: “The Beauty of Things”, “Their Beauty Has More Meaning”, “The Continent’s End”, “Star-Swirls”, “Carmel Point”, “The Inhumanist”, “Rock and Hawk”, “Hooded Night”, “The Place for No Story”, “Hurt Hawks”, “November Surf”, and “The Broken Balance”. Ecocriticism is an effort for the recuperation of human organic unity with Nature in which the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity blurs. *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) is an important anthology on ecocriticism. In his ‘Introduction’ to the book, Cheryll Glotfelty says:

...ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from agender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty xix)

Jeffers wrote some of the grim and bleak poetry in the entire corpus of American literature from his isolated home Tor House in California. His sombre vision, a kind of post-*The Waste Land*, is of a cold planet that would be more habitable devoid of human beings. With no solution at hand, Jeffers's poetry predates the bleak landscape of the kind of science fiction that anticipates the scenario of the world post ecological or nuclear holocaust. Jeffers saw the mass civilisation of his time as increasingly alienated from the stout earth on which it depended on ultra-urbanisation and technological exploitation.

In "Their Beauty Has More Meaning" (1947), the narrator laments that the serene beauty he used to watch before, is no longer visible today because of the contaminated atmosphere: "Yesterday morning enormous the moon hung low on the ocean,/ Round and yellow-rose in the glow of dawn; ... Today/Black is the ocean, black and sulphur the sky" (*SP*, p. 77). The narrator ultimately concludes by saying that when all human race will be blotted out, the beauty of Nature will continue to exist: "And when the whole human race/Has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here:/ storms, moon and ocean,/Dawn and the birds. And I say this: their beauty has/more meaning/Than the whole human race and the race of birds" (*SP*, p. 77). The cosmos itself bears the testimony that all things human beings will be blotted out in the course of time and civilizations will fall down. In that situation, something else will be renewed in its stead. We should not be propelled by religion but by the earth, for Jeffers believed that the earth would endure the test of time than any other beings/things on earth. So, in this poem, we find reverberations of deep ecology.

According to deep ecology, "the self should be understood as deeply connected with and as part of Nature, not disassociated from

it” (Britannica n. p.). Deep ecologists think that we should conceive human nature as the “ecological self”, and it represents a stage on which humanbeings and Nature will act together. According to Naess, when we can realize the ecological self, it will follow the norms of environmental ethics that will put an end to the harm meted out to Nature. He gives a clarion call to take ourselves out of the cocoon of anthropocentrism. Moreover, the ecological self will inculcate a habit of “biocentric egalitarianism”, in which humanbeings, non-human beings, and inhumam objects occupy the same position.

Jeffers did not like the vanity of the human beings and their utter inability to understand their peripheral position in the whole scheme of the big universe. Robinson Jeffers’s eco-prophecy stems from his “attitude” of Inhumanism. His Inhumanism is “a reaction to the arrogance of humanism and its failure to provide human beings with god-consciousness and understanding of their marginal place in the universe” (Fleming 3). If human beings can’t bridle their violent drives, it will bring about their termination. Jeffers believed that since the earth and the cosmos existed before the human beings, only these can provide solace to the human beings to attain.

In the poem “Star-Swirls” (1963), Jeffers is much concerned about the catastrophe awaiting us: “The polar ice-caps are melting, the mountain glaciers/ Drip into rivers; all feed the ocean ;/ Tides ebb and flow, but every year a little bit higher./They will drown New York, they will drown London” (“Star-Swirls”, *CP-III*, p. 476). From these lines, we come to understand that Jeffers was undeniably perturbed by the imminent environmental crisis. It is interesting to note that Jeffers wrote it in the early 1960s. Wallace Broecker synthesized his and others’ related research in the journal *Science* in an article called “Climatic Change: Are We on the Brink of a Pronounced Global Warming?” in 1975 when for the first time the world heard the term “global warming”. So it can be said without doubt that Jeffers foresaw global warming. Jeffers apprehends that his Tor House that he built near California Coast will also be submerged. But later he keeps the hope that his Tor House will survive the repeated blowings of the sea by continuing to

exist even in the form of a fossil: "...it will become/Geological, fossil and permanent" (*CP-III*, p. 476). At the end of the poem, the poet suggests that man should "count the star-swirls" in order to realise his utter insignificance in the vast universe.

Eco-prophecy is uttered by the old man in "The Inhumanist" (1948) when he says "There is one God, and the earth is his prophet" (*CP-III*, p. 304), signifying that the earth holds the password to human happiness, survival. Jeffers expresses his view of pantheism in this poem. The prophet here does not predict the arrival of a messiah but we feel the presence of God through the lens of Nature's exaltation. Nature is not benign but majestic, crude, and callous. Nature's magnificence and munificence are found not only in the biomass but also in human consciousness that deciphers it. "Inhumanism" expresses his worldview, but eco-prophecy is his message to the reader. The earth and the cosmos will shape the future. Human beings occupy a small position in the periphery in the whole scheme of Nature. They ought to learn to derive their meanings from their eagerness to glorify/worship Nature—not merely seascape/landscape/skyscape but the mindscape of Nature.

In the short poem "Continent's End" (1925), Jeffers starts with a celebration of the Pacific Ocean, identifying the Pacific as the crucible of life, but then he penetrates within to find something "harder than life and more impartial, the eye that watched before there was an ocean" (*SP*, p. 4). Jeffers shares a bond of brotherhood with a non-human, non-living materials of the earth because they also share a fundamental nature. This fundamental nature, as explored in this poem is the common mass-energy of all living things. The phrase "you have grown bitter" makes it seem as though the ocean is vexed by human hubris: "It was long and long ago; we have grown proud since then" (*SP*, p. 4). Human *hubris* is a flaw that would continue to visit Jeffers's work throughout his career.

In the poem "The Beauty of Things" (1951), the narrator wants to feel and speak "the astonishing beauty of things—earth, stone, and water,/Beast, man and woman, sun, moon and stars—" (*SP*, p. 94).

Jeffers here sings a paean of Nature. He argues that the “sole business of poetry” is “to feel/ Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural /Beauty” (*SP*, p. 94). Here the poet thinks that the existence of human species is not permanent but rock, water, and sky are perennial. Here, the poet praises all natural things. Deep ecology emphasizes the basic interconnectedness of all life forms and upholds a symbiotic world-view rather than an anthropocentric one. It is a holistic concept that implies that humanbeings are integrated within the universe rather than a separate part of the universe.

Jeffers formulates a poetics that reflects a commitment to understand the increasing importance of a science and aesthetics of biodiversity apart from human management. Jeffers acknowledges some of the philosophical implications of scientist Charles Darwin’s work, but denies the disenchantment of the cosmos and instead takes a pantheistic outlook to the world. Jeffers’s poetics aim to revive the classical mythology: “His poetics aim to revive the way classical mythology weaves humans, animals, and theological power together” (Schuster 19). This neoclassicism is also a neo-romanticism, for Jeffers insists that Darwinian non-teleological evolution is circumscribed by an organic and holistic universe: “Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is / Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty / of the universe. Love that, not man” (“The Answer”, *CP-II*, p. 536). Trying to disburden himself of the guilty feeling of so much violence perpetrated by humans against fellow humans and other life forms, Jeffers writes practically nonchalantly that “I’d sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk” (*SP*, p. 45).

Jeffers goes as far as to state in another poem, “The Place for No Story” (1932), that any human presence among a coastal scene of rock, ocean, and animal would be a disturbance and a diminishment of Nature’s intrinsic beauty: “This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen. / No Imaginable / Human presence here could do anything / but dilute the lonely self-watchful passion” (*CP-II*, p. 157). Here Jeffers seems to go as far to take an eco-political stance. Jonathan Bate remarks that poems can feature “‘ecopoetic’ consciousness but not necessarily ‘ecopolitical’ commitment” (Bate 42).

We are self-evidently living in a period in which pessimism is a widespread response to the historical, socio-economic, and ecological circumstances in which we discover ourselves. Yet we continue to consider it as a subjective response to these circumstances rather than taking it as a general epistemological situation. When we find our circumstances stubborn, we tend to feel dissatisfied in the face of them; we feel our utter inability to take any positive step. But on the other hand, by mustering the courage to defy our problems, we can show optimism: “When we find our circumstances intractable, we tend to repine in the face of them; we feel there is nothing we can do. If, on the other hand, we believe ourselves limited not by our capacity but only our willingness to take on our problems, then we are said to be optimistic” (Tangney 67).

In “The Answer” (1935), Jeffers writes: “A severed hand/ is an ugly thing, and a man dissevered from the earth and the stars and his history...for contemplation or in fact.../Often appears atrociously ugly” (*CP-II*, p. 536). The lines bring into focus the unity of soul and self. The poem also brings up the ecological thought of oneness and interdependence in a way that seems nourished by the spiritual succour of the former and the material nutrients provided by the latter. In his poem “Carmel Point” (1925), Jeffers calls for our realignment with the earth and her creatures:

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. (*SP*, p. 102)

In the poem “Hurt Hawks” (1928), the speaker describes the sad state of the hawk in repellently frightful details, describing the “Clotted shoulder”, with “the bone too shattered for mending” (*SP*, p. 45). The poem brings to the fore the bond between the human and the non-human. The title itself is open for multiple interpretations as the word “hawks” in the title implies a plurality but we do not find multiple hawks here. This absence induces the reader to see it as a metaphor for all the creatures of Nature. Jeffers challenges humanity to relinquish its assumed dominion over non-human objects: “[the poem] rejects

human primacy and acknowledges the grander context that both the human and the nonhuman inhabit, allowing us to recognise the “transhuman magnificence”, which may also be called the sublime” (Green 14).

Both the Hawk Tower (which Jeffers built over his Tor House in California) and the coastal landscape figure glaringly in Jeffers’s poetic oeuvre, where we find a celebration of the overwhelming beauty of the hills and ravines that plunge into the Pacific Ocean. His poem “Rock and Hawk” (1934) is a perfect example of his belief in the dramatic, and often tragic, power of Nature. In this poem, the rock symbolises endurance, stability, and persistence through time: “Earthquake-proved, and signatred/By ages of storms...” (*SP*, p. 56). The hawk may signify force, speed, and flux. Both, Jeffers suggests, are essential on the way to enlightenment. Jeffers illustrates scenes from a wild Nature to exemplify the obliterating power of beauty: “Jeffers depicts scenes from a wilder nature to embody his sense of the annihilating power of beauty. Jeffers un-centres the speaker, thereby centralising the landscape, prioritising nature’s processes over the thinking and feeling self” (Brophy 139).

We find the glorification of rock also in another poem “Hooded Night” (1928). He thinks that the rocks have been there from time immemorial: “I see the heavy granite bodies of the rocks of the headland,/That were ancient here before Egypt had pyramids” (*CP-II*, p. 3). The poet thinks that before men set foot on earth, natural elements existed:

Here is the reality.

The other is a spectral episode: after the inquisitive animal’s Amusements are quiet: the dark glory. (*CP-II*, p. 3)

In “November Surf” (1930), the poet paints a rather unpleasant picture. Unfortunately, here the reader is more startled by Jeffers’s Nietzschean view of mankind. He shows through his poem that things like eggshells, pieces of clothing, the clots of dung contaminate the purity of the sea. We fail to understand Nature in its true essence,

because for centuries we knew it solely through traditional representation of it as a provider of human needs:

“At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and those hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia.” (Camus 12-3)

The earth also dreams of a fresh bath to cleanse itself of its impurities: “The earth, in her childlike prophetic sleep, / Keeps dreaming of the bath of a storm” (*CP-II*, p. 159). The earth is thinking of redemption. Jeffers witnesses that cities are almost destroyed and men are rarely seen on the streets. Only hawks are seen in plenty in the world as a source of unadulterated joy and freedom: “The cities gone down, the people fewer and the hawks more/ numerous,/ The rivers mouth to source pure” (*CP-II*, p. 159). Only then men, ‘the two-footed mammals’ begin to realise the value of rareness: “when the two-footed/

Mammal, being someways one of the nobler animals, regains/
The dignity of room, the value of rareness” (*CP-II*, p. 159).

Another poem robustly dealing with environmental issues is “The Broken Balance” (1929). Here, Jeffers observes that the beautiful places were ravaged to make space for new cities: “The beautiful places killed like rabbits to make a city, /The spreading fungus, the slime-threads and spores” (*CP-I*, p. 375). This poem is more concerned with contamination—the filth and disease of civilisation as an evil.

On his mystical quest of Nature, Jeffers thus creates different landscapes because Nature exhibits so many emblems of a divinity. The counter-play between humanbeings and Nature expresses Jeffers’s view that humanity, viewed separately from Nature, is habitually ugly and vicious. He feels that our own human hopes are ultimately bound up with our ability to situate ourselves within an ecology that embraces not only our planetary environment but also the cosmic order as well.

Deep ecology posits that if we want to sustain Nature, we have to make large-scale changes to our lifestyle. We have to bridle our

gastronomic cravings by limiting the commercial farming of meat to help preserve forest areas. We will also have to switch to green mode of transport in place of the transport systems which involve the use of combustion engines. Besides advocating these lifestyle changes, deep ecology takes our attention from the narratives of pollution and conservation to formulation of policies and their implementation. Additionally, to recognize the rich tapestry of different life-forms, deep ecology calls for a re-evaluation of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" doctrine. We should put "survival of the fittest" doctrine into practice and inculcate the habit to cooperate and coexist with Nature, as opposed to exploiting it. Deep ecology thus prioritizes a 'live and let live' attitude over an 'either you or me' approach.

The ecological aesthetics presented through Jeffers poetry, reintroduces Nature into critical discourse, resisting anthropocentric stance in dominant ideology. He championed the cause of the environmentalists. In the Modern age and culture, where most intellectuals agree that "poetry makes nothing happen" [This supposedly pessimistic statement is found in Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1940). Perhaps, the Left-leaning poet Auden (1907-1973) intended to suggest that writers and artists were incapable of effecting political change in the politically turbulent situation in his times.], Jeffers remains strangely influential.

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