dered humanity." There's no higher compliment from one poet to another."

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Daniel Helsing: More Contemporary Than His Contemporaries

I first heard of Robinson Jeffers fairly late in my studies as a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at Lund University. I did not read him until I'd finished my degree and moved to California, however—not with enough care and presence, in any case, to be genuinely absorbed by his work.

Ever since my late teens, reading Wittgenstein and Thomas Mann, I've been drawn to, in both my creative and critical writing, the question of what is possible aesthetically in our cultural moment. "Possible aesthetically" means something along the lines of: What does artistic integrity mean in our (contemporary) (Western, global, Swedish) culture? What kinds of literature in today's world can one (or I) enjoy aesthetically and take seriously philosophically? While I don't pretend to have found answers to these questions—I suspect that incessant questioning is part of the answer—I at least have a better sense of what I do enjoy and what my thoughts and opinions are.

I bring this up because Jeffers seems to have been wrestling with similar questions in the years leading up to *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*. In his wonderful introduction to the second edition from 1935, he recounts a hike twenty-one years prior, in 1914, with Una and their dog, in the Del Monte Forest. On this particular day, a "bitter meditation" on the poetry of his contemporaries filled his mind and darkened his mood. Rather than beauty, passion, and intelligibility, in the style of Milton, Keats, and Shelley, the ideal of the day was austerity. Jeffers could sense the direction in which poets like Mallarmé and Pound were going: diminution, elimination. He couldn't stomach it: "These austerities were not for me; originality

by amputation was too painful for me." By the end of the hike, he had made his "final decision not to become a 'modern'" (*CP* 4: 386).

That decision, though, didn't bring him instant clarity; he still hadn't found his Inhumanist aesthetics. For the time being, he was "doomed to go on imitating dead men"—"unless," he adds, "some impossible wind should blow me emotions or ideas, or a point of view, or even mere rhythms, that had not occurred to them" (*CP* 4: 386). The rhythms that he could barely bring himself to hope for found him on the shores of the Pacific, whipping the rocks, trees, and creatures of the central California coastline.

In the Western world, more or less since the end of the nineteenth century, it is fair to say that science and technology increasingly determine what counts as real. If something can't be measured—at least in principle—it doesn't really exist. When extrapolating this metaphysically, we end up with a view of existence in which matter and energy evolve purposelessly over billions and billions of years, across incomprehensibly large cosmic vistas, to produce galaxies, planets, life, and mind. Humankind is but a "mote of dust in the morning sky," as astronomer Carl Sagan puts it in the opening sequence of *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980), standing on a grass-covered cliff by the Pacific—a sequence shot, fittingly enough, just a dozen or so miles south of Carmel-by-the-Sea.

In my view, Jeffers ranks among the greatest poets to give form to our culture's cosmic physicalism, for want of a better term—a world in which humanity is an ephemeral species in a universe governed by blind natural laws. By giving up the fruitless quest to become "modern" and "original," Jeffers became more contemporary than most of his contemporaries. He was never afraid to plumb the depths of that indifferent void in which, as he writes in "Joy," "at length quietness / Will cover [the] wistful eyes" of humankind" (*CP* 1: 117)—a void which seems to be closing in by the day in our time, by way of ever-increasing fossil fuel emissions, out-of-control artificial intelligence, or a sudden nuclear apocalypse.

Yet Jeffers is not a poet of abstract theory. To say that Pacific winds transformed his writing is barely metaphorical. Precisely this is the most illuminating aspect for me, in relation to my own creative work: California's sensuous presence, the way in which the environment shapes the form and rhythms of his poems. Regardless of one's philosophical worldview (I tend to veer closer to some kind of agnosticism than materialism), I see the decision to let a given

scene or situation decide on form and style as crucial. If literature is a kind of mirror of the world, then the rhythms of the world must give shape to the life nerve of the poem. This doesn't comprise an answer to the question of what is possible aesthetically today; but it is to say that Jeffers is one of those poets whose poetry is both beautiful and possible to take seriously.

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Kevin Hearle: The Question of Jeffers' Relevance

What do I think of Robinson Jeffers? I think he is the Ur great poet of California (especially its landscapes), the greatest U.S. narrative poet of the 20th Century, the poet who rescued the long line from Whitman's sentimentality and tendency to ramble, and an indispensable resource for anyone who wants to understand the archetypal power of tragic poetry. If he doesn't matter today, that would say far more about what we have become as a nation and a society than it would about Robinson Jeffers or his poems.

I first heard of Jeffers from reading Yvor Winters. His mistaken claim that if Jeffers had had the courage of his convictions he would have done what Winter's friend Hart Crane had done—namely commit suicide by jumping off the back of a ship at sea—caught my attention, but Jeffers' poems held it. The enormous force of "Tamar" with its incest, sacrifice, and those long, sinewy lines gripped me like a Greek tragedy somehow sprung from the rocky coastline of my home state. Here was a California poetry that was strong, embedded in the place, and a challenge. Would I ever be able to write similarly powerful poems about California?

Jeffers' pessimism about civilization and Inhumanism's faith in the value of the non-human have always resonated with me, but—even as I came to love so many of his poems—I also couldn't keep myself from noticing the significant barriers between Jeffers and me. However much I recognized him as a master, someone whose poems I would come back to again and again for pleasure and for techniques to use in my own poetry, I never wanted to be