

## “It Is Time for Us to Kiss the Earth Again”: Robinson Jeffers and Poetry of Place

The West Coast has provided one of the foremost models for writing poetry of place in the work of California poet Robinson Jeffers. Jeffers settled in Carmel in 1913 when it was little more than a scattering of houses and over the next fifty years set many of his poems in the spectacular landscapes of Big Sur and the Carmel country. Throughout the poems and in his rare comments about poetry, Jeffers provides pertinent ideas for how to let the spirit of place infuse a poem.

Perhaps most essential to Jeffers’ poetry of place is the poet’s being attuned to the influences of a particular place on people. Jeffers admires the identification with a landscape that long familiarity or, more rarely, a mystical experience can engender. In Jeffers’ “The Tower Beyond Tragedy,” Orestes explains to his sister how his experience in the natural landscape of the forest has changed him, providing an excellent example of achieving a oneness with a place:

. . . I entered the life of the brown forest  
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone,  
I felt the changes in the veins  
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we  
have our own time, not yours; and I was the stream  
Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and  
I was the stars,  
Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of  
his own summit; and I was the darkness  
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me.  
I was mankind also, a moving lichen  
On the cheek of the round stone. . . .  
.....  
I have fallen in love outward.

Jeffers isn't asking everyone to achieve such a high-pitched state but is offering a representative example of what he says is "the feeling—I will say the certainty—that the universe is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things; and is so beautiful that it must be loved and revered." In a letter written a decade later, Jeffers says that if he has a "message," this passage from "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" expresses it.

Mystical or not, we are formed by our environments, and Jeffers is well enough attuned to his place to provide evidence of the workings of environment on his characters. Some characters assume qualities of the landscape in which they live. The title character in Jeffers' verse-narrative "Cawdor," for instance, "knew / His hills as if he had nerves under the grass," and his daughter tells him that "Your voice . . . was as hard as a flint. We know that you and the Rock over the canyon / Will not die in our time." His daughter, in turn, has taken on the qualities of the wind that blows on the coast, illustrated in passages such as, "A wind blew from her eyes / Like sea wind from the gray sea."

Of as great importance to Jeffers as an openness to the influences of a landscape is a second skill: the ability to see a landscape as a whole. Almost all of our culture's experts talking to us through the mass media about how best to manage our forests, our rangelands, our fresh water, and our buried oil and minerals see only certain aspects of a landscape. Those are the aspects which they are trained to see, usually entailing human usage and commerce. Most of the rest of us are, as a result, conditioned to see landscapes in the same fragmentary (if not utilitarian) way. In what has become perhaps one of Jeffers' most quoted passages (from "The Answer"), he summarizes his alternative holistic view:

A severed hand

Is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and  
stars and his history . . .

Often appears atrociously ugly. 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  
Apart from that . . .

Jeffers includes machines in his landscapes; he doesn't present a de-industrialized utopian landscape, but rather a landscape with all that typically is there. "Great-enough both accepts and subdues; the great frame takes all creatures," he says in "Phenomena." He then presents not only grass, cormorants, and pelicans, but also, among other machines, "the air-plane dipping over the hill" and "The navy's new-bought Zeppelin going by in the twilight" with "motor-vibrations / That hum in the rock like a new storm-tone of the ocean's to turn eyes westward." In "The Machine," a biplane "Insect in size as in form, / Was also accepted . . . placed without preference / In the grave arrangement of the evening." Jeffers' landscapes are not the pretty, artfully composed "scenic" landscapes of Sierra Club calendars and National Geographic appointment books, but are rather his attempts to present the place as accurately as possible.

Like Walt Whitman, Jeffers is answering Ralph Waldo Emerson's plea to be the poet "who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things, and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight." The importance of a holistic understanding of reality permeates Jeffers' writing. In a response to a request for a comment on his "religious attitudes," Jeffers says, "I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. (This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.)" This is dialogue, we might add, as well as physics, religion, and ecology: All entities are in communication with each other, creating each other by their interaction. What we must do as poets is learn to perceive and then represent these entities.

Jeffers' mention of physics (as well as biology and ecology) suggests a third skill he spent much of his life developing: finding the most accurate language—often, the most scientifically accurate—to represent what is happening in a particular place. Jeffers' father, a professor of Old  
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Testament literature and Biblical history, had tutored his son in Latin and Greek before sending him to boarding schools in Europe, where he continued his studies of the classical languages and developed fluency in French and German as well. After graduation from college, Jeffers spent three years studying medicine at the University of California Medical School before moving to the University of Washington to spend a year studying forestry, providing him with a solid base of scientific concepts and vocabulary.

Jeffers uses science throughout his poetry as a means of understanding reality. He draws upon not only the concepts but also the vocabulary of contemporary biology, geology, astronomy, physics, and chemistry. Sometimes he pushes the envelope in a poetic line with an unusual scientific term, such as in his description of a character's death (in "Cawdor") when "the work of the autolytic / Enzymes of the last hunger hastened or failed." In this instance the diction somewhat jars the line, but the effect is admirable: a yoking of the "two cultures" of the sciences and the humanities in contemplation of the functioning of humans in the natural world. The disinterested scientific perspective also discourages sentimentalizing. Jeffers's language is smoother in "Animals," when he tells us after reflecting on sea lions off the shore that "There are many other chemistries of animal life / Besides the slow oxidation of carbohydrates and amino-acids."

Robert Frost's use of science and avoidance of scientific vocabulary in his poetry might be worth considering in contrast to the more extreme instances of Jeffers' practice. Frost subscribed to *Scientific American*, kept up on scientific theories, and talked with scientists about their current work. For instance, he discussed quantum physics and particle theory with the Nobel laureate Niels Bohr and subsequently used his ideas in poems (such as "For Once, Then Something"), but seldom moved beyond everyday language. Some critics have said that ideas occurring in *Scientific American* sometimes turned up in a poem of Frost's within a few months—but usually only the ideas, not the scientific language.

Most of Jeffers' metaphors and vocabulary for the natural world are drawn not from scientific literature but from other parts of the natural

world found in the place of the poem's occurrence. Some of these parallels are straight forward. The image suggested by the description of Hood Cawdor's dissolving consciousness at death is immediately clear: "Like the dispersion of a broken hive: the brain-cells / And rent fragments of cells finding / After their communal festival of life particular deaths."

Jeffers considers "a scientific basis" to be "an essential condition" for the thinker. He says in a letter that "We cannot take any philosophy seriously if it ignores or garbles the knowledge and view-points that determine the intellectual life of our time"; if a poet has no familiarity with modern science, "his range and significance would be limited accordingly."

Science of the past century has given writers an immensely expanded range of concepts and vocabulary, which many poets seem uninterested in learning, much less judiciously putting to use in poems. That's unfortunate, because it leaves poetry less capable of representing our contemporary lived reality. Biologist E. O. Wilson cites a Chinese saying that "The beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right names." Jeffers shows how. In an era now when some are denying the reality of scientific discoveries which don't fit their religion or politics, it's even more important for poetry to be able to use the full range of language. In his brief but powerful essay "Landscape and Narrative," Barry Lopez writes that "the truth reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions" that are characteristic of the most powerful narratives. "Beyond this," he writes, "there are only failures of imagination: reductionism in science; fundamentalism in religion; fascism in politics." To write of particular landscapes using the most accurate and fitting language is one way to resist the "failures of imagination" of our time.

A fourth lesson we might derive from a reading of Jeffers' poetry is that we cannot simply stand back and admire landscape as an "other" out there in the "green world" beyond our everyday urban commonplaces. Rather, we must engage the landscape in something like a dialogue. Inevitably, we do engage every place we're in, by standing

on something, breathing in its air, and touching what is around us, but often we're not listening to what the place has to say back to us in response.

With the increase in technological diversions and processed foods that hardly resemble anything from nature, many urban dwellers seem to have an unrealistic notion that we can live independent of nature. Most of our social, political, and religious institutions make it all but impossible to hear the resonances of a landscape. Furthermore, it's a natural human tendency to perceive reality in human terms, as when "A stone on the mountain has a man's face, / A storm-warped tree against the fog on the mountain is a man running." Jeffers laments that "to see the human figure in all things is man's disease" (in the poem beginning "As the eye fails").

For a dialogue to be possible, it's necessary to perceive the interlocutor as capable of some kind of cogent response. Throughout Jeffers' poetry, the earth is not only alive, but also has a consciousness, with "Dreams gathering in the curded brain of the earth" ("Clouds at Evening"), and an ocean that "remembers the storm last month" and is "never mournful but wise" ("Ocean"). In the untitled poem beginning "The unformed volcanic earth," Jeffers states that "I think the rocks / And the earth and the other planets, and the stars and galaxies / Have their various consciousness, all things are conscious." He considers that the nerves of an animal merely bring the consciousness to focus. With consciousness comes intention on the part of the landscape, the earth, and the universe: "This globed earth / Not all by chance and fortune brings forth her broods, / But feels and chooses," Jeffers tells us ("De Rerum Virtute"). In explaining his work on a speaking tour, Jeffers corrected the misperception that landscape is only a backdrop, telling his audiences that "this rocky coast is not only the scene of my narrative verse, but also the chief actor in it."

Landscape is constantly telling us things, Jeffers says, and it's up to us to listen, understand, and respond. It takes courage, determination, and effort to hear what the earth says. In reading Jeffers it becomes apparent that we need to relate to a place more like we listen to music,

in a pre-linguistic way. In "Advice to Pilgrims," Jeffers says to "Walk on gaunt shores and avoid the people; rock and wave are good prophets; / Wise are the wings of the gull, pleasant her song." The problem, Jeffers acknowledges, is that we are always moving toward abstractions, which lead us away from the permanent truths of the natural world: "A little too abstract, a little too wise, / It is time for us to kiss the earth again," he tells us in "Return." We inevitably project purely human values upon the landscape and never learn the values the landscape is presenting until we deal with "things," as Jeffers calls the elements of concrete reality. In "Sign Post," Jeffers asserts that "Things are the God," and he gives a formula for arriving at this understanding: "Lean on the silent rock until you feel its divinity." In "Rock and Hawk," Jeffers names for us some of the qualities which the landscape around Carmel seem to be presenting as examples for humans to consider emulating: in the hawk, "bright power, dark peace; / Fierce consciousness . . . / Disinterestedness" as well as "realist eyes"; in the rock, "Mysticism" and the freedom from being "cast down" by failure or made proud by success.

Some of Jeffers' poems show understated interactions between humans and place, as in "October Evening": A "male-throated" ship's horn moans, "quivering the shorelong granite," and then "Coyotes toward the valley made answer. / Their little wolf-pads in the dead grass by the stream / Wet with the young season's first rain."

Other poems demonstrate how we interact more thoroughly with places, often without even realizing it, particularly in cities:

Broad wagons before sunrise bring food into the city from  
the open farms, and the people are fed.

They import and they consume reality. Before sunrise a  
hawk in the desert made them their thoughts.

("Meditation on Saviors")

Because we all have bodies, and we eat, we inevitably are in dialogue with the earth—but with today's globalized food industry, we know far less than in Jeffers' day which places we're actually interacting

with. The landscape is giving us our thoughts—but Jeffers says we typically turn inward toward human affairs and lose the values the landscape might bring us. Michael Pollan’s most recent books—*The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*—provide many ideas about the connections between landscape and who we are. If we are what we eat, we are all primarily ears of corn, as long as we are “industrial eaters” consuming the products of convenience stores, supermarkets, and fast-food outlets (since high-fructose corn syrup is in most processed foods and most meat-providing animals have been fed corn, not the animals’ natural diets). The reality we consume with our food is a diminished thing; how we interact with landscapes through the foods we eat is a barely explored aspect of poetry of place.

Jeffers’ “Boats in a Fog” provides a more complex presentation of interaction between people and place. “Following the cliff for guidance,” six fishing boats creep by, moving out of a blinding fog and into it again as the speaker listens to “The throb of their engines subdued by the fog.” The landscape, with which the fisherman are already familiar, tells them how to proceed safely in the necessary human activity of hunting for food. “A flight of pelicans / Is nothing lovelier to look at; / The flight of the planets is nothing nobler; all the arts lose virtue / Against the essential reality” of the fishermen doing what they must do. Their earnest involvement in nature as part of an everyday effort to survive ennobles them as “creatures going about their business among the equally / Earnest elements of nature.”

Those who extract their livelihoods from a landscape are often more attuned, more receptive, more engaged in a dialogue with a place than the occasional admiring visitor can be. The casual visitor to a place might be able to name the trees, the plants, the birds, the rocks, and be uplifted by the experience of observation and naming. But what is the place saying? Our being does not come exclusively from within, but also from our environment, our places. Place makes us possible. How is the place saying to be?

A fifth and last value we might draw from Jeffers is the motive for writing about place: Our contemporary relationship to place is not



healthy, and we need to seek one that works better than the relationship we have now. The search is difficult because we blind ourselves with our own creations. Jeffers describes how we might look to future ages:

We shall seem a race of cheap Fausts,  
vulgar magicians.  
What men have we to show them? but inventions and  
appliances. Not men but populations, mass-men; not  
life  
But amusements; not health but medicines.  
("Decaying Lambskins")

The solution is to turn to permanent, natural things. The process begins with effort. "A little scraping the walls of dishonest contractor's-concrete / Through a shower of chips and sand" leads a person to "freedom" in "A Little Scraping." Then the poet says to "Shake the dust from your hair," and he lists various elements of the landscape that are "real" and more worthy of observation: a mountain sea-coast, lean cows which "drift high up the bronze hill," a "heavy-necked plough team," gulls, rock, "two riders of tired horses" on a cloudy ridge, topaz-eyed hawks, and more. Once the effort has been made to break through to what is real, we might have a better perspective on the reality of our culture.

In "Real and Half Real" Jeffers tells us that the landscape of the coast hills at the mouth of Soberanes Creek is "first-class reality": "The human affair is half real, part myth, part art-work: this is in earnest." Hopefully as poets of place we can bring our readers what we all desperately need: The essential, earnest reality of the places we live.

—Bill Siverly & Michael McDowell

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## Contributors' Notes

**Judith Barrington** lives in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent book, *Lost Lands*, was published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2008.

**Sharon Bronzan** lives in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent show, "The Presence of Absence," was at the Augen Gallery, Portland, Oregon, from April 26 through May 22, 2008.

**Don Colburn** lives in Portland, Oregon. His most recent book, *As If Gravity Were a Theory*, was published *The Cider Press Review* in 2006.

**Mike Donaldson** lives in Winfield, British Columbia.