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ROBINSON JEFFERS' VIEW ON HUMANITY
AND ITS FATE

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Rebecca Luther Mayhew entitled "Robinson Jeffers' View of Humanity and Its Fate." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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ROBINSON JEFFERS' VIEW OF HUMANITY AND ITS FATE

An Abstract

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Rebecca Luther Mayhew

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ABSTRACT

"Robinson Jeffers' View of Humanity and Its Fate" investigates that philosophy of man which has been of great importance in determining the reception of Jeffers' poetry. Most of the readers who have rejected his poetry have done so because of his attitude toward violence and mankind. Jeffers believes that violence is a beautiful, positive force which is responsible for the creation of new values. Man is childish, selfish, cruel, and presumptuous.

The race of man is a rather insignificant part of nature. In fact, other parts of nature are superior to man, for they are aware of their intended contribution to the whole of life. Man cannot understand his own nature and is deceived about his importance. He fancies that he has authority over nature.

Nature is an expression of God. Through observation of nature man may learn about the Deity. God is unfriendly and even hostile toward humanity. Man is foolish to expect justice or mercy from Him. Yet, man must learn to love God and His expression in nature.

Jeffers prophesies the eventual extermination of humanity. This destruction may occur through war, anarchy, or starvation. Death will inevitably save each man from himself. While the individual is still alive, he may improve the quality of his existence by escaping the corrupting influence of civilization. He must recognize that there is a fate larger than the fate of humanity. He must not evaluate all things according to their effect on man.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to Robinson Jeffers, Frederic Carpenter comments upon the reversal of the poet's critical reputation and popularity. In the 1920's Jeffers was hailed as the equal of T. S. Eliot. Critics referred to Jeffers and Eliot as America's two greatest poets. The 1940's brought almost universal rejection of Jeffers' poetry both by critics and the reading public. Critical disagreement about Jeffers' poetry is found even among his admirers. They cannot agree upon which particular poem or group of poems reveals his finest work. The only point upon which all readers of Robinson Jeffers' poetry agree is that it is the expression of a truly unique mind and personality.¹

Most of the critical disagreement over Jeffers' work is the result of varying subjective reactions to Jeffers' philosophy. Some critics denounce his poetry simply because in it he denounces humanity. Moralists attack him because of his seeming lack of morality. Followers of certain religions condemn him because of his condemnation of religion.¹

Because Jeffers' philosophy, particularly his philosophy of man, has been so important in determining the reception of his poetry,

¹Frederic I. Carpenter, Robinson Jeffers (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), pp. 11-12.

it is deserving of a study apart from any evaluation of the worth of the poetry itself. This thesis is an attempt at such a study.

The second chapter of this thesis explains the importance of violence in the poet's philosophy of man. Violence is a beautiful, positive force which results in the creation of new values. It has always been present, and man should not bemoan its presence now. A study of Jeffers' attitude toward man and his description of man is also made in the second chapter. Man is arrogant, presumptuous, cruel, and deceived about his own importance.

The third chapter treats Jeffers' conception of man's relation to God and to nature. God is indifferent and even hostile toward humanity. Nature, which is a physical expression of God, is also indifferent toward man's needs and desires. Man is only an insignificant part of nature, but he fails to realize this. Neither does man understand himself and his contribution to the universe.

The fourth chapter examines Jeffers' view of humanity's fate. He sees an extermination of man in the future and suggests certain means by which it will be accomplished. The poet does, however, offer some hope in his poetry. Death, as Jeffers sees it, is not a fate to be dreaded. It, like violence, is a beautiful, positive force. The poet also offers specific advice to his readers for improving the quality of their lives.

Chapter 2

VIOLENCE AND MAN

Much of the rejection and condemnation of Robinson Jeffers' poetry stems from his obvious attraction to violence. Unless a reader understands this attraction, he will not be able to see the importance of violence in Jeffers' philosophy of man.

In "Apology for Bad Dreams" Jeffers writes:

I know of no reason
For fire and change and torture and the
 old returnings
I think they admit no reason; they are
 the ways of my love.²

Violence is "the way of his love." He seeks it out, dwells upon it, and admires it, almost in a worshipful sense. In his system of thought, violence is basic to life. As he says in "The Great Explosion," it is "the root of all things."³ "Granddaughter" expresses his belief that violence is a "natural element" of human experience (BE, p. 60). When it is lacking, life is not satisfying, and men are static. When it is present, man is led to a discovery of God, whom Jeffers sees as the force behind all violence. It is a positive

²Robinson Jeffers, The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 177. Additional references to this source will be given in the text using the abbreviation "SP."

³Robinson Jeffers, The Beginning and the End and Other Poems (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 4. Additional references to this source will be given in the text using the abbreviation "BE."

force. Violence has dignity. It is good, noble, and beautiful. It is, he says in "Natural Music," "like some girl's breathing who dances alone by the ocean-shore, dreaming of lovers" (SP, p. 77).

Although Jeffers believes that all violence is beautiful and has a positive result ultimately, he does find the violence of humanity less appealing than the violence seen in nature or the violence resulting from God. He gives examples of man's less noble and less beautiful acts of violence:

I think we are the ape's children, but believe history
 We are the Devil's: the fire-deaths, the flaying
 alive,
 The blinding with hot iron, the crucifixions, the
 castrations, the famous
 Murder of a King of England by hot iron forced
 Through the anus to burn the bowels, and men outside
 the ten-foot dungeon-wall
 Could hear him howling.

("Believe History," BE, p. 40)

We have invented the jet-plane and the death-bomb and
 the cross of Christ

("Passenger Pigeons," BE, p. 16)

However, even these atrocities lack finality. All change and destruction gradually result in renewal. The deepest wounds of violence are healed both in nature and in humanity. "Shiva" illustrates the point well:

There is a hawk that is picking the birds out of our
 sky.
 She killed the pigeons of peace and security,
 She has taken honesty and confidence from nations and
 men,
 She is hunting the lonely heron of liberty.
 She loads the arts with nonsense, she is very cunning,
 Science with dreams and the state with powers to
 catch them at last.
 Nothing will escape her at last, flying not running.
 This is the hawk that picks out the stars' eyes.
 This is the only hunter that will ever catch the wild
 swan:

The prey she will take last is the wild white swan of
 the beauty of things.
 Then she will be alone, pure destruction, achieved and
 supreme,
 Empty darkness under the death-tent wings.
 She will build a nest of the swan's bones and hatch a
 new brood,
 Hang new heavens with new birds, all be renewed.
 (SP, p. 611)

Violence has always been present in the universe. Man should not
 bemoan its presence now. It has not diminished the energies and the
 particles from which creation came into being.

Jeffers' view of violence, particularly his view of war, is
 similar to that of Nietzsche. Both men abandoned the values of their
 ages and looked to violence and war as a means for creating new
 values. "The Bloody Sire" expresses Jeffers' belief that war estab-
 lishes a new system of values:

It is not bad. Let them play.
 Let the guns bark and the bombing-plane
 Speak his prodigious blasphemies.
 It is not bad, it is high time,
 Stark violence is still the sire of all the world's
 values.

What but the wolf's tooth chiseled so fine
 The fleet limbs of the antelope?
 What but fear winged the birds and hunger
 Gemmed with such eyes the great goshawk's head?
 Violence has been the sire of all the world's values.

Who would remember Helen's face
 Lacking the terrible halo of spears?
 Who formed Christ but Herod and Caesar,
 The cruel and bloody victories of Caesar?
 Violence has been the sire of all the world's values.

Never weep, let them play,
 Old violence is not too old to beget new values.⁴

⁴Oscar Williams (ed.), The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse: From Colonial Days to the Present (Cleveland: The World Publishing Co., 1955), p.276.

These lines from "Night Without Sleep" show that the building of civilizations and their destruction through war are a repetitive cycle:

The world's as the world is; the nations rearm and pre-
pare to change; the age of tyrants returns;
The greatest civilization that has ever existed builds
itself higher towers on breaking foundations.
(SP, p. 608)

War, like other violence, prevents man from becoming static. Without war man will "dig under the straw for a stone to bruise himself on" ("The Cruel Falcon," SP, p. 562). In times of peace, men become absorbed in themselves and in their materialistic pursuits. Peace does not have the nobility found in war.

Jeffers is concerned that modern man does not know how to engage in true war. He writes in "To Kill in War Is Not Murder":

To kill in war is not murder, but this is not war.
Shooting missiles to the moon--childish romance put
into action--calculating the bomb-size
That will completely obliterate New York and Moscow
and the polar ice-cap: they have a new breed
of men
Working at this. Obedient, intelligent, trained
technicians like trained seals, tell them to do
something
And they can do it. But never ask them their reasons,
For they know nothing. They would break up into neo-
Christian jargon like Einstein.
(BE, p. 28)

Modern national defense programs create bigger missiles, more sophisticated weapons, more accurate bombing techniques. The real spirit of war, however, is not to be found. It is ironic that modern civilization, in Jeffers' view, is not yet able to destroy itself. It can only "deep-wounded drag on for centuries" ("Decaying Lambskins," SP, p. 610). A war which resulted in total riddance of mankind would at least free nature of his influence.

For an explanation of the poet's desire to see man exterminate himself it is necessary to study his more general, descriptive remarks about man. In "To the Story-tellers" he writes, "Man, the illogical animal. . . . his loose moods disjoin; madness is under the skin / To the deep bone" (BE, p. 36). It is impossible to predict the behavior of man because he is inconsistent. An individual may lead a miserly existence for years and then suddenly become extravagant and totally unconcerned about his financial situation. He may seek to destroy himself for no just cause, or he may cling desperately to life when it has nothing to offer him. Only a human will destroy his beloved and pamper his enemy. Only man will refuse to accept an obvious truth. Appropriately, Jeffers closes the poem by saying, "There are no fences, man will do anything" ("To the Story-tellers," BE, p. 36).

The following three quotations illustrate Jeffers' frequent application of the term "animal" to men:

So we scream and laugh, clamorous animals
Born howling to die groaning
("The Beginning and the End," BE, p. 8)

. . . the animal-stinking ghost-ridden darkness, the
human soul.
("The Beginning and the End," BE, p. 10)

Man is an animal like other animals, wants food and
success and women, not truth.
("Theory of Truth," SP, p. 614)

Nietzsche also refers to man as an animal. However, he stresses the point that man has great potential for becoming something more than animal. Likewise, the poet does not content himself with having called man animalistic. He wants it understood that man is a lesser animal. Man is the only animal, according to "Hellenistics"

(SP, p. 603), characterized by "cruelty, filth, and superstition." These three tendencies are very often found in young children. It is interesting that Jeffers also says in "Birth and Death," ". . . the human race is not old / But rather childish, it is an infant and acts like one" (BE, p. 30). Like children, humanity is completely self-centered. Men believe themselves to be the triumphs of creation and the masters of nature. They reject anything which might thwart the satisfaction of their personal whims.

Jeffers is not the least impressed by the accomplishments of mankind. He sees civilization as a "transient sickness" ("New Mexican Mountain," SP, p. 363). Man gloats over his mastery of air, ocean and space, but the poet still points a finger at him and says, "How little he looks, how desperately scared and excited, like a poisonous insect . . ." ("Unnatural Powers," BE, p. 19).

Robinson Jeffers longs for the time when a friend risked his life for a man, when an enemy killed a man's children. Emotions then were simple, but pure. Jeffers writes of modern man:

Should I need a friend? No one will really stab me
from behind,
The people in the land of the living walk weaponless.

Should I hate an enemy? The evil-doers
Are pitiable now. Or to whom be faithful? Of whom
seek faith?

("No Resurrection," SP, p. 474)

Jeffers believes that man evolved from the ocean first and then from the apes. Evidence for this remark may be found in "Continent's End," (SP, pp. 87-88) and in "The Beginning and the End." His belief in evolution is quite important to his philosophy of man, for it is the basis for two of his opinions. First, he uses

evolution to explain the savagery of man. The following lines from "The Beginning and the End" illustrate the point:

But whence came the race of man? I will make a guess.
 A change of climate killed the great northern forests,
 Forcing the manlike apes down from their trees,
 They starved up there. They had been secure up there,
 But famine is no security: among the withered
 branches blue famine:
 They had to go down to the earth, where green still
 grew
 And small meats might be gleaned. But there the great
 flesh-eaters,
 Tiger and panther and the horrible fumbling bear and
 endless wolf-packs made life
 A dream of death. Therefore man has these dreams,
 And kills out of pure terror. Therefore man walks
 erect,
 Forever alerted: as the bear rises to fight
 So man does always. Therefore he invented fire and
 flint weapons
 In his desperate need. Therefore he is cruel and
 bloody-handed and quick-witted, having survived
 Against all odds. Never blame the man: his hard-
 pressed
 Ancestors formed him: the other anthropoid apes were
 safe
 In the great southern rain-forest and hardly changed
 In a million years: but the race of man was made
 By shock and agony.

(BE, pp. 8-9)

It is also because of the poet's belief in evolution that he sees man as only a small part of a very large whole which has been evolving for ages. Jeffers is particularly disturbed by man's feeling of ultimate significance to the universe. He writes:

We take our mortal momentary hour
 With too much gesture, the derisive skies
 Twinkle against our wrongs, our rights, our power.
 ("The Truce and the Peace," SP, p. 74)

While men have been killing, stealing, enslaving and lying, the rest of nature has continued in its flawless, silent integrity. Unlike Nietzsche, Jeffers does not envision the evolution of a race of

supermen. Following the example of the dinosaurs, mankind too will become extinct.

Jeffers is very much aware of humanity's suffering. He says in "Praise Life" that any place which is inhabited by man is filled with anguish (SP, p. 570). Yet, he does not understand man's attitude that the universe is obligated to alleviate human pain. In "The Old Man's Dream after He Died" he writes:

Pain and pleasure are not to be thought
 Important enough to require balancing Such
 discords
 In the passionate terms of human experience are not
 resolved, nor worth it.

(SP, p. 184)

Man is not particularly significant. In fact, he is decidedly inferior to other parts of nature. It is indeed absurd for him to expect or demand special treatment from the universe. Although Nietzsche does picture man as a mere drop of life against the totality of the universe, he believes that man has it within his power to become the very god of the universe.

Chapter 3

MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO GOD AND TO NATURE

The importance of violence in the philosophy of Robinson Jeffers is illustrated by his characterization of God as both beautiful and violent. Often, as in the following passages, he speaks of the beauty of God:

And we know that the enormous invulnerable
beauty of things
Is the face of God

("Nova," SP, p. 598)

The Greeks were not the inventors
Of shining clarity and jewel-sharp form and the
beauty of God. He was free with men before the
Greeks came:

He is here naked on the shining water. Every eye
that has a man's nerves behind it has known him.

("Hellenistics," SP, p. 602)

By "things" Jeffers means the objects of nature. God is present in the beauty of these physical, tangible objects. Because every man is surrounded by nature and exposed to its beauty, every man has experienced some revelation of God. This idea is remarkably similar to that of Paul in the New Testament. He writes:

For the invisible things of him from the creation
of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the
things that are made, even his eternal power and God-
head; so that they are without excuse⁵

Both Paul and Jeffers believe that man has access to knowledge of God through careful observation of nature.

⁵Romans 1:20.

In the following lines Jeffers again mentions God's beauty, but he also introduces a new aspect of God's nature:

He includes the flaming stars and pitiable flesh,
And what we call things and what we call nothing.
He is very beautiful.

("Intellectuals," SP, p. 458)

"Stars," "flesh," "things" and "nothing" are all a part of God. In "Meditation on Saviors" the poet writes, "This people as much as the sea-granite is part of the God . . ." (SP, p. 202). Both people and nature contribute to or participate in the essence of God. The following lines elaborate on the contribution of people:

The human race is one of God's sense-organs,
Immoderately alerted to feel good and evil
And pain and pleasure. It is a nerve-ending,
Like eye, ear, taste-buds (hardly able to endure
The nauseous draught) it is a sensory organ of God's.
As Titan-mooded Lear or Prometheus reveal to their
audience

Extremes of pain and passion they will never find
In their own lives but through the poems as sense-
organs

They feel and know them: so the exultations and
agonies of beasts and men
Are sense-organs of God: and on other globes
Throughout the universe much greater nerve-endings
Enrich the consciousness of the one being
Who is all that exists.

("The Beginning and the End," BE, pp. 9-10)

Humanity is the only part of nature having consciousness and a system of morality. Since no other object in nature is conscious of itself, it, therefore, cannot experience pleasure and pain in the sense that man does. Because no other part of nature is conscious of other parts of nature, it cannot conceive of good and evil. Humanity, as a part of God, enables Him to experience pleasure and pain, good and evil. Animals or "beasts," though lacking man's self-consciousness and man's articulate conception of his

relationship to others, still experience pain and pleasure on a lower plane, thereby making their own contribution to the consciousness of God. Their "exultations and agonies" are also "sense-organs." The last lines suggest not only that life exists on other planets, but also that such life is superior to humanity and therefore makes an even greater contribution to the consciousness of God.

Since man, animals, and all other parts of nature participate in God's essence and are an expression of that essence, it is accurate to say that God "is all that exists." In "The Beginning and the End" Jeffers indicates that God would prefer to be free of the contribution man makes to His being. He writes:

He would be balanced and neutral
As a rock on the shore, but the red sunset-waves
Of life's passions fling over him. He endures
them

(BE, p. 10)

Closely related to the beauty Jeffers sees in God is the violence he finds in God. This point is illustrated in "He Is All." Because God is all that exists He is alone. Like a shepherd who has been isolated from people for fifty years, God has become eccentric. Constant solitude has affected His thinking patterns. His mind produces "beautiful and terrible things" (BE, p. 51). In "Hurt Hawks" Jeffers chooses the word "wild" to describe God. He states that "communal people" have forgotten God but that the "intemperate and savage" hawks and dying men remember Him (SP, p. 198). The association of the Deity with violence is strengthened even further in "A Little Scraping." God smiles while He stacks up cities as if they were building blocks to be toppled and while He herds people

together as if they were animals to be hunted. God consciously seeks to destroy and kill; yet, Jeffers calls His power "beautiful" (SP, p. 457). The poet's fullest statement of God's violent tendencies and their beauty is found in the following passage from "Look, How Beautiful":

There is this infinite energy, the power of God forever
 working--toward what purpose?--toward none.
 This is God's will; he works, he grows and changes, he
 has no object.
 No more than a great sculptor who has found a ledge
 fine of marble, and lives beside it, and carves
 great images,
 And casts them down. That is God's will: to make great
 things and destroy them, and make great things
 And destroy them again. With war and plague and horror,
 and the diseases of trees and the corruptions of
 stone
 He destroys all that stands. But look how beautiful--
 Look how beautiful are all the things that He does.
 His signature
 Is the beauty of things.

("Look, How Beautiful," BE, p. 52)

"Self-criticism in February" is a conversation Jeffers has with himself about his poetry. The voice of criticism argues that his worst fault as a poet is his not having mistaken something else, "demon, passion or idealism," for the real God. Defending himself against his own attack, he replies that if that is his worst fault then his worst fault contains more truth than anything else for which he is responsible. Again the voice of criticism argues that he should have written about the love of God or about the social justice that will soon prevail. Jeffers replies that he can tell lies while writing prose (SP, p. 601). The implication, of course, is that Jeffers would be lying were he to say in his poetry that "God is love," or that "social justice will soon prevail."

In "Birds and Fishes" God is not only lacking in love and justice, but also in mercy. The poet states, "Justice and mercy are human dreams, they do not concern the birds nor the fish nor eternal God" (BE, p. 73). The following lines are from "The Great Explosion":

He is no God of love, no justice of a little city like
Dante's Florence, no anthropoid God
Making commandments: this is the God who does not
care and will never cease.

("The Great Explosion," BE, p. 4)

Jeffers presents a frightening portrayal of God as unloving, unjust, unmerciful, indifferent, and yet eternal. In "Intellectuals" he speaks of "Our unkindly all but inhuman God, / Who is very beautiful and too secure to want worshippers . . ." (SP, p. 458). God is not even sufficiently interested in man to care about his worship. The following passage from "Triad" confirms the indifference of God toward man:

Science, that makes wheels turn, cities grow,
Moribund people live on, playthings increase,
But has fallen from hope to confusion at her own business

Of understanding the nature of things;--new Russia,
That stood a moment at dreadful cost half free,
Beholding the open, all the glades of the world
On both sides of the trap, and resolutely
Walked into the trap that has Europe and America;--
The poet, who wishes not to play games with words,
His affair being to awake dangerous images
And call the hawks;--they all feed the future, they
serve God,

Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity.
(SP, p. 459)

In "Unnatural Powers" Jeffers speaks of the feats men have mastered out of their desire to do that which they were not meant to do. Man has learned to fly through the air as the birds do and to breathe in the water as the fish do. He has harnessed the powers of electricity

and has traveled to the moon (Jeffers anticipated the lunar landing). Despite these accomplishments, man is still small, frightened, and helpless. Jeffers says, "No God pities him" (BE, p. 19).

Jeffers does not stop with indifference. He presents God as openly hostile toward mankind. In "Birth-dues" he writes, "The world's God is treacherous and full of unreason; a torturer . . ." (SP, p. 262). The implication is that God will direct His violence against men. The following lines about God are from "The Truce and the Peace":

. . . he will not start
For a little thing . . . his great hands grope,
unclose,
Feel out for the main pillars . . . pull down the house.
(SP, p. 74)

These lines appear to be a reference to blind Samson, who killed the Philistines when he caused their building to collapse by pulling on the main pillars. God is reaching for the "main pillars" of man's life. When He pulls them, He will destroy man. Jeffers further establishes the threat which God poses to man in "Still the Mind Smiles." He calls God, ". . . the exact poet, the sonorous anti-strophe of desolation to the strophe multitude" (SP, p. 460). Taking his imagery from the ancient Greek chorus, Jeffers shows God bringing utter destruction and desolation upon man as His response to man.

Robinson Jeffers' conception of Christ differs greatly from his conception of God. Probably this results from his belief that Christ is not a member of the Godhead. The following passages indicate this belief:

. . . but church and state
Depend on more peculiarly impossible myths:

That all men are born free and equal: consider that!
 And that a wandering Hebrew poet named Jesus
 Is the God of the universe. Consider that!
 ("The Great Wound," BE, pp. 11-12)

Here was a man who was born a bastard, and among the
 people
 That more than any in the world valued race-purity,
 chastity, the prophetic splendors of the race of
 David.
 Oh intolerable wound, dimly perceived. Too loving to
 curse his mother, desert-driven, devil-haunted,
 The beautiful young poet found truth in the desert,
 but found also
 Fantastic solution of hopeless anguish. The carpenter
 was not his father? Because God was his father,
 Not a man sinning, but the pure holiness and power of
 God. His personal anguish and insane solution
 Have stained an age; nearly two thousand years are one
 vast poem drunk with the wine of his blood.
 ("Theory of Truth," SP, p. 615)

Jesus bore the stigma of illegitimacy among a people who were particularly concerned about chastity and race purity. Jeffers postulates that He was too gentle to condemn or shame His mother. The solution He created was to proclaim that God was His father. This insanity, Jeffers feels, is matched by the insanity of those who have accepted the fantastic tale during the past two thousand years.

Even though Jeffers does not accept Christ as God in the flesh, he does admire some of His qualities. In "Theory of Truth" he refers to ". . . the dear beauty of the Jew whom they crucified but he lived, he was greater than Rome" He says that Christ had beauty. Acknowledgment of beauty is a very favorable remark from Jeffers. He also seems fascinated by the inability of the Roman empire to squelch the following Christ had. The "Jew" lives in the hearts of His followers today, but the Roman empire is nonexistent (SP, p. 614).

In "Fog" Jeffers indicates approval of Christ's desire to restore oneness to all people and all things. However, he disapproves of Christ's method, ". . . devouring the world with atonement for God's sake" (SP, p. 162). The following lines reveal the poet's opinion that Christ's mistake was in loving man:

. . . and the young Jew writhing on the domed hill in
the earthquake, against the eclipse
Frightfully uplifted for having turned inward to
love the people:--that root was so sweet Oh,
dreadful agonist?--
I saw the same pierced feet, that walked in the same
crime to its expiation; I heard the same cry.
A bad mountain to build your world on.
("Meditation on Saviors," SP, p. 201)

Jeffers is generally critical of Christianity as a religion. In "Meditation on Saviors" he indicates that the mimics of Christ have no comprehension of Him and that they lack the courage to actually confront His demands of them. Christians praise love, but they do not demonstrate it. They are indifferent, seemingly incapable of either love or hatred. Their trite little phrases and occasional good deed do not conform to the example set by their professed master (SP, pp. 200-201).

Like Nietzsche, Jeffers was a minister's son and rebelled against Christianity. As Nietzsche rejected what he called the slave morality of Christianity and protested that the Christian virtues of love, humility, and kindness could be cultivated only in a weak person, so Jeffers indicates in "Thebaid" his similar belief that men turn to Christianity only because of their weakness and loneliness. "Mother Church" provides a place of comfort and security for the adult who still needs and seeks a parental figure. It takes

less strength of character to live when traditional ties with Christianity exist (SP, p. 593). In the final lines of the same poem Jeffers claims that he alone, in his separation from Christianity, can actually understand life and death; he alone is in contact with reality:

--I see the sun set and rise
And the beautiful desert sand
And the stars at night,
The incredible magnificence of things.
I the last living man
That sees the real earth and skies,
Actual life and real death.
The others are all prophets and believers
Delirious with fevers of faith.

(SP, p. 593)

Both Nietzsche and Jeffers felt that the doctrines of Christianity were lies and that truth should be sought elsewhere. In "The Giant's Ring" Jeffers warns, "Conclude that secular like Christian immortality's / Too cheap a bargain" (SP, p. 468). "Delusion of Saints" expresses the poet's belief that after death followers of Christianity will meet the same fate as the murderers and lechers. There will be no separation of such persons into either heaven or hell (SP, p. 475).

In "The Beginning and the End" Jeffers writes:

. . . a wound was made in the brain
When life became too hard, and has never healed.
It is there that they learned trembling religion and
blood-sacrifice,
It is there that they learned to butcher beasts and
to slaughter men,
And hate the world: the great religions of love and
kindness
May conceal that, not change it.

(BE, p. 9)

Christianity, in Jeffers' view, is powerless to change or to improve man. It can, at best, only hide his wickedness.

Since Christ is not God and since Christianity is both powerless and false, Christ and Christianity should not be involved in the proper relationship between God and man.

Jeffers' conception of man's relationship to nature is also important in a study of his view of humanity and its fate. The poet is concerned that man is mistaken about his relationship to nature.

Jeffers' theory is quite similar in some respects to that of Wordsworth. Both poets see man as being alienated by his thinking from the harmony existing among all other parts of the universe. Each desires that man attempt to work himself back into harmony with nature. Both poets often use small physical objects to represent the divine organization of nature. They speak of "the whole" and see all things as being a part of "the whole."

Wordsworth also stresses nature's protective and healing powers. He has faith that nature will sustain the heart that loves her. Jeffers sees nature as the expression and physical presence of a God who is indifferent and even hostile toward humanity. However, he occasionally suggests that man may find comfort in nature. In "Nightpiece" he describes a nightmare in which he experiences terrible fears and anxieties. Jumping out of bed, he rushes to his window. There the presence and steadfastness of the moon, the wind and the ocean calm his fears and ease his anxieties (BE, p. 61). "Return" urges man to leave "thoughts" and turn to "things."

Physical contact with nature restores man's health and sense of well-being (SP, p. 576). The poet expresses the healing effect of nature upon man in these lines:

Look up the night, starlight's a steady draught
For nerves at angry tension.

("The Truce and the Peace," SP, p. 74)

Even if the individual cannot understand or accept himself, he may still find some degree of peace in his capacity for experiencing nature. As stated in "Love the Wild Swan," he can appreciate the eyes which see and the ears which hear the beauty of nature (SP, p. 573).

Jeffers sees nature as being vastly superior to man and as having greater worth. He often makes such striking remarks as ". . . a lone bird was dearer to me than many people" ("People and a Heron," SP, p. 166) or ". . . a handful of wildflowers is nobler than the human race" ("Salvage," BE, p. 63). In one poem he says:

Mountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees
Are the protagonists, the human people are only symbolic
interpreters--
So let them live or die.

("My Loved Subject," BE, p. 50)

People are not essential to the story of life. They function as mere "interpreters" of the spectacle of nature. The indifference toward man seen in the final line quoted is also found in these lines from "Autumn Evening":

No matter
What happens to men . . . the world's well made though.
(SP, p. 167)

In "Hellenistics" Jeffers' attitude toward man is one of condemnation. He says that man is contemptible, but no beast is

contemptible (SP, p. 603). He illustrates this attitude in "My Burial Place" by his request to share the grave of a deer or a puma rather than to share the cemetery of other men (BE, p. 67).

The poet seems interested in man's learning that he is of less value than the elements of nature. The following quotations illustrate this point:

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.

("Star-swirls," BE, p. 18)

Man's world puffs up his mind, as a toad
Puffs himself up; the billion light-years cause a serene
and wholesome deflation.

("Animula," BE, p. 71)

To try all changes, progress and corruption, powers,
peace and anguish, not to go down the dinosaur's
way

Until all his capacities have been explored: and it is
good for him

To know that his needs and nature are no more changed
in fact in ten thousand years than the beaks of
eagles.

("The Beaks of Eagles," SP, p. 607)

He attacks the belief that men today are a great improvement upon their ancestors of ten thousand years ago. The modern man may have a bomb rather than a primitive club, but he has experienced no more basic change than have the beaks of eagles.

A few of Jeffers' poems suggest his reasons for regarding man as inferior to nature. In "Life from the Lifeless" he sees man as made equally wicked and despicable by both prosperity and misfortune. Nature, however, experiences both with never a loss of beauty or character (SP, p. 564). "The Broken Balance" adds another justification for the poet's view. The creatures of nature

understand life. They know their own natures and what contribution they are to make to the universe. They are true to their natures and therefore enjoy life completely. Humans have no understanding of life or of themselves. They have "choked their natures until the souls die in them" (SP, p. 259). "Natural Music" reveals yet another deficiency in man that is not seen in nature. The various parts of nature combine their efforts to form one united song or language. Men are unable to see themselves as another part of nature. They do not seek to establish or to maintain unity, oneness in nature (SP, p. 77). Probably Jeffers' strongest reason for preferring nature to man is found in "Margrave" and "The Place for No Story." Man has consciousness. This consciousness causes man to "slave for contemptible pleasure and scream with pain." It leads man into thinking that he is special and superior to other parts of nature. He becomes disjointed and disoriented because of his absorption in thoughts and the abstract (SP, pp. 365-366). Nature has, rather than consciousness, the beautiful quality of "lonely self-watchful passion" (SP, p. 358).

Jeffers is very resentful of the damage which man has wreaked upon nature. He says the race of man is only a "moment's accident"; yet, it has brought much suffering and has destroyed much beauty ("The Broken Balance," SP, pp. 260-261). In "The Beautiful Captive" he assures the earth, "The troublesome race of man, Oh beautiful planet, is not immortal" (BE, p. 31). He looks forward in "The Broken Balance" to the time when man will be gone and the world will resume "the old lonely splendor" (SP, p. 261). However, he wonders

in these lines from "Subjected Earth" if nature can ever completely recover from the injustices man has done her:

Poor flourishing earth, meek smiling slave,
 If sometime the swamps return and the heavy forest,
 black beech and oak-roots
 Break up the paving of London streets;
 And only, as long before, on the lifted ridgeways
 Few people shivering by little fires
 Watch the night of the forest cover the land
 And shiver to hear the wild dogs howling where the
 cities were,
 Would you be glad to be free? I think you will never
 Be glad again, so kneaded with human flesh, so humbled
 and changed.

(SP, p. 483)

Man is deceived about his relation to God and to nature.

The race of man is only a small part of the universe and deserves no special treatment. Whether or not man realizes and accepts this truth will be important in determining the fate of humanity. Jeffers' view of man's fate will now be considered.

Chapter 4

THE FATE OF HUMANITY

An investigation of Robinson Jeffers' descriptive comments about man and of his conception of man's relation to God and to nature prepares the reader for a study of the fate Jeffers prophesies for man.

The poet predicts the total extermination of man and the destruction of the civilization he has developed:

. . . the towered-up cities
Will be stains of rust on mounds of plaster.
Roots will not pierce the heaps for a time, kind rains
 will cure them,
Then nothing will remain of the iron age
And all these people but a thigh-bone or so, a poem
Stuck in the world's thought, splinters of glass
In the rubbish dumps, a concrete dam far off in the
 mountain
("Summer Holiday," SP, p. 181)

In "The Broken Balance" Jeffers pictures the last man perishing under the eyes of the stars. The race of man was only an "accident," a mistake which will be corrected. After all men have died, the world will "resume the old lonely splendor" (SP, pp. 260-261). Nature will remain intact and will flourish after being freed of the plague man brought ("End of the World," BE, p. 20).

In a few poems Jeffers indicates specific means by which humanity may meet obliteration. "The Purse-seine" suggests that political struggles will bring doom. The individual, no longer self-sufficient, will be dependent on all other persons. The

implication is that interdependency will lead to increasingly centralized government. This government will gain such power that society will rebel. Revolution and anarchy will destroy mankind (SP, pp. 588-589). The following passage from "Birth and Death" proposes that the population explosion, with its resulting starvation and disease, will bring destruction;

And the earth is too small to feed us, we must have room.

It seems expedient that not as of old one man, but many nations and races die for the people.

Have you noticed meanwhile the population explosion Of man on earth, the torrents of new-born babies, the bursting schools? Astonishing. It saps man's dignity.

We used to be individuals, not populations.

Perhaps we are now preparing for the great slaughter.

No reason to be alarmed; stone-dead is dead;

Breeding like rabbits we hasten to meet the day.

(BE, p. 30)

In "The Beautiful Captive" the poet offers a third world war as the means of extermination. Those who escape the blasts and explosions will be killed by the radiation. Jeffers concludes the poem by saying that if there is no third world war God will find some other means of eradicating mankind (BE, p. 31).

Although one cannot escape the eventual extermination of man found in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers, the poetry is not without hope. A study of Jeffers' view of death suggests that the very dying out of humanity involves an element of hope, for in death man gains salvation from himself.

Jeffers pictures death as a positive force. He personifies it in these lines:

O Death

Sweet and more sweet is your dancing.

Like the swoon of fulfilment of love in some lonelier
 vale among flowers is the languor that flushes us,
 O why did we fear him, for Death
 Is a beautiful youth and his eyes are sleepy, the lids
 droop heavily with wine when he awakens,
 And his breast is more smooth than a dove's.
 ("Songs of the Dead Men," SP, p. 68)

Young, beautiful, quiet, and gentle, Death brings sweet joy. In "Margrave" the poet compares death to a "gay child that runs the world around with the keys of salvation in his foolish fingers" (SP, p. 374). Since death holds the "keys of salvation" for humanity, it is obviously involved in the fate of humanity. In "Suicide's Stone" Jeffers urges his readers to celebrate the death of a friend with music and fireworks. In death the friend has "found his fortune" (SP, p. 85).

Even while alive, the individual is influenced positively by the inevitability of death. "Where I?" tells of a woman who knows she has less than a year to live. When she looks at her body she knows that soon it will be destroyed. Formerly she was lazy, lifeless, and indifferent, but now she is eager, alert, and animated. Knowledge of approaching death has actually given her true life (SP, p. 575).

Jeffers believes that as death is a blessing, eternal life would be a curse. In "Meditation on Saviors" he argues that the race of man would indeed be pitiable were each man to live forever. However, men do not live eternally and are, therefore, not deserving of pity (SP, pp. 203-204). The following lines from "Animula" express Jeffers' horror at the thought of immortality:

The immortality of the soul--
 God save us from it! To live for seventy years is a

burden--

To live eternally, poor little soul--
 Not the chief devil could inflict nor endure it.
 (BE, p. 71)

The poet sees the state of death as superior to the state of life. While alive, a person is subject to the tiresome burden of consciousness; he cannot free himself of the activity of his mind. In death one simply lies down to rest from this burden. The mind dissolves quietly, and the body blends with the ground ("The Low Sky," SP, p. 466). Life pushes the individual to achieve, to leave something behind him. Life causes him to feel inadequate, but "no dead man's lip was ever curled in self-scorn" ("The Giant's Ring," SP, p. 468). The superiority of death is confirmed by the poems in which Jeffers allows dead men to speak. The dead of "Ghosts in England" are not tormented by a "great past and a declining present." They assure the living that "failure is not the worm that worries the dead, you will not weep when you come" (SP, p. 478). The speaker of "Ossian's Grave" says:

We dead have our peculiar pleasures, of not
 Doing, of not feeling, of not being.
 Enough has been felt, enough done, Oh and surely
 Enough of humanity has been. We lie under stones
 Or drift through the endless northern twilights
 And draw over our pale survivors the net of our dream.
 All their lives are less
 Substantial than one of our deaths (SP, p. 464)

Occasionally the attitude of the dead toward the living is one of amusement, as in "Shooting Season" (SP, p. 477), or of contempt as in these lines from "In the Hill at New Grange":

By God if we dead that watch the living
 Could open our mouths, the earth would be split with
 laughter. (SP, p. 471)

Peace is seldom found while one is alive. When it is found, it lasts only temporarily. The dead, however, are "bathed in God's peace," and that peace cannot be taken away from them ("In the Hill at New Grange," SP, p. 469; "Patronymic," BE, p. 55).

The greatest blessing Jeffers sees in death is its uniting of man with nature. "Inscription for a Gravestone" is a description of this process. The narrator explains that he is not dead; he has simply become inhuman. The pride and the weakness of humanity have been abandoned. No longer conscious, he is free from "good and evil" and from "pleasure and pain." Now he is a part of that beauty which he so loved while alive (SP, p. 480).

Although the poet sees death as a beautiful savior, he does not advocate bringing it about prematurely through suicide. To avoid death for a time is "virtuous"; to fear it is "insane" ("Margrave," SP, p. 374). Man's dislike of death and his desire for death should be balanced so that he may live and die properly ("The Bed by the Window," SP, p. 362). "Integrity in life" and "integrity in death" are both possible if one realizes that "the enormous invulnerable beauty of things" survives him ("Nova," SP, pp. 597-598). It not only survives him, but also takes him into itself;

. . . death comes and plucks us: we become part of the
 living earth.
 And wind and water whom we so loved. We are they.
 ("The Shears," BE, p. 72)

For those readers who seek hope for man during his lifetime, Jeffers does make very specific suggestions for remedying man's problems and his unhappiness while he still lives. One suggestion involves his emphasis on the simple life. In a number of poems he

advises the life of farmers and shepherds as a beginning. People in these occupations are out-of-doors. They have continuous physical contact with animals and with nature. Man should have few tools, few weapons, and few neighbors. He should not absorb himself with reading or complex thought; his mental and emotional activity should be simple. Jeffers would urge man to resist civilization, which is like "an old drunken whore, pathetically eager to impose the seduction of her fled charms on all that through ignorance or isolation might have escaped them" ("The Coast Road," SP, p. 581). Doctors, lawyers, and constables only complicate life and should not, therefore, be included in this simple existence. The simple life has more beauty even if it is narrower.

Occasionally Jeffers speaks of an inner peace. He dwells on this subject at length in "The Truce and the Peace." Man's essential nature, his soul, cannot be given away. If he can bring himself to a discovery of this inner self, he will find the capacity for cultivating a peace there which nothing can shake or destroy. Such peace, Jeffers says, "is not hard to find," for, "it lies more near than breathing to the breast," ("The Truce and the Peace," SP, p. 76). The cultivation of this inner peace is another of Jeffers' suggestions for bringing happiness into one's life. He speculates in "An Artist" that this peace combined with human suffering might even improve man enough to make him worthy of existing beside other parts of nature (SP, p. 194).

The following lines state explicitly Jeffers' analysis of man's problems and the solution for those problems: ". . . to see

the human figure in all things in man's disease; / To see the inhuman God is our health" ("See the Human Figure," BE, p. 66). "Turn outward, love things, not men . . ." ("Signpost," SP, p. 574). Proud and arrogant, man sees himself as the center of the universe. He evaluates all things according to their effect upon him. Because he sees his fate as being of the utmost importance, he demands justice and mercy. Feeling superior to all other aspects of life, he even fancies that he has authority over nature. Jeffers attacks all these tendencies. Man's problems stem from his belief that he occupies an honored position in the universe. If he realizes that this is not true, there is hope for him. Man must forget himself and look for the "inhuman God." This is a phrase Jeffers uses very frequently, a phrase which is important in his philosophy of man. God is not like a man blessed with infinite powers, for His essential nature differs from that of man. God is inhuman in two senses. He is not like man; He is indifferent toward man. Jeffers writes of this God, "The world's God treacherous and full of unreason; a torturer, but also / The only foundation and the only fountain" ("Birth-dues," SP, p. 262). God appears callous and unconcerned about man's needs; yet, paradoxically, it is only in seeking Him that man's needs can be met. When the poet speaks of man's seeking the inhuman God, he means man's recognizing that there is a fate going on outside the little world men construct for themselves. He means that man must think of himself as only a relatively insignificant part of that fate. What Jeffers is asking the individual to do is not completely new. In the Old Testament story of Job, a righteous man suffers greatly.

Man, apart from the whole of the universe, is ugly. That is why those who see the universe as revolving around man are subject to despair. If one loves the whole he will not be shaken by the ugliness of one minor part. The whole is fantastically beautiful. Speaking of his granddaughter Jeffers said: "I hope she will find . . . / The beauty of things--the beauty of transhuman things, / Without which we are all lost," ("Granddaughter," BE, p. 60). Referring to his wife he wrote:

As for me, I have to consider and take thought
Before I can feel the beautiful secret
In places and stars and stones. To her it came
freely,
I wish that all human creatures might feel it.
That would make joy in the world, and make men perhaps
a little nobler

("Salvage," BE, p. 63)

When man recognizes the beauty of nature, he has access to joy and to nobility. The following lines imply that he also will have access to truth:

Then search for truth is foredoomed and frustrate?
Only stained fragments?

Until the mind has turned its
love from itself and man, from parts to the whole.

("Theory of Truth," SP, p. 615)

In "Nova" Jeffers says that after one has discovered the "enormous invulnerable beauty of things," he can ". . . live gladly in its presence, and die without grief or fear knowing it survives us" (SP, p. 598).

Jeffers anticipated the reception his philosophy would receive. He knew man well enough to foresee the resentment felt toward any system of thought which does not make man the center of the universe. The poet believed, however, that eventually humanity would embrace

his ideas and thus find the hope which they offer. The following lines from "Going to Horse Flats" serve as an excellent summary of Jeffers' philosophy of man:

Man's world is a tragic music and is not played
for man's happiness,
Its discords are not resolved but by other discords.

But for each man
There is real solution, let him turn from himself
and man to love God. He is out of the trap
then. He will remain
Part of the music, but will hear it as the player
hears it.
He will be superior to death and fortune, unmoved by
success or failure. Pity can make him weep still,
Or pain convulse him, but not to the center, and he
can conquer them But how could I impart
his knowledge
To that old man?

Or indeed to anyone? I know that
all men instinctively rebel against it. But yet
They will come to it at last.
Then man will have come of age; he will still suffer
and still die, but like a God, not a tortured
animal.

("Going to Horse Flats," SP, pp. 583-584)

This is not nihilism. It is inhumanism. However, even as an
inhumanist, Robinson Jeffers offers man beauty, joy, peace, dignity,
nobility, and truth. His poetry does indeed present hope for
humanity.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an investigation of that philosophy of man which is responsible for the extreme praise and blame Robinson Jeffers' poetry has received, and which it will probably continue to receive. There has been no attempt in this study to determine the worth of Jeffers' poetry in itself. However, it should be noted that if success in presenting a consistent philosophy of man throughout an entire poetic career is a valid criterion for the evaluation of poetry, then one is obligated to acknowledge the poetic genius of Robinson Jeffers.

He sees the race of man as childish, selfish, proud, and deceived. He cites specific instances of man's despicable behavior and gives vivid descriptions of man's inadequacies. Occasionally, he reminds himself and his readers that man behaves as he does because of the ages of torment and danger through which the process of evolution has brought him.

Man fancies himself the triumph of the universe and the lord of nature. Actually, he is only an insignificant part of nature. He is inferior to the animals, the plants, the mountains, and the oceans, for they understand and are true to their natures while man cannot understand himself or the contribution he is to make to the whole of life. Nature is an expression of God. Through observation

of nature man may learn about God. The Deity seems unfriendly and hostile toward man; but, paradoxically, it is only in loving God that man's needs can be met.

Jeffers prophesies that the race of man will ultimately be obliterated. This destruction may be accomplished through a third world war; through revolution and anarchy; through famine, starvation, and disease; or through some other means that a violent God will devise. Man has plagued nature, but nature will be relieved of the burden man brought and will continue to flourish long after the last man has perished.

There is hope for man in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers. Death is inevitable for every individual and will save every man from himself. Death is a superior state to living. For those interested in improving themselves while still alive, Jeffers makes specific suggestions. They should seek a more simple existence, away from the corrupting influences of civilization. They should rid themselves of the notion that man is deserving of special treatment from the universe, and should recognize that there is a fate larger than the fate of humanity. They must learn to love God and His expression in nature rather than loving man. They must accept violence as God's way of establishing new values. These changes in attitude will alleviate the suffering and the unhappiness found in men's lives.

The fact that a reader cannot accept for himself the philosophy of man which Jeffers develops in his poetry is irrelevant. It is obvious from close exposure to his poetry that Jeffers can

accept it himself. Furthermore, he succeeds in presenting this philosophy in a clear and interesting fashion through the medium of poetry. Robinson Jeffers is a success philosophically and poetically.

Robinson Jeffers, *Selected Poems*, New York: The Modern Library, 1932.

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