

THE SELF-REFLEXIVE PHILOSOPHY OF ROBINSON JEFFERS

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The poetry of Robinson Jeffers is consistently haunted by a philosophy that seems to insist on the insignificance of humanity, especially when humanity is compared with the natural world. Robinson Jeffers criticism has long recognized the importance of this philosophy to an understanding of Jeffers' poetry, but critical reactions have differed wildly concerning the success of the haunting. Kenneth Rexroth strongly condemns the poetry and philosophy:

His philosophy I find a mass of contradictions -- high-flown statements indulged in for their melodrama alone, and often essentially meaningless. The constantly repeated gospel that it is better to be a rock than a man is simply an unscrupulous use of language.¹

William Everson is more positive:

In the mature work of his supreme middle years he hurled his indictments and asserted his pronouncements with pulverizing intensity.²

These two positions, despite their different evaluative stances, share a similar approach: they see the poetry as a manifestation of the philosophy; but they also fail to recognize

that the poetry undermines the philosophy even as it is expressed, essentially because it is expressed.

Jeffers' philosophy emerged through narrative works such as "Tamar," "Roan Stallion," and "Thurso's Landing" to eventually become a vision cosmic in scope.³ However, despite the complexity of its poetic expressions, Jeffers was eventually able to clarify it into a convenient scheme:

First: Man also is a part of nature, not a miraculous intrusion. And he is a very small part of a very big universe, that was here before he appeared, and will be long after he has totally ceased to exist.

Second: Man would be better, more sane and more happy, if he devoted less attention and less passion (love, hate, etc.) to his own species and more to non-human nature. Extreme introversion in any single person is a kind of insanity; so it is in a race; and race has always and increasingly spent too much thought on itself and too little on the world outside.

Third: It is easy to see a tree, a rock, a star are beautiful; it is hard to see that people are beautiful unless you consider them as part of the universe -- the divine whole. You cannot judge or value any part except in relation to the whole it is part of.⁴

Jeffers added one more component to his philosophy, a natural deism, or pantheism as Jeffers himself reluctantly named it,⁵ giving his philosophy an essentially four-tenet structure; he also gave it a name, Inhumanism, which was meant to signify the shift of attention Jeffers wanted to achieve, a shift of

for waiting, for standing; the difference is that between positive action and helpless passivity.

The first section of the poem ends with the emergence of a new symbolic pair that builds upon the differences now signified by the sky and the earth; thus the differences between the hawk and humanity are explored:

He is strong and pain is worse to the strong....
The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to
those
that ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.
You do not know him, you communal people, or you
have forgotten him;
Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;
Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are
dying, remember him (198).

With the exception of the last line, this section of the poem continues to present the hawk as a singular image while the first introduction of humanity is plural, 'people.' The use of the singular hawk would seem to emphasize its independence while the use of the plural 'people' would seem to emphasize humanity's collective dependence. The hawk is characterized by words such as 'strong,' 'intemperate,' 'savage,' and 'arrogant.' Humanity is linked to words like 'mercy,' and 'communal;' humanity also forgets. The words mercy and communal and the action of forgetting seem to imply weakness. Thus the differences of hawk and humanity are governed by significations of independence and dependence and strength and weakness. The introduction of a synthesizing term, 'God,' begins the process

of evaluating these qualities, a process which is to result in the shift of attention away from human values to those of nature.

'The wild God of the world' is a being above both hawk and humanity, the dispenser of mercy, and perhaps the poetic incarnation of the fourth tenet of Jeffers' Inhumanism. As dispenser of mercy this god is also a judge, an evaluator, a signifier for ultimate values. The hawk, unencumbered with communal human affairs — independent, arrogant, strong — remembers this god; the hawk and the god are linked. Humanity, communal and weak, has forgotten him; humanity and god are estranged. Thus there is a third over-riding symbolic pair comprised of transcendent values, signified by the hawk, and merely human values, signified by humanity. The second section of the poem explores this pair further by introducing a new element into the poem, the persona of the poet.

Section two begins: "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (198). This line accomplishes two things: first it introduces a persona into the scene heretofore dominated by the hawk, and second it introduces the hypothetical choice contemplated by that persona. In a sense, the symbolic pairs of the first section are transformed by this line, for the hypothetical choice — that between a hawk and a man — recasts into choices the sky and the earth, the hawk and humanity, and transcendent values and human values. The denouement of the poem, the mercy killing of the hawk by the persona, plays to these choices by describing the transcendent ascension of the hawk's spirit through the

persona's final decision:

I gave him the lead gift in the twilight.
What fell was relaxed,
Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what
Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the flooded
river cried fear at its rising
Before it was quite unsheathed from reality (199).

The hawk is reunited with the heavens; its strength inspires fear. Behind it, earth bound, is its soft, feminine body. The denouement, then, like the 'wild' god of the first section, serves to emphasize the importance of the first terms of the symbolic pairs Jeffers has given to his poem by celebrating the final return of the hawk to the sky; the celebration of this 'fierce rush' recalls those aspects of Inhumanism that emphasize the importance and the beauty of nature, turning attention away from mankind toward the transcendent, 'wild God of the world.' In one sense, this reading of the poem, in terms of Jeffers' philosophy, would seem to be adequate; however, the first line of the second section calls attention to another element of the poem: it is the only line that seems self-reflexive, that calls attention to itself as language play, and it is this line that undermines a provisional reading of this poem as an assertion of Jeffers' philosophy.

"I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk," on one level, is a statement consistent with the Jeffers Inhumanist philosophy: it quite matter-of-factly is a statement by the poet's persona of preference for the

world of the not-human. But within this line is the limiting phrase "except the penalties," and this phrase triggers a choice of possible significations that lead to questions about the felicity of expressions that shift attention away from the non-human world.

This line of the poem points to a hypothetical choice: if the persona could choose, he would prefer the hawk to the man, even if the choice extended to homicide. But the condition, "except the penalties," mitigates the bald assertion of such a preference; the penalties for homicide are too severe. However, the mitigating condition is not so easily explained, for the word 'except,' the signifier that indicates the penalties' power over the persona, also conjures the sound of its homophone, 'accept'; here the language of the poem undermines a simple reading: the hypothetical choice between a hawk and humanity is complicated by the simultaneous imposition and defiance of human values.

In more detail, if the signifier 'except' is taken to signify the word 'except,' then the persona is in a weak position: in this case the poet will have, paradoxically, accepted the power of the penalties to prevent an anti-social action, in essence accepting the power of the 'communal people' of the first section of the poem. If instead the signifier 'except' is heard to signify the word 'accept,' a possibility a reader is forced to consider at least provisionally due to the language play of homophones, then the persona is in a stronger position: in this case the poet will have, paradoxically, excepted himself from the power of the penalties

to prevent anti-social action, in essence defying the power of the 'communal people' to influence his actions, while at the same time accepting the penalties themselves.

The importance of this choice is not the eventual decision that comes from it -- in fact the particular choice between man and hawk is hypothetical; the persona never actually makes this particular choice despite the fact that it foreshadows the eventual choice between life and death that the persona makes on behalf of the wounded hawk. Instead, the importance of this choice is that it focuses attention back to the persona himself and the philosophy he would seem to assert. If the persona is influenced by the penalties he accepts the human world and its values by avoiding a particular action; if he is not prevented by the penalties from a particular action, he still is forced to accept the human world and its values by virtue of the fact that he has chosen to accept the penalties themselves. In either case, what becomes clear is that the language play -- the ambiguous signifier 'except' -- has forced attention away from the values of the 'wild God of the world' and toward the values of humanity. In a sense, the symbolic pairs of the first section, with their first terms privileged by their association with the inhuman world, have been overturned: the fact of language use has thrust the world of humanity into the field of attention; it is no longer nature that possesses values but humanity that bestows them. The hawk -- with all the tenets of Inhumanism that he might be seen to signify -- yields his position of privilege to mankind who assumes the role of evaluator.

"Hurt Hawks" is thus a complicated assertion of a philosophy that is undermined, in a sense, by the very fact that it is expressed in language. And the simultaneity of this process is not only an aspect of Jeffers' poetry; when Jeffers chose the name Inhumanism for his philosophy he was essentially engaging in the same linguistic give and take, for while the name Inhumanism was meant to signify the importance of the 'not-human,' the word undermines itself by calling attention to its own use as language: an unusual and value-significant word like Inhumanism asserts its human origins and recalls the definition of man as a symbol making animal. Thus there seems to be a certain irony to Jeffers' philosophy, an irony that is signified in his poetry and that lends the poetry an indeterminate ambiguity that enriches reading. Rexroth's petulant charge that the assertion that it is a better thing to be a rock than a man is an "unscrupulous use of language" seems to lose its force; it is precisely because it is a use of language that Jeffers poetry and philosophy question their own assertions.

Hurt Hawks

I

The broken pillar of the wing jags from the clotted shoulder,
The wing trails like a banner in defeat,
No more to use the sky forever but live with famine
And pain a few days: cat nor coyote
Will shorten the week of waiting for death, there is game with-
out talons.

He stands under the oak-bush and waits
The lame feet of salvation; at night he remembers freedom
And flies in a dream, the dawns ruin it.
He is strong and pain is worse to the strong, incapacity is worse.
The curs of the day come and torment him
At distance, no one but death the redeemer will humble that head.
The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.
You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten
him;
Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;
Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember
him.

II

I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk; but
the great redtail

Had nothing left but unable misery

From the bones too shattered for mending, the wing that
trailed under his talons when he moved.

We had fed him six weeks, I gave him freedom,

He wandered over the foreland hill and returned in the evening,
asking for death,

Not like a beggar, still eyed with the old

Implacable arrogance. I gave him the lead gift in the twilight.

What fell was relaxed,

Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers, but what

Soared: the fierce rush: the night- herons by the flooded river
cried fear at its rising

Before it was quite unsheathed from reality (189-199).

NOTES

¹Kenneth Rexroth, "In Defense of Robinson Jeffers," Saturday Review of Literature (August 10, 1957), 30.

²Brother Antoninus (William Everson), Fragments of an Older Fury (Berkley: Oyez Press, 1968) 59.

³For a complete explication of Jeffers' emergent philosophy consult: Arthur B. Coffin, Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1971); for a full exploration of the philosophical roots of Inhumanism refer to: Radcliffe Squires, The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1956).

⁴Robinson Jeffers, The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers, ed. Ann N. Ridgeway (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968) 291.

⁵Robinson Jeffers, Themes in My Poems (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1956) 23-24.

⁶Robinson Jeffers, Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers (New York: Random House, 1959) 198. All subsequent page references in the text will refer to this specific edition.