Robinson Jeffers: “The Love and the Hate”
An Overlooked Work

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Introduction

I discovered the work of Robinson Jeffers in preparation of my visit to Tor House during my outside experience. His work first interested me because of his penchant for long lines and the narrative form. I was, and remain, intrigued by the way Jeffers uses the landscape of coastal California as a metaphor.

My reaction to “The Love and the Hate” came as a surprise. When I began to read *The Double Axe* I had no idea that “The Love and the Hate” was such a brutal poem. I recall shaking, as I sat in an idyllic setting overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Carmel thinking, “what in the world am I reading? This is a story that is more than what it appears to be on the surface.”

The first time I read the poem, I only had the volume with the publisher’s “note” with none of the background as to how this “note” came to be. I was puzzled, as it is so highly unusual for a publisher to release a work and yet make it clear that the publishing house does not wholeheartedly support the book. It was this puzzlement, combined with my personal reaction, that sent me on to researching critical responses to the poem and reading the work more deeply to explore its classical foundation.

Jeffers was an isolationist. Through his poetry, he preached that mankind is motivated by hatred, envy, greed. He lived his own life in a simple manner, building around him a stone house without electricity or many modern day conveniences. While his wife Una greeted visitors – everyone from Stravinsky to Edna St. Vincent Millay – to Tor House, Jeffers abhorred being famous. He was well into his fifties by the time he gave his first public reading. He hated too, the growing popularity of Carmel and on
many a social gathering Jeffers would wander off alone for the afternoon. Jeffers’s poetry reflects his values.

For Jeffers, the beauty of nature lies in what is permanent. “Finally I say let demagogues and world-redeemers babble/ their emptiness/ To empty ears; twice duped is too much./ Walk on gaunt shores and avoid the people; rock and/ wave are good prophets” (DA 119).

Jeffers believed that Roosevelt, Churchill, and the other leaders of the Allied Forces, set false goals which led to participation in WWII. I agree with Selden Rodman, who writes in his essay “Transhuman Magnificence,” that it is folly to think that the Allied leaders “spoke only for themselves and from the vilest of motives, and that from now on we have nothing better to do than give our hearts to hawks” (Karman CE 158). The United States could not have avoided World War II. But, over sixty years from the first publication of this volume, with the histories of Korea and Vietnam behind us and the current war raging without an exit plan, I do believe Jeffers’s poems continue to be vital and relevant.

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Robinson Jeffers’ “The Love and the Hate”: An Overlooked Work

_Patriotism has run the world through so many blood-lakes;
and we always fall in._

—Robinson Jeffers

As an American poet profoundly affected by two world wars, Robinson Jeffers spares his reader no solace or forgiveness for the propensity of humans to repeat history. “The Love and the Hate” is a passionate and intentionally violent narrative poem written to stir the reader out of complacency. While resigned to the nature of humans to create wars, Jeffers puts to use his democratic right to protest the United States actions in World War II by writing a poem set against the classic tragedy of the _Oresteia_.

“The Love and the Hate” is still considered (by those who consider it at all) a prime example of Jeffers’s didacticism. The lack of interest in the poem, I would argue, stems from an irrational public stance against it driven by Jeffers’s publisher in the context of a post World War II, blind patriotic culture. The poem’s extreme rage combined with a narrative that verges on prose, lays the groundwork for future poets.

Jeffers’s editor at Random House, wrote an unprecedented note at the beginning of the book which, while acknowledging the longstanding relationship between publisher and poet, went on to indicate that the publishing house “felt compelled to go on record with its disagreement over some of the political views pronounced by the poet.” (DA xiii). This statement was greeted with “cheerful consent” (DA xxi) by Jeffers who went on to point out to the reader that “it is futile at present to argue the matters [of war]...they are not particularly important...they are only the background or moral climate, of its thought and action” (DA xxii). In other words, Jeffers’s intentionally employed universal
themes central to classical tragedy to amplify the corruption that comes as a result of retribution, violence begetting violence, and revenge begetting revenge.

Jeffers is not anti-American in this poem, rather he is stating his profound angst at what America had become. This is supported by the fact that Jeffers wrote the “The Love and the Hate” at a time when his son Garth was fighting in World War II, and when even though he was opposed to the United States participation in the conflict, he flew the American flag from his iconic Hawk Tower in Carmel, California. The metaphor of “The Love and the Hate” is with war, no matter who wins, both sides of the conflict lose because the loss of life, youth, and soldiers’ permanent injuries weigh more deeply than any gain.

In Jeffers’s Tor House library there are copies of both Æschylus and Whitman. These influences are dramatically present in this poem. Jeffers relies on the classics to contemпорize a Greek tragedy. Like Whitman, he seeks love and compassion for the United States. However, the two men, Whitman and Jeffers, are polar opposites in their conclusions about the future of the United States. Whereas Whitman envisioned a bright future for post-Civil War America, Jeffers foresaw a third World War – a final destruction for America and the world.

The reigning poets of Jeffers’s period, Pound and Eliot in particular, had a profound distaste for Jeffers’s work, and Jeffers himself recognized that his work was not in concert with modern trends. Jeffers, in fact, was proud of these differences. In an article for the New York Times, “Poetry, Góngorism, and a Thousand Years,” he called “The Waste Land” by T. S. Eliot “one of the finest poems of this century and surely the most influential.” But he also felt it marked the close of a literary dynasty, since he
believed that poets should not follow fashion but instead, write for the future as he himself felt committed to do.

In this same article, and also, in the Preface to *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, Jeffers clearly articulates his poetic philosophy: “I have not sympathy with the notion the world owes a duty to poetry, or any other art. Poetry is not a civilizer, rather the reverse, for great poetry appeals to the most primitive instincts. It is not necessarily a moralizer; it does not necessarily improve one’s character; it does not even teach good manners. It is a beautiful work of nature, like an eagle or a high sunrise. You owe it not duty. If you like it, listen to it; if not, let it alone.”

This philosophy gave Jeffers the freedom to eschew a public audience and write only for himself. He also understood that poetry evokes immediate emotional response. But, this was neither conventional, nor an accepted approach, to the creative work of the 1940s and 50s, most of which downplayed controversy or tension. Americans sought solace in what was sweet, non-confrontational.

This desire for solace was so pervasive that it led critics and reviewers alike to misjudge “The Love and the Hate,” by ignoring the ways the poem is an extension of classic tradition.

Mark Jarman, in his insightful article “Robinson Jeffers: The Love and the Hate” argues that Jeffers used the story of Hamlet as a basis for the poem. I propose that he also used these sources: Æschylus’s *The Oresteia*, the *New Testament*, and Dante’s *Inferno*. I base this argument upon a discussion I had last fall with Robert Brophy at Tor House in which I learned that by the time Jeffers was 12, he fluently read and wrote Greek and
Latin. Because of this early training, it is safe to assume that Jeffers consistently returned to the work of Æschylus, Euripides and Sophocles.

“The Tower Beyond Tragedy,” from *The Roan Stallion* is for example, a direct re-writing of *The Oresteia*. In this work, Jeffers specifically “preserves elements of the Greek trilogy” (Brophy MR 116) in his dramatic form. “The Love and the Hate,” however, flows as a narrative and was coupled with a longer second narrative in *The Double Axe*, “The Inhumanist,” which clearly states Jeffers’s personal philosophy. “(Inhumanism) neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty” (DA xxi). While “The Inhumanist” speaks to the beauty of nature and how the human race is determined to destroy it, “The Love and the Hate” directly addresses the results of jealousy, revenge, and irrational acts of retribution. Writing these poems during the War and the period immediately following, Jeffers is grappling with humanity’s penchant for self-destruction. In both these poems, he is seeking inner truth, solace and centering. The principal character in “The Inhumanist” retreats to Big Sur. Jeffers asks “What does God want?” (DA 56). This central question drives both poems. In his own life, Jeffers grounded himself in his marriage to Una Custer, keeping his life as secluded as possible behind the stone walls of Tor House. He saw God in nature and beauty and found spirituality in the land and sea.

Many of Jeffers’s poems are violent and disturbing. Jarman states that the narrative action in “The Love and the Hate” is so terrible that some critics have considered it illogical, and that because of this have concluded that the poem itself a
failure (Jarman 91). Kenneth Rexroth articulates this point of view in his essay In Defense of Jeffers:

In my opinion Jeffers’s verse is shoddy and pretentious and the philosophizing is nothing but posturing. His reworkings of Greek tragic plots make me shudder at their vulgarity, the coarsening of sensibility the cheapening of the language and the tawdriness of the paltry insight into the great ancient meanings. (Karman 205)

Rexroth’s statement misses Jeffers’s point. The Greek tragedies were supposed to be vulgar, in the sense of the vulgus representing the mob or common people. Jeffers viewed WWII as a tragic event, a vulgar event, and in the classic meaning of the word tragedy he believed it would lead to the downfall of civilization.

Predictably, Jeffers sets “The Love and the Hate” in the central coast of California. Unlike in many of his poems, the landscape is not the main character yet, it is not insignificant either. It is a metaphor for purity, and its destruction in the end represents the physical cleansing of the soul.

Like the Oresteia, “The Love and the Hate” is a domestic tragedy but beyond it “lies the tragedy of war” (Æ 11). As in the Agamemnon, no reason can match the result of destruction. The principal characters in the poem are Hoult Gore, his mother, Reine, his father, Bull Gore, and his best friend and mother’s lover, Dave Larson. Hoult Gore is the prodigal son whose ghost returns to the Gore ranch, located on the California central coast. He had been killed by Japanese on Meserole Island in the South Pacific. Hoult returns to avenge the robbing of his own existence through the subsequent destruction of his family at his own hand.
“Agamemnon,” the first play of Oresteia, opens with Agamemnon, son of Atreus, returning home weary from battle of Troy with Cassandra, his mistress. He finds his wife, Clytaemestra, has taken his cousin and enemy Aegisthus for a lover. Complicating the plot is the fact that prior to leaving for Troy, Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia. Clytaemestra, can not forgive him, even though it was at the beseechment of Apollo, and even though Agamemnon was going to Troy to save her sister, the beautiful Helen. Clytaemestra has expelled her son Orestes from the Kingdom, and placed her surviving daughter, Electra, in a position of silent servitude.

In partnership with Aegisthus, Clytaemestra commits two murders. First she kills Agamemnon, opening the way for her lover Aegisthus to claim the throne from Orestes. Then she murders Cassandra, the prophetess. Neither of these murders result in bringing good or virtue to Argos and at the close of “Agamemnon,” the door is opened for Aegisthus to cruelly control its citizens.

In “The Libation Bearers,” the second play in the trilogy, Orestes returns to avenge his father’s death. With the approval of Apollo and with Electra’s assistance, he re-enters his house as a stranger, murders Aegisthus and then, Clytaemestra. After the killings, Orestes is driven mad by the sight of his mother’s blood in the heads of snakes. His psychological state is the dramatic irony of revenge, which in the end has delivered not justice but madness. Through the chorus, Æschylus laments that no good can come from retribution, revenge and violence.

In the final play, Orestes’s murderous act is brought to public trial with the goddess Athene presiding. As the play begins, Orestes has taken refuge from the Furies
in Delphi at the Pythian Apollo. Apollo drives them away to protect him. But, the Furies representing the people, demand Orestes be brought to trial.

The scene moves to the Acropolis in Athens before the temple of Athene. After Athene has heard the petitions for justice by the Furies, Apollo stands up to speak for Orestes. The Furies refuse his interference and Athene sees that a court of judges must be gathered.

Orestes admits to killing his mother but believes his act was justified. The court then calls Apollo, who supports Orestes. Athene calls for a ballot to determine Orestes’s guilt or innocence. When the votes are tied, she breaks the tie in Orestes’s favor. The cycle of revenge perpetuated for generations, only most recently by Orestes, must end. She risks the wrath of the Furies by offering them sanctuary, beseeching them to love, do good, and forgive. They accept her offer, trading their angry spirits for kindness.

Jeffers pays tribute to Cassandra, in a poem by that name in which he writes what he perceived to be the real truth: the country was led into WWII as a result of government deception. It is curious that he did not write an homage to Athene as well, though in “The Love and the Hate,” Jeffers, the writer, plays out her search for justice. It is this search which drives the character Hoult, and in the end Reine, insane and to their deaths. Unlike in The Oresteia, however, Jeffers offers us no Furies to forgive and create a better world.

Hoult Gore embodies both Orestes and Agamemnon. He returns home to find his mother in dizzy gaiety, without “shame or disturbance,” (DA 3) having just slept with her young lover, Dave Larson. Jeffers names his characters to evoke the metaphor of who they are. The mother’s name (French: queen) gives the character a multifaceted
dimension which is explored throughout the poem. The father, Bull Gore, by contrast is one dimensional. By enthusiastically sending his son to war, he has literally gored his son’s life. The only character whose name is not an overt metaphor is Dave Larson.

Jeffers expands Reine’s character to represent “old” Europe. Dave Larson represents the United States, and the physical, illicit unison between Dave Larson and Reine is the metaphor for the United States saving Europe. In a cruel manner, it is as if the adulterous act is symbolic of what Jeffers perceives to be the old needing the young to be beautiful and powerful once again. Returning to the parallels with The Oresteia, Reine is Clytaemestra and Dave Larson, Aegisthus. Unlike Æschylus’s Aegisthus, however, Jeffers does not fully develop the character of Larson; we only know him as the lover of the mother.

Like Orestes and Agamemnon, Hoult returns knowing he will find deceit. This is not implicit in Jeffers’s language but implied in Hoult’s actions. In fact, it is not until nearly the bottom of the second page, after some babbling by Reine, that he utters a word: “‘Yeh,’ he said, “I came home. All hell couldn’tve stopped me. The will does it” DA 4).

Hoult, like Agamemnon, like Orestes, must come home to settle a score. But, as the editors of Oresteia point out “All executioners plead that they act for just retribution, but the chain of murder has got out of hand and is perpetuating itself, until it seems no longer to come from personal purpose but has grown into a Curse, a Thing. Every correction is a blood-bath which calls for new correction” (Æ 15).

Initially, Hoult is vengeful toward both his mother and his father. He believes that he was sent to war for a lie and is naturally bitter that the lie has cost him his life. He comes back to life having pulled himself out of his grave and proclaims that he does not
understand how his dead fellow soldiers could remain buried “After being gypped and killed? Gypped by their governments/And their fathers and their women: gypped out of life/fooled and despised and lied to” (DA 7). Reine does not realize Hoult is dead, but the ranch help, the servant girl Jesusa, and the ranch hand Soto do. Fearing the evil spirit that has descended upon the ranch, both escape.

Bull Gore is not home when Hoult first appears, and Hoult appeals to his mother not to tell his father he has returned. The second morning of the narrative, Hoult goes out riding and his father walks out of the house. Hoult, from afar, cruelly kills the dog Rosie who was walking next to Gore. This is Bull Gore’s first sighting of his son. A second dog bites Hoult; the father asks if Hoult is cut. Hoult says “The cloth is rotten and so is the flesh...so is the blood” (DA 12).

This line, like the line from Dante, “when a soul betrays as I did, it falls from its flesh and a demon takes its place” (D 279) has a double meaning: first that a demon has over taken Hoult and like Orestes, he is being driven mad, and second that Hoult’s soul was betrayed, and he, the flesh and blood of his parents, is now rotten. The sight of Orestes being driven mad by his mother’s own blood comes to mind as Jeffers illustrates how retribution and revenge drive people to madness. It is war which has driven Hoult insane and it is the writer Jeffers who speaks through him begging to his readership to decry this evil.

Bull Gore, not knowing what to make of his son, returns his horse to the barn. Reine pleads with Hoult to be patient with Bull and wonders where Hoult has been riding to at such an early hour. In answer, Hoult tells her he has been to see Larson to invite him deer hunting (the season opens in two days); he lashes out at his mother for sleeping
with this man. She continues to deny that act, and in a maternal way places her hand on Hoult’s to find it burning with fever.

Hoult says: “Sure, decomposition’s/A kind of fever. Rotten wood shines in the
dark/Rotten hay-ricks catch fire. Rotten countries make war. Rotten old women/Seduce
boys. Did you get him drunk first?” (DA 15).

Bull Gore reappears and we learn for the first time directly, that Hoult has
returned for retaliation. Gore wants to know how long Hoult’s furlough is and Hoult
responds that he has stolen the clothes he is wearing, then in a rather long passage,
graphically explains the horrors of war to his father and taunts him for not having seen a
flame thrower, and so not knowing what damage flames can do. Like Cassandra, Hoult
declares that as a result of this the earth will be scorched and its fruit withered. Bull Gore
reasons that his son has lost his mind, and though seething, excuses his ranting.

Hoult continues his tirade, now this time focused at Reine. Here he plays out
love and hate saying in one breath his death “nearly dissolved in the rank flesh of the
island: I saw your face/Leaning over me like a little thin moon/In that black sky. God,
how I hated you” (20) and in the next: “You are beautiful, Mother./I didn’t know you
were beautiful. I/am evil, I think, an offense against Nature, an evil will/Bearing up a
corpse: will you put your arms around me/And kiss me? I am lonely in pain” (DA 21).

Reine responds by telling Hoult that she is not the one who sent him off to war –
the implication being that was Gore’s bidding. When Hoult grovels for affection, she is
repulsed.

Jeffers then takes the story to new level. As Christ asked the apostle Thomas to
touch his wound, Hoult asks his mother to touch his. This scene is an odd, simulated
incestuous act between mother and son. It is a purposeful climax, in which Jeffers graphically illustrates the brutality and injury resulting from war. We must keep in mind that Jeffers’s tactic here is revolutionary. In the 1940s and early 50s, writers, filmmakers and other artists glorified the victories of war rather than depict its horror. It was also a time when soldiers, returning from war, kept their memories of battle bottled inside their private souls. Jeffers, by contrast, neither glorified war or victory. Instead, he foreshadows the first Vietnam photographers and journalists who gave the world its first graphic glimpses of war’s damage.

Wounds ravage Hoult’s body and soul and he is unable to purge his pain. He asks for mother’s protection. Reine puts her hand inside of him, feels where his lung should have been, feels the “dreadful/Fever of his body, and the heart flapping and leaping” and Hoult says: “You’re near me now. Oh, I’ve been lonely. Cut off by infinite hate and the foulness of death/From all that live. – Draw it out, dear. The pain” (DA 22-23). As Reine pulls her hand from her son’s body, it is scored on his rib, and her blood drips into his.

Bull Gore can not forgive his son. He can only rationalize by assuming Hoult has deserted. He gives the son 24 hours to stay. He strikes him in reaction to Hoult’s decrying of war then repents his action, blaming Hoult’s condition on battle fatigue. Hoult scoffs at this, tells his father that they will have a “settling” (DA 27) and reminds both parents he has read Tolstoy, and he is “profoundly aware of the irrational motives for human behavior in both peace and war” (SPN).

The least developed character in “The Love and the Hate” is Dave Larson. We know only two things about him. He is Reine’s lover and Hoult’s best friend. We do not
know how much affection he feels for Reine. He is the one character with little memorable dialog. He is symbolically Aegisthus, but an Aegisthus who does not desire revenge. Therefore, his murder is not justified even by Hoult’s natural and uncontrollable jealousy.

On the final day of the narrative, a telegram arrives announcing Hoult’s death. Gore, Reine, and Larson pass it around like children playing Hot Potato. At dinner, Hoult sees the ghosts of three friends who also died, and Jeffers uses them as a Chorus of Furies to join Hoult in tormenting his family. Hoult plays out a parody of the Last Supper. Reine becomes “a Mary Magdalene, [as well as Judas] confessing her sin with Larson and in effect, delivering the life of her lover into Hoult’s hands” (Jarman 93).

She prays “Deliver us from evil, deliver us from evil, deliver us/From evil” (DA 39) while Gore counsels his son that “there have always been wars; and people get killed in them/And now there are more people, there are more killed” (DA 39). Hoult’s question - what is the justification for this war – remains unanswered. Thus, Jeffers, uses the theme of Æschylus to illustrate the slide of the United States from prosperity to ruin.

Jeffers overtly uses Reine, the mother figure, to represent Europe, yet calls her a whore. He uses the affair she had as the metaphor for the merging of Europe and the United States which in the end will be destroyed.

Mother, made yourself perfect – twice now since we’ve taken
An ordinary European kennel- quarrel
And blown it into a world-war, and swollen our fate
Fat with dropsical victories, but wait a little, the third
time’s a charm, the eternal –
Not justice, what is justice? – the eternal
Retaliation – will catch. What’s that to us? Be happy, for
here are four of us, complete and childless,
That are sailing out of these things into carefree eternity. (DA 40)
This speech is reminiscent of Æschylus’ tormenting Chorus: “Where/is the end? Where shall the fury of fate/be stilled to sleep, be done with?” (Æ 144).

The fourth and final day of the drama dawns with the opening of hunting season. The men of the household rise early while Reine continues to sleep. Hoult and Larson leave to go hunting. Bull Gore dislikes hunting, so he does not join them. He chastises Reine for not arising to make coffee. Reine is tormented; she knows the fate awaiting Larson. The description of Reine’s position in bed is the foreboding of what is to become of her lover. “While he (Gore) spoke, a rifle-shot/Clapped in the mountain dawn, and Reine’s whole body/Jerked on the bed as if the bullet had entered her; and again/She lay rigid and still. Gore said, “By God,/That’s a grim kind of sleep” (DA 42).

Hoult returns to the ranch alone and Bull Gore greets him, assuming he has not had hunting success. Hoult replies that he got ‘one.’ Gore is puzzled as he sees no deer, looks to the distance, sees a small campfire and mumbles about hunters and their lack of respect for the land.

Reine is overcome with guilt when she hears of Larson’s murder and becomes a tragic figure, which Hoult, again, directly equates with Europe. The fire in the distance has become an inferno; Gore leaves to try and save his cattle. We see Gore’s resolution and his belief that Hoult is not his son but some shadowy figure. As Bull Gore saddles up he says: “If I had a son/He’d help me now” (DA 46). Hoult shoots him “right in the loins” (DA 47) and the fire whirls and rages around the house.

Hoult sees his execution of his father as justifiable. But in actuality nothing justifies his killing of Bull Gore, any more than there is justification for Aegisthus in
murdering Agamemnon, or the sins of Agamemnon justified his murder by Clytaemestra, or the sins of Paris and Helen justify the obliteration of Troy (Æ 15).

The fire itself becomes a larger metaphor. If there is to be hope for humankind, there must be purification first. But moral decay is larger than one person, one action. As in The Oresteia, the issue is too big for the Gods alone to pronounce justice. It is the fire that by enveloping the household and the ranch returns the land to its natural order. By dying, Bull Gore renounces his power and his ranch. He also restores Hoult’s ability to have ultimate power over his mother.

The house is saved by a leaky water-tank. Hoult, beckoning to Reine, says:

‘Come little rose, little white rose
Among the red ones: there are giants in these days, are you afraid? My corpse is huge.
It covers the western world and sprawls over Asia, people will hold their noses high Mongolia
And choke in London. Come darling. Come, little one.’ (DA 49)

Hoult folds over his mother, his corpse becomes the symbol of the death and destruction of not just World War II but of war throughout time. He is reduced to a small child in need of his mother’s protection:

‘. . . I do not believe that any human being is rank enough
To deserve boiling.’ He was silent and then cried out:
‘Cover me, comfort me,
Cover me with your bed-clothes as when a child
And I was frightened. Oh, why did you ever cast me out of you
Into this butcher’s dream.’ (DA 50)

Here Hoult is grieving not for himself, but all of humanity since in “the Love and the Hate,” there is no court, no justice to stop the violence from being passed from one generation to the next.
The tragedy ends three weeks later. Three African American soldiers from Fort Ord find Reine naked, bereft, insane, lying on the corpse of Hoult. Looking at their skins, she thinks they too, were burned in the fire. Her final speech echoes Athene’s beseechment to the people and the Furies at Orestes’s trial. No good has come of the revenge, the violence, says Athene:

While with good will you hold in high honor
these spirits, their will shall be good, as you steer
your city, your land
on an upright course clear to the end. (Æ 184)

Jeffers updates the goddess in Reine’s final words: “those that cause wars are damned/As those that suffer them” (DA 51). After imploring to the soldiers to be The Kindly Ones, Reine asks them to leave, to let her get dressed. When they do, she takes the gun Hoult used to kill the dog, Larson, and Gore, kisses its barrel and fires the last of the four cartridges into her own mouth. Symbolically, the violence is over. The mother is dead and no children are left to carry the burden of retribution into the future.

Jeffers’s love for the land and its ability to cleanse and heal itself is present at the beginning and end of the piece. We are told at the beginning of the narrative that there had been a great fire that “skinned the hills’ faces.” Then Jeffers says “Nature played one of her beautiful tricks;/she planted them solidly with purple lupin, sheets of pure blossom” (DA 3). At the end, the fire on the ranch (the violence) returns it, and the humans who lived on it, to Nature. In keeping with Jeffers’s belief that things of nature are better than humans, this return is the final blessing. In a second flowering after the fire, Jeffers is pointing toward hope.

In “The Love and the Hate,” Jeffers sees idealism as the true villain, leading world leaders to send youth to fight causes which may better be solved by diplomacy. He
illustrates this point through Hoult’s madness as a result of his war experience and through the shattering of ideals on the Gore ranch.

Orestes’s trial proves a method for containing the violence, even putting an end to it. “The Love and the Hate” is Jeffers’s very public plea - graphic and gruesome as it is – for such an outcome, for society itself to be The Kindly Ones. He, like Athene, is telling readers to love, forgive, and to end the desire for retribution which results in violence against one another and humanity itself.

William Everson points out that “the nation (in the 1940s) was enjoying an interval of rare self-esteem . . . all free nations looked to her [the United States] for security and protection and she felt worthy of it. She saw the ordeal of her triumph as heroic and self-sacrificial after very real privations, and she was enjoying the reward of accelerating prosperity. Into this bland complacent atmosphere Jeffers’s book dropped like a bomb (a stink bomb many thought)” (DA xi).

It is the time and distance between WWII and the present which cries out for a closer look at “The Love and the Hate.” What has been lost in the critical reviews of this work is Jeffers’s own humanity. In a 1941 letter to his son, Jeffers states that both he and Una, his wife, did not want Garth in the war. Yet, in the same letter, he advises to his son to sign up for officers’ training, then admonishes him to be careful, and the letter closes with these words: “Write to us when you can. Come home as soon as you can. All the love in the world from Mother and me and Winnie [the Jeffers’s English bulldog]. Father” (Ridgeway 290).

In assessing Jeffers, I looked at other WWII poets who expressed their views though their work. Randall Jarrell, one of the most recognized poets of this era, wrote
directly from the battlefield. Nowhere in his work does he speak as directly as Jeffers. In

“Soldier [T.P.]:”

What have you learned here? To bear, and be silent.
To do what I must, as I must: that is, to die.
What are the soldier’s answers? Yes, sir;
No, sir; no excuse sir...But (sir) there is no room there, to die –
To die or to live...Hush, no-one is listening.
Ask as you please, there is no one here to reply.
Here what they teach is other people’s deaths;
Who needs to learn why another man should die?
Who has taught you, soldier, why you yourself are dying?
And there is no time, each war, to learn.
You must live or die as the dice are thrown on a blanket;
As the leaf chars or is kindled; as the bough burns. (Jarrell 398)

Jarrell’s syntax is more contemporary than Jeffers’s, yet his intent is no less heart
rendering. However, Jarrell allows the reader the luxury of inferring emotion. Jeffers
does not allow any such distancing. Instead, he demands that this work leave no room for
confusion as to its meaning.

This passion for clarity contributes to the momentum and velocity of all of
Jeffers’s poetry, “The Love and the Hate,” in particular, since in its story the horrors
depicted are forward drivers.

“The Love and the Hate” begins almost pastorally. Technically, its rhythm does
not change when the dialog begins. Instead, Jeffers speeds the momentum by breaking
from one person to the other, mid-line. Sometimes, to stop the reader he inserts a one or
two word line. For example:

On the scuffed earth. ‘Liar,’ he said. She mourned, ‘Oh,
Hoult!
What has happened to you?’ ‘If you hadn’t lied to me
I would’ve told you.
Where’s the old man?’ ‘I,’ she said, ‘... Monterey.’ (DA 5)
Terrence Diggory describes Jeffers’s use of the longer line as a tool which “encourages a reader to run quickly over the several perceptions that may be registered within the line, rather than pausing to dwell on each perception in isolation” (Thesing 29). This kind of pacing is prescient and establishes a foundation for future poets such as Ginsberg in “Howl” and Hass in his prose poetry, such as “Tall Windows.”

Many have written, including Ginsberg himself, about the influence Whitman had upon him. What is not acknowledged, is the influence Jeffers may also have had. In “Howl,” Ginsberg rages at what humanity has become. He laments what has been lost and despairs the future. “Howl’s” first publication was banned and its publisher taken to trial. Some, even, thought it an affront to society. What would have happened to “Howl” if Ferlinghetti and City Lights Books included a similar statement to the note included in The Double Axe? What would have happened to The Double Axe if it had had a forward as supportive as William Carlos Williams’s was in “Howl”?

“Howl” was a galvanizer for an entire generation. Ginsberg’s colleagues flocked to him and stood by him. Jeffers, on the other hand, was left alone to defend (or not, as he chose) his literary accomplishment. Why “Howl” and not “The Love and the Hate?” Could it have been a matter of timing? Ginsberg wrote in a time of celebrated counterculture while Jeffers’s time was, as we have said, not one for risk taking. Yet could “Howl” have received any acceptance at all had not Jeffers work appeared first?

As William Everson points out in the introduction to the 1977 re-printing of the Double Axe, this is a work in which “Jeffers proves himself to be a political poet par excellence . . . No other contemporary verse comes to mind that is quite so brusque,
savage, and intransigent” (DA x). At the request of Jeffers’s editor, eleven poems were taken out of the original addition for being too inflammatory.

Jeffers not only allowed the publisher to print its note and remove the poems, but he, in response, significantly altered his own preface to the book. In its original version, the preface states that the book “perhaps ought to be called ‘The Inhumanist’ rather than ‘The Double Axe.’” It presents, more explicitly than previous poems of mine, a new attitude, a new manner of thought and feeling, which came to me at the end of the war of 1914, and has since been tested in the confusions of peace and a second world-war, and the hateful approach of a third; and I believe it has truth and value. It is based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and abilities are insignificant as our happiness . . .” (DA 172).

In the first published version of the Preface, Jeffers simply comments that the first part of Double Axe was written during the war and significantly shortens and diminishes his philosophical discussion. He states: “As to the Publishers’ Note that introduces this volume, let me say that it is here with my cheerful consent, and represents a quite normal and difference of opinion. But I believe that history (though not popular history) will eventually take sides with me in these matters” (DA xxii).

In his original preface, Jeffers made clear that he intended “The Love and the Hate” to be much more than a rant, a platform for his own political views. It is a plea to humanity to return benevolence. Time has served this work’s message well and Jeffers has indeed proved himself a “Cassandra.” And yet, as I conclude, I must agree with the words of Ruth Lechlitner, “. . . in this year of peace, 1948, why, the reader may well ask,
the compulsion on the part of its publishers, whatever personal disagreement there may be, to disavow so publicly certain views of its author?” (Karman 161).

In light of the current war and recent past wars, it would be interesting to see what would happen if Jeffers’s poem was freshly published. My intuition is that though the passion of the piece would be timely, its narrative structure would not be well received. Even at the time of its first publication, Jeffers’s form was considered somewhat dated. Yet, we owe Jeffers a debt.

Jeffers, while saying he was not a follower of Whitman, took the long line form to a new level in the best Whitman tradition. Jeffers broke his lines with irregular rhythm opening a door for Ginsberg to take the long line form to a new height, breaking it at breath points. And, we owe Jeffers a debt for being bold, unflinching. If Jeffers were alive today, I would imagine he would be writing about global warming, the current war, the polluted ocean and air. Because of Jeffers, we have the work of Ginsberg, Sam Hamill, Gary Snyder, Robert Hass, and W. S. Merwin to keep alive those vital issues, speaking truth to keep us from forever repeating history.
Works Cited


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