

Downward Is but One Direction

A Commentary on "Prescription of Painful Ends" by Robinson Jeffers

Writing on Jeffers is something like writing about Jan Sibelius. Listening to the music of the Finnish composer one is never quite sure that his principal has not a cosmic symphony before him from which he makes extractions from time to time. There seems to be a vast and almost changeless panorama, and all the themes are there; or there is just one basic theme from which materials are taken. Yet in both Jeffers and Sibelius we have a grandeur, a magnificence, limited in the case of the musician by his restricted geographical environment; in the case of the poet by his limited emotional imposed environment.

Melody and rhythm are fundamentals in music. Melody would express urges from within, which may or may not be identical with mental operations. Rhythm, on the other hand, seems to be associated with the earth itself, with nature and its laws, and also with the autonomic nervous system; e.g. in African dances. We find all sorts of melody and rhythm in various musics, drawn from every sphere of existence. The cat seems concerned only with rhythm, the canary primarily with melody. In the Orient more attention has been paid to such matters—i.e. with the philosophy of music rather than with music itself. Jeffers presents us with melodies, he was and is no hep-cat; his rhythms are not so apparent and this characteristic is part of his personality.

Traditional poetry has been, perhaps of necessity, connected with arithmetical timing. The Greeks and Hindus often have elements of spatial movements that appear in their poetry, drama and declamation, which were not duplicated either by the Anglo-Saxons or Arabs. Jeffers definitely takes sides here. But he has also been influenced by an age of machinery and technology—which he does not admire.

The printer sees advantages in traditional poetry, which enables him to set up his fonts easily. But we have passed from the world of simple arithmetic. Descartes and his successors have opened up vast vistas and these have been reflected in the arts. There are non-arithmetical rhythms and pulsations and vibrations. We find them in nature as well as in the laboratory, and their influence cannot be checked. We may thus establish a large rhythmical curve, easily formularized; or we may take a derivative of that curve and fail to see its beauty. We find something like that in Jeffers.

The philosophy of Jeffers is plainly set forth in his poem, "Prescription of Painful Ends" and the theme stands out in the second line:

"Whence no way but downward..."

This is a leit-motif not only of these verses but of his basic philosophy. And we have here a curve, derived from a rhythmic sweep, drawn only in one direction because any other way of drawing or describing it would not suit the poet.

One may find oneself at Big Sur looking down at the beach from above and seeing the path that leads to the water. There is movement, there is direction, and a finality. One goes down, in despair, to an ultimate baptism, an almost Nirvana of darkness. The opposite possibility is given no consideration. It does not belong. Jeffers would be quite dissatisfied with an amelioristic evolution, having

life come out of the sea, passing through many phases and finding a temporary or permanent resting place in man.

The Lines run in sweeps as if each one, when read, were to require equal timing in recitation or reading. One feels beats but they are not beats of a metronome. The pulses of the sea-shore, the sounds from fly-belts and wheels in a giant factory, the movement of machine-cranes show pulsations and vibrations which are the backgrounds of inspiration, but do not give us metronomic music.

The whole poem will not be copied, but the introductory line,

“Lucretius felt the change of the world of his time”

reflects what may be found elsewhere in Jeffers, a sort of identification with Classical Man and a protest that that age has gone by and brought us different kinds of people and economies. While Jeffers believes he is protesting against humanity, one may conclude that he is fighting a hopeless war against Spengler, whose ideal man was in the year 1300 A.D. or thereabouts and not in classical Rome or Greece.”

When the second line ends:

“... Plato in his time watched Athens
Dance the clown path”

we find an identification of the Californian with the Roman and Greek worlds, a sort of nostalgia. But it is a Platonic nostalgia for all the mention of Lucretius for Jeffers is more concerned with his thoughts and feelings than with his observations.

Aesthetically we have movement and sleep and a wonderful consistency between artistic and philosophical tendencies. Mood and expression are one.

Then Jeffers adds:

“The future is ever a misted landscape,
no man foreknows it, but at cyclical turns
There is a change felt in the rhythm of events ...”

The poet has set himself up as a god. He **must** say: “no man foreknows” because he would desecrate foresight. He not only does not admire humanity, he does not want to admire it. Therefore he can only praise hindsight and the past. Yet he does recognize rhythm, even admires it. He is not sure, however, whether he wants rhythm or chaos and he does not want to reveal his own weaknesses, the fault must lie elsewhere; he thus continues:

“In the gallop of the world, and now suspect that, come peace or war,
the progress of America and Europe
Becomes a long process of deterioration—started with famous
Byzantium’s and Alexandrias,
Surely, but downward ...”

Jeffers does not want history. He does not see the inconsistency of looking at only one side of a coin. Byzantium and Alexandria are symbolic cities which ended in tragic dissolution. But there are other grand cities which he would prefer to treat as non-existent. He would introduce Lucretius but not Rome. He would condemn Christianity and praise the Greeks but overlook Damascus. Benares does not exist nor China. The only possible philosophy for him, therefore, is solipsism which is immediately introduced:

“... One desires at such times
To gather the insights of the age summit against future loss,
against the narrowing mind and the tyrants ...”

This looks wonderful. But he does not believe in insight. He wants to pontificate so he adds:

“The pedants, the mystagogues, the swarms of barbarians”

Indeed everybody that he does not like or with whom he cannot agree.

So he returns to Plato and Lucretius. They are almost as former incarnations of Jeffers or as obsessing forces from which he cannot escape. To him Hermes must have been greater than Zeus and the writer greater than the creative artist in other lines, the inventor, the engineer, the social reformer. These men look up to the heights, they climb an **upward path**. He makes this “inconceivable” and therefore evil.

We may now skip to the concluding lines:

“Our own time, much greater and far less fortunate,
Has acids for honey and for fine dreams
The immense vulgarities of misapplied science and decaying Christianity:”

Another poet might write, with equal fervor:

“far more fortunate but less great.”

This is not true poetry. It is a philosophy of pessimistic solipsism, written under an emotional strain, the emotional disturbance being too great to permit a prosaic expression. The influence of Plato is evident with its “out of mind, out of existence” attitude; but it is a Plato running back into the cave from the sunlight, content with nightmarish dreams and calling them “realities.” He is a Lucretius verbalizing a “wide world” in a most unsemantic manner.

The solipsist has to see evil as outside his own orbit and personality. Decadence is in the world around him because he is attuned to it, “Decaying Christianity” is a nominal-phrase, just as “decadent Capitalism” is and no amount of outward change in religion is going to change Jeffers’ point of view. No doubt the decadence is in the social order, but it may as well be ascribed to a number of other pseudo-causal factors. And naturally **Christianity** remains as undefined and as a scapegoat word as Hitler’s “Judaism.”

He ends:

“therefore one christens each poem, in dutiful
Hope of burning off at least the top crust of the time’s
uncleanness, from the acid bottles.”

Jeffers’ grandeur and futility appear in the words “christens” and “hope.” He cannot surmount the problems that he has evoked and while philosophically not surrendering, verbally has. He has to go to the enemy’s dictionary for his words. He remains unaware of a cosmic view expressed in Buddha and Mohammed and Paul variously, that there is an escape from a sordid world into a divine, benign cosmos.

Perhaps Jeffers should be regarded as an American Nietzsche, whose grand literary expressions cannot be called “prose;” whose protest is a combination of extreme ego-centricity and a call to revive and revitalize Hellenistic outlooks, and whose private psychology belies one’s public philosophy. He is a man who wants to drown his sorrow in vinegar instead of alcohol. He has not studied his own biochemistry and would probably shun physicians and psychiatrists who might be eager to alleviate his sorrow. No, masochism is better; and if not that, then sadism.