

Thomas Merton, Czeslaw Milosz and Robinson Jeffers:  
Poets of Attention  
by  
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I've read *Striving Towards Being, The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* as part of my attempt to keep current not only with the newly published seven journals but also with the five volumes of Merton's letters, ever in search of new illumination in regard to Merton, one of this century's great spiritual masters.

When I read the following, I became particularly interested because I've taught Robinson Jeffers' poetry for many years even though he has been out of fashion in America for a long time. Milosz, winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, writes to Merton in a letter dated May 18, 1963,

I spent the last year on turning around Robinson Jeffers. This may surprise you. In any case any serious preoccupation with Jeffers surprises many today. I believe the low ebb is something temporary for he was in a way a gigantic figure. I treat him comparatively so to say, i.e. meditating on Polish, Russian, French and American poetry of today and of the future. Very much noise and blubbering and we do not see clearly, for me emerging figures of a monumental achievement are Cavafy, Jeffers ... The reason I am attracted by Jeffers is probably the same I am attracted by you. Not poetry 'per se' but an effort to communicate a vision of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

Merton responds in a subsequent letter dated November 11, 1963,

I am glad you have been working on Jeffers. I can see what would attract you in him, though I have not read him much. There is too much of him, and he is too grandiloquent for me in some ways. I have never been attracted to him much. But this is my fault and not his. Mark Van Doren likes him and I like Van Doren (one of the rare poets here I can read).<sup>2</sup>

If we now make a huge leap to Merton's journal entry of September 9, 1968, we read quite a different response to Robinson Jeffers.

And then (10:15) for some unknown reason I sit up late reading Robinson Jeffers, that Pacific Blake, and he is O.K. I am deeply moved by him. I abide by him!

We have climbed at length to a height, to an end, this end: shall we go down again to Mother Asia? Some of us will go down, some will abide, but we sought More than to return to a mother. This huge, inhuman, remote, unrul'd, this ocean will show us The inhuman road, the unrul'd attempt, the remote lodestar ....

"And the old symbols forgotten in the glory of that your hawk's dream."  
So--title!

The footnote for this entry reads: *Robinson Jeffers, Selected Poems (New York: Vintage Books) 4041*. "This is an excerpt from "The Torch-Bearer's Race," written in 1928, which several times refers to the "hawk's dream" after which Merton titled this part of the journals."<sup>3</sup>

To progress from "I have never been attracted to him much" to "I am deeply moved by him, I abide by him!" is such a tremendous change of heart and mind, one I don't have the time and space to address in this short essay except to say that Merton obviously penetrated to the heart of Jeffers' poetry and was willing to "abide by him." Abide resonates with various connotations, and I'll leave the reader to decide which one suffices for him. We can be certain, however, that the Jeffers' poem "The Torch-Bearer's Race" is an appropriately profound one to conclude the journal that is now titled "Preparing for Asia."

Merton's re-evaluation of Jeffers is definitely the result of Milosz's prompting. Ironically Milosz's interest in Robinson Jeffers is the result of Merton's encouraging the Polish poet to meet beat poet Brother Antoninus. Milosz was offered two teaching posts in the States, one in the University of Indiana, Bloomington, the other in the University of California, Berkeley. Although the Indiana position would have been nearer to Kentucky and thus to Merton, Milosz

chose Berkeley, California because "California had approached me earlier."<sup>4</sup> Merton writes to Milosz,

There is a very good Catholic poet at Oakland, a Dominican Brother, Brother Antoninus, who also is a printer. Get in touch with him and say that I suggested you come to see him. I think he might be able to introduce you to some interesting people. He knows the writers in San Francisco anyway.<sup>5</sup>

Milosz indeed met Brother Antoninus; Merton writes, "I am glad you met and like Antoninus."<sup>6</sup> At the time Antoninus was the foremost American Jeffers scholar whose study, "Robinson Jeffers: Fragments of an Older Fury" is one Merton read. It is likely that Antoninus stimulated Milosz's interest in the Poet of Carmel and Milosz's enthusiasm in turn reignited Merton's interest.

Antoninus credits Jeffers with his conversion to Catholicism in 1949 and in 1951 he entered the Dominican order. In 1969 after eighteen years as a lay brother, he left the Dominicans to marry. Always considering himself a disciple of the poet Robinson Jeffers, Antoninus wrote to his friend Lawrence Clark Powell,

... taking out his books (Robinson Jeffers'), touching them, looking at his picture ... The new articles speak only of his vast reputation and prestige -- no hint of the snarling refusal of the literary critics to give him his honour ... he was my spiritual father. It was he who broke my own father's agnosticism, and proved to me there is a God. It was he who taught me how to worship. It was he who woke up my soul, related me to the whole of things. It was he who made me a religious man, gave me the dignity of faith in life and in God. Without him I would probably never have found my voice as a poet. He taught me to write. I mourn the passing of my father. For me it is the end of an epoch, and era of my life and experience. I wish to God I had met him, touched his hands.<sup>7</sup>

Merton and Antoninus have much in common. Both men were converts; both were poets in addition to writing substantial autobiographical prose; both entered monastic life; both achieved fame

as "religious" writers; both in late life fell in love with younger women. Antoninus dramatically left the Dominican order; in December, 1969, after a public reading he divested himself of his religious habit, "This is my habit and when I take it off, I take off my own skin. But I have to take it off to find my heart."<sup>8</sup> He then assumed his birth name William Everson.

Everson describes his book *Man-Fate* as "a love poem sequence, a cycle of renewal, but it also concerns the monastic life, from the point of view of one who has renounced it. The love of woman and the love of solitude have contested together, and solitude has lost."<sup>9</sup> A similar contest is captured in Merton's *Eighteen Poems* with the opposite result: Merton maintained his monastic/priestly vocation.

Antoninus understood Robinson Jeffers' greatness and for most of his life he promoted Jeffers' rightful place in the pantheon of major 20th century poets. Although Jeffers has recently suffered a blow from critic Helen Vendler in her *Soul Says, On Recent Poetry*, Jeffers has had his fair share of admirers. In addition to William Everson, there is mythologist and teacher Joseph Campbell who respected Jeffers' verse, "Jeffers also made a big impression on me. He's one of the few poets that have ever really influenced my own thinking and style."<sup>10</sup> Campbell's biographer states "Years later the single poem which Campbell most recited, and which he preferred even over his beloved Yeats and Blake, was another of Jeffers', 'Natural Music.'"<sup>11</sup> Eminent poet and critic Robert Hass says about Jeffers,

The least that can be said of it is that he wrote many remarkable and original poems. He was not afraid to stake a large claim. Critics have been inclined to expound his ideas systematically, but it seems to me that he is, in the end, an intuitive, unsystematic, and contradictory thinker. It is as a feeler not a thinker that he matters. Looking out at the Pacific landscape, with its sense of primitive violence that time and the weather had not quietened and eroded, he found himself haunted by the riddles of desire and suffering, and he thought he saw a way out of the cycle, and that way connected to his almost mute, though intense, feeling for the natural world -- and for all the life

outside of and imperiled by the rapacity and unconsciousness of the human usurpation of the planet.<sup>12</sup>

Not only was Czeslaw Milosz successful in luring Merton into a rereading of the "grandiloquent" Jeffers, he also captures his own fascination with the poet of Carmel in his poem "To Robinson Jeffers" composed in 1963 the year of his correspondence with Merton about Jeffers.

Why were both men attracted to Jeffers? First, a brief biography of Jeffers. Jeffers, the first child of William and Henry Robinson, was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on January 10th 1887. Educated in schools in Germany and Switzerland, he returned to America to attend University of Western Pennsylvania. Moving to California, he graduated from the University of Southern California. He met Una Call Kuster whom he eventually married.

In 1914 Jeffers and his wife moved to Carmel, California. This relocation would transform Jeffers' life. The first time they glimpsed the Pacific ocean crashing in on the Carmel shore they knew they had found their final home. "When the stage-coach topped the hill from Monterey," says Jeffers, "and we looked down through pines and sea-fogs on Carmel Bay, it was evident that we had come without knowing it to our inevitable place."<sup>13</sup>

What occurred in the soul of the young poet when he first saw Carmel has intrigued scholars from the beginning of Jeffers' fame with the publication in 1924 of *Tamar and Other Poems*. Surely Jeffers had found his sacred space just as Merton had found his *locus Dei* in the monastery of Gethsemani. Surely living near the wild beauty of the rugged Pacific coast with it constantly crashing surf within sight and hearing, Jeffers could make his soul. And he did just that.

Although his narrative verse concerned such taboo themes as incest, castration and parricide, he developed a philosophy of life that was not only austere and tragic but also one offering hope through the transcendence of the personal ego so that man could indeed, if he truly desire it, attain harmony within himself and with the cosmos.

So briefly what is the vision that appealed to Milosz (or as Hass says "the way out of the cycle") and consequently to Merton? I suggest that the core of Jeffers's vision is found more readily in his short lyrics. I shall refer to two: "Love the Wild Swan," and "Carmel

Point." In the first, the poet laments the failure of his verse to capture the beauty of the world; in fact, he says, "I hate my verses, every line, every word." He offers a catalogue of nature's beauty: "grassblade's curve," "the throat of one bird," and "one color, one glinting flash, of the splendor of things." No poet, he concludes, can outdo nature. What the poet and all people can do is to love the beauty which surrounds them. He exhorts us to love: "At least/ Love your eyes that can see, your mind that can/ Hear the music, the thunder of the wings. Love the wild swan."

But to love the world requires attention. Like Simone Weil who says absolute attention is prayer, Jeffers in "Carmel Point" exhorts us to be selfless, for only in selflessness can we love anything. He writes in "Carmel Point,"

As for us:  
We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;  
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident  
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

Too often Jeffers has been misinterpreted because of his use of the word "unhumanize." Defining his "inhumanism" Jeffers says, "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 as insignificant as our happiness."<sup>14</sup> He does not mean for us to be inhuman or inhumane; on the contrary he encourages us to "uncenter" ourselves by forgetting ourselves in contemplation of the beauty around us and leaving behind our very human views, thoughts and ideas. Only in losing the ego can we offer our attention to the world and to others. Attention leads to humble self-effacement and in that moment we become aware of the Other. Without overtly referring to the Gospel, he echoes Christ's injunction, "In losing yourself, you will find yourself."

It is likely this religious aspect of Jeffers' verse is what attracted Milosz and why he saw a bit of Merton in Jeffers: both were contemplatives. Both Jeffers and Merton also in a sense left the world. Both were imbued with a good dose of *contemptus mundi* and thus were very critical of their fellow men. But both men were able to move

through their anger and self-hatred, transcending it through/by the contemplation of the Other. For Merton the Other is God through Christ. For Jeffers it is God without the intermediary of the Incarnational.

When we read Jeffers closely, we can't help being struck by the spiritual power of his verse. If beauty is God's smile toward the world as Simone Weil suggests, then Jeffers devoted his life to gazing upon that smile. And if we become what we behold as William Blake suggests, then we need only read Jeffers' letters to discover a man kind, loving, compassionate and wise.

Jeffers was a secular monk. One of his best interpreters, Robert Zaller, writes,

His entire life had been shaped as a vessel for his work. he did not teach, tour, or lecture. he wrote no prose, declined invitations to translate or review. He shunned causes and kept aloof from controversy. The solitude and monotony of his days had been as carefully cultivated as a monastic regimen.<sup>15</sup>

Living with his wife and twin sons in his "hermitage" Tor House which he built by his own hands from the stones along the Pacific shoreline, Jeffers lived in many ways a more austere, monastic life than either Merton and Antoninus lived.

In his meditation on what it means to be a poet, William Everson writes,

Vocare. Vocare. The calling. A call from the deep of the night in the inner soul. The dark submergence of the soul. The inner being is opening its eye, trying to see.<sup>16</sup>

Merton, Milosz, Jeffers and Everson: Poets who tried to see, to pay attention, poets who exhort us to do the same.

#### Primary Source

Rock and Hawk, *A Selection of Shorter Poems by Robinson Jeffers* compiled and edited by Robert Hass, (New York: Random House, 1987).

#### Notes and References

1. *Striving Towards Being, The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* edited by Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997) p. 150. Hereafter referred to as STB
2. Ibid. p. 155.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Seven, 1967-1968*, edited by Patrick Hart OCSO, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) p. 167.
4. STB, p. 97
5. Ibid. p. 97.
6. Ibid. p. 124.
7. Lee Bartlett, *William Everson: The Life of Brother Antoninus* (New York: New Directions, 1988), p. 191.
8. William Everson, *Man-Fate, The Swan Song of Brother Antoninus* (New York- New Directions, 1973) p. vii.
9. Ibid. p. viii.
10. Stephen and Robin Larsen, *The Life of Joseph Campbell*, (New York: Doubleday, 1991) pp. 179-81.
11. Ibid. pp. 179-181,
12. Robinson Jeffers, *Rock and Hawk: A Selection of Short Poems*, edited by Robert Hass (New York: Random House, 1987), p. xxxix.
13. James Karman, *Robinson Jeffers, Poet of California*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1987) p. 26.
14. Robinson Jeffers, *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, (New York: Liveright, 1977) p. 172.
15. Robert Zaller, *The Cliffs of Solitude, A Reading of Robinson Jeffers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 173.
16. William Everson, *Birth of a Poet* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), p. 22.

