

4-1-2012

Robinson Jeffers: Appalachian, Californian, Poet

Ted Olson

East Tennessee State University, olson@etsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>

 Part of the [Appalachian Studies Commons](#), and the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Citation Information

Olson, Ted. 2012. Robinson Jeffers: Appalachian, Californian, Poet. *Rapid River: Arts and Cultural Magazine*. Vol.15(8). 28-28.
https://issuu.com/rapidrivermagazine/docs/04-rriver_apr2012

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact digilib@etsu.edu.

Robinson Jeffers: Appalachian, Californian, Poet

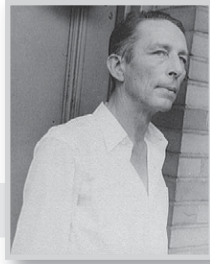
Copyright Statement

This document was published with permission from the publisher. It was originally published in the *Rapid River: Arts and Cultural Magazine*.

poetry & poets

Robinson Jeffers:

APPALACHIAN, CALIFORNIAN, POET



Robinson Jeffers
Photo by Carl Van Vechten, July 9, 1937

BY TED OLSON

Jeffers (1887-1962) is a seminal American poet, one whose poetic vision is austere and uncompromising yet whose poems are strangely musical and memorable. Virtually all his poems were composed in California, yet he was Appalachian by birth and by attitude. While most of the major poets of his generation—T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, among others—plied a poetry that was self-consciously modern, cosmopolitan, and internationalist, Jeffers was more at home in the world of natural things, and he felt a profound psychic connection to the past.

Gale in April

Intense and terrible beauty, how has our race with the frail naked nerves,
So little a craft swum down from its far launching?
Why now, only because the northwest blows and the headed grass billows,
Great seas jaggng the west and on the granite
Blanching, the vessel is brimmed, this dancing play of the world is too much passion.
A gale in April so overfilling the spirit,
Though his ribs were thick as the earth's, arches of mountain, how shall one dare to live,
Though his blood were like the earth's rivers and his flesh iron,
How shall one dare to live? One is born strong, how do the weak endure it?
The strong lean upon death as on a lock,
After eighty years there is shelter and the naked nerves shall be covered with deep quietness.
O beauty of things, go on, go on, O torture
Of intense joy, I have lasted out my time, I have thanked God and finished,
Roots of millennial trees fold me in the darkness,
Northwest winds shake their tops, not to the root, not to the root, I have passed
From beauty to the other beauty, peace, the night splendor.

Born and reared in western Pennsylvania, he wrote his first poem at age 10, about a snake he saw in his parents' garden in a Pittsburgh suburb. His father, a theologian, sent his son to schools in Europe, then relocated the family to southern California, and Jeffers, a brilliant but restless student, vacillated between observing conventional career paths (medicine, forestry) and finding his own way. Freedom excited him more than security, and he and the woman he married in 1913—Una Call Kuster, who

Tor House

If you should look for this place after a handful of lifetimes:
Perhaps of my planted forest a few
May stand yet, dark-leaved Australians or the coast cypress, haggard
With storm-drift; but fire and the axe are devils.
Look for foundations of sea-worn granite, my fingers had the art
To make stone love stone, you will find some remnant.
But if you should look in your idleness after ten thousand years:
It is the granite knoll on the granite
And lava tongue in the midst of the bay, by the mouth of the Carmel
River-valley, these four will remain
In the change of names. You will know it by the wild sea-fragrance of wind
Though the ocean may have climbed or retired a little;
You will know it by the valley inland that our sun and our moon were born from
Before the poles changed; and Orion in December
Evenings was strung in the throat of the valley like a lamp-lighted bridge.
Come in the morning you will see white gulls
Weaving a dance over blue water, the wane of the moon
Their dance-companion, a ghost walking
By daylight, but wider and whiter than any bird in the world.
My ghost you needn't look for; it is probably
Here, but a dark one, deep in the granite, not dancing on wind
With the mad wings and the day moon.

fled an unfulfilling marriage with a prominent L.A. lawyer to live with an aspiring poet—traveled north in 1914 to explore California's coastal wilds.

As the poet later wrote, "When the stage-coach topped the hill from Monterey and we looked down through pines and sea fog on Carmel Bay, it was evident that we had come without knowing it to our inevitable place."

Buying property on the edge of the ocean in the town of Carmel (then a bohemian artistic colony), Jeffers built a house and a tower out of stones he hauled up from the beach, and he planted trees. "I think one may contribute (ever so slightly) to the beauty of things," wrote Jeffers, "by making one's own life and environment beautiful." Constructing Tor House

and Hawk Tower taught Jeffers how to make poems that would last.

Whether he wrote long narrative poems chronicling tragic events in the lives of early Carmel-area settlers, or short lyrics rhapsodizing about the mysteries of nature, Jeffers's work was utterly distinctive, solidly against the grain of literary modernism. Living in and with nature, he discovered a poetic voice capable of capturing the wild beauty of the world that surrounded him—ocean, rocky promontories, and coastal mountains—and



Hawk Tower, Tor House, Carmel, CA.
Photo: Jessica Malinkowski

capable of understanding the impacts of manmade contributions to that world.

In the poem "Tor House," Jeffers envisioned that he had built one thing—a house—that would endure the leveling changes of time. But Jeffers had created another thing that would last as long, and perhaps longer: a poem.



Ted Olson is the author of such books as *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications, 2006) and *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998) and he is the editor of numerous books, including *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). His experiences as a poet and musician are discussed on www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm

Poets who would like for their poetry to be considered for a future column may send their books and manuscripts to Ted Olson, ETSU, Box 70400, Johnson City, TN 37614. Please include contact information and a SASE with submissions.

April's holidays celebrate the renewal of life: Easter (when it falls in April) signals both literal and metaphorical rebirth; Earth Day (April 22) spreads awareness of Earth's ecology and the necessity of living well on Earth (*eikos* is Greek for household); and Arbor Day (the last Friday in April) honors trees. Even April Fools Day can be seen as life-affirming—its pranks traditionally stem from feelings of playfulness brought about by the victory of spring over winter.

April is also National Poetry Month, and this column will focus on an April-themed poem—not one of the many April poems evincing sincere religiosity or forced sentimentality, and not that famous poem that cynically asserts that "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land." I'd like to focus on Robinson Jeffers and his fine if forgotten "Gale in April," a poem infused with the power and passion associated with life's seasonal resurgence. Instead of evoking flowers or other conventional symbols of springtime, Jeffers in that poem evokes the stark beauty he witnessed one April day while living on the rugged Pacific coast near Carmel, California.



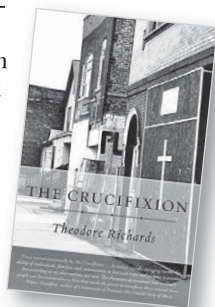
Theodore Richards

REFRAMING THE BIBLE INTO TALES OF MODERN AMERICA

Poet, writer and religious philosopher Theodore Richards presents his novel, *The Crucifixion*. A world traveler who has studied

with numerous spiritual teachers, Richards transforms his broad life experience into a thoughtful, brave, some might say controversial reframing of the Bible. His novel sees the Old Testament in terms of the flight of African Americans from the Deep South during the Great Migration. In his New Testament, his hero, stifled in an urban world of black and white, seeks refuge in a new, more livable world overflowing with vibrant color.

www.cosmosophia.org



IF YOU GO: *Friday, April 27, at 7 p.m. at Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, 55 Haywood Street, downtown Asheville. www.malaprops.com, (828) 254-6734.*