8. Robinson Jeffers, "The Double Axe"

Students of Robinson Jeffers' poetry have identified a number of philosophical influences on his thinking. His dark view of humankind is thought to owe much to Friedrich Nietzsche[1], while his admiration for the beauty of nature has been compared to sentiments Lucretius expressed in *de rerum natura*.[2] In many respects, however, the philosopher who stands closest to Jeffers in both thought and personality is the ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus of Ephesus.

One clear parallel between the two is their shared contempt for the general run of mankind, set against a broad appreciation of the beauty of nature. In the doctrine he termed "Inhumanism" Jeffers maintained that human beings and their concerns are of little importance, especially when compared with the beauty and grandeur of the cosmos. His poem "Their Beauty Has More Meaning" reflects this outlook:

> Yesterday morning enormous the moon hung low on the ocean,
> Round and yellow-rose in the glow of dawn;
> The night-herons flapping home wore dawn on their wings. Today
> Black is the ocean, black and sulphur the sky,
> And white seas leap. I honestly do not know which day is more beautiful.
> I know that tomorrow or next year or in twenty years
> I shall not see these things—and it does not matter, it does not hurt;
> They will be here. And when the whole human race
> Has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here: storms, moon and ocean,
> Dawn and the birds. And I say this: their beauty has more meaning
> Than the whole human race and the race of birds.[3]

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[1] See Coffin 1971, chapters 3, 4, and 5. Coffin notes the presence in Jeffers' poetry of the Nietzschean concepts of the transvaluation of value, eternal recurrence, the death of God, and the sublimation of the will to power, among others.

[2] Coffin 1971, 246 quotes from Jeffers' final volume of verses, *The Beginning and the End*: "And the passionate human intelligence/ Straining its limits, striving to understand itself and the universe to the last galaxy—*Flammantia moeni mundi,* Lucretius wrote,/ Alliterating like a Saxon—all those Ms mean majesty--/The Flaming world-walls, far-flung fortifications of being/ Against not-being."

[3] Jeffers 1948, 120.

Jeffers was especially critical of those he considered responsible for involving the United States in the Second World War. As he explained to his readers:

> Because you are simple people, kindly and romantic; and set your trust in a leader and
> believed lies;
> Because you are humble, and overvalued the rat-run historical tombs of Europe; you have
> been betrayed
> A second time into folly. ("Fourth Act," 1942)

> …it was not our business
> To meddle in the feuds of ghosts and brigands in historical graveyards.
> We have blood enough, but not for this folly;
> Let no one believe that children a hundred years from
> Now in the future of America will not be sick
> For what our fools and unconscious criminals are doing today. ("Invasion," 1944)

Jeffers' celebration of nature's beauties[4] gained him a following among the pioneers of the American environmental movement and the "nature photographers" Horace Lyon, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams.[5] By contrast, his political views, voiced in wartime, provoked a strongly negative reaction.[6]

In Part II of "The Double Axe" (called "The Inhumanist") the story of a returning soldier's murderous rampage provides the backdrop for a series of reflections on war and its place in the universe. Jeffers speaks through a "not entirely human" old man who, at some time after the gruesome events described in Part I, appears as a caretaker on the Gore farm wielding a symbol of death and destruction, a double-bladed axe:

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[4] No doubt inspired by his surroundings in the Big Sur region of California. In Ridgeway 1968, 22 he comments: "We have builded us a little house on the sea-cliff here…a delightful place we think, cormorants on the sea-rocks in front of us, and pelicans drifting overhead; a most graceful hill-range to the south across a neck of water;--it is a promontory with water on three sides of us. The house and garage and walls are gray granite—sea boulders, like the natural outcrop of the hill. In foolish frankness it is the most beautiful place I have ever seen."

[5] See the discussion in Bradley 2005, 1-22.

[6] See the discussion in Vardamis 1972, esp. 108-14.

> He considered the double-bladed axe: "In Crete it was a god, and they named the labyrinth for it. That's long before the Greeks came: the lofty Greeks were still bushmen, It was a symbol of generation: the two lobes and the stiff helve: so was the cross before they christened it. But this one can clip heads too. Grimly, grimly. A blade for the flesh, a blade for the spirit: and truth from lies." (54)[7]

"The Inhumanist" relates a series of grisly incidents—rapes, suicides, and murders—providing Jeffers with ample opportunities to rail against the essential wickedness of the human race. At one point the old man prays:

> --hear me Lord
> God! Exterminate
> The race of man. For man only in the world, except a
> few kinds of insect, is essentially cruel.
> Therefore slay also these if you will: the driver ant,
> And the slave-maker ant, and the slick wasp
> That paralyzes living meat for her brood; but first
> The human race. Cut it off, sear the stump. (110)

In both respects Jeffers' thinking parallels that of Heraclitus. At one point Heraclitus speaks of the beauty of nature as the product of conflict and opposition:

> What opposes unites and the most beautiful arrangement (*kallistên harmoniê)* comes from things bearing in opposite directions. (B 8)
>
> To god all things are beautiful (*kala*) and just whereas human beings suppose that some things are unjust, other things just. (B 102)

Heraclitus also speaks of a *harmonie* or "attunement" evident in the workings of nature:

> An unapparent *harmoniê* is stronger or better than an obvious one. (B 54)

A belief in the beauty of nature is also implicit in Heraclitus' references to the physical universe as a *kosmos* in B 30:

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[7] Kaminski 2007, 7-8 explains the significance of the double-axe: "By choosing the double axe, Jeffers selects one of mankind's most ancient and enduring symbols—a prominent position that may derive from the fact that the double axe is also one of humanity's oldest technological implements. It should be remembered, though, that the axe is both a tool and weapon; as such, it has served humanity in times of war and peace, and in moments of creation and destruction." The dual nature of the double-axe is entirely in keeping with Heraclitus' doctrine of the unity of the opposites.

> This order (*kosmon*), the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an everlasting fire, kindled in measures and extinguished in measures.[8]

We are given some sense of the aesthetic connotations of the Greek *kosmos* from a passage in Homer's *Iliad* IV (145) when an artfully crafted horse's bridle is described as "an ornament (*kosmos*) and treasure fit for a king." Similarly, in *Iliad* XIV (187) the goddess Hera is said to have decked herself out "with all manner of adornment" (*panta…kosmon*). Heraclitus' *kosmos*, then, was not simply a "world," but rather a "beautifully ordered world."[9]

Heraclitus linked his admiration of nature with a thinly disguised contempt for those who had previously sought to explain the natural order and, even worse, for those who showed no interest in such matters. While one might have expected him to express some gratitude to his predecessors (the first philosopher-scientists of ancient Miletus), just the opposite appears to have been the case. The Ionian thinkers Pythagoras and Xenophanes are held up (along with Homer and Hesiod) as illustrations of the truth that "the learning of many things does not teach intelligence" (B 40). According to Heraclitus, Pythagoras is "chief captain of swindlers" (B 81a) and master of "an evil art" (B 129). The citizens of Ephesus also come in for abuse:

> What discernment or intelligence do they possess? They place their trust in the popular poets and take the mass for their teacher, not realizing that the many are bad and the good are few. (B 104)

> The adult Ephesians should by all rights go hang themselves, leaving the city to the adolescents. For they expelled Hermodorus, the most valuable man among them, saying "We will not have even a single one as the most valuable among us. If such there be, let him go elsewhere and be most valuable among others." (B 122)

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[8] Heraclitus also observes that: "The most beautiful order (*kosmos*) is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random" (B 124). But this is probably best understood (as in B 107): <u>for those who fail to grasp the *logos*</u> the "beautiful order" will appear to be "a mere heap of sweepings."

[9] The same is true for the use of the term in the phrase *ou kata kosmon*. When Thersites makes a series of outrageous remarks (*epea… akosma*), he is said to speak in a way that is "not in accordance with right order" (*ou kata kosmon*, *Iliad* II, 214).

> Uncomprehending even when they have heard the truth about things, they are like deaf people. The saying “absent while present” bears witness to them. (B 34)

On no fewer than five occasions Jeffers reveals his knowledge of Heraclitus’ teachings:

(1) At one point the old man of “The Double Axe” encounters “a grey-haired walker” who asks what can be done to reverse the slide toward militarism. Their conversation continues:

> “Me you ask?” “Because they say you
> have a harsh wisdom, unperfumed, untuned, untaught
> Like Heraclitus’s Sibyl.” “Whose voice” the old man
> answered, “reached over ten thousand years
> Because of the God. (70)

Jeffers here follows Heraclitus B 92 (from Plutarch’s *On the Pythian Oracles*):

> The Sybil, uttering with raving mouth words mirthless, unadorned and un-perfumed, reaches us with her voice up to a thousand years later, thanks to the god.[10]

(2) At the outset of the poem the old man had identified God with alternating opposites:

> “Winter and summer,” the old
> man says, “rain and the drought;
> Peace creeps out of war, war out of peace; the stars rise
> and they set; the clouds go north
> And again they go south.—Why does God hunt in circles? (52)

Jeffers’ source here appears to be Heraclitus B 67:

> God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and famine, and undergoes change in the way <fire> whenever it is mixed with spices, gets called by the name that accords with the bouquet of each.

(3) Jeffers also speaks of the cosmos as the “eternal roundabout” and “eternal fire-wheel”:

> It is strange, truly,
> That great and small, the atoms of a grain of sand and
> the suns with planets, and all the galactic universes
> Are organized on one pattern, the eternal roundabout, the
> heavy nucleus and whirling electrons, the leashed
> And panting runners going nowhere; frustrated flight,

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[10] Scholars disagree on how much of Plutarch’s wording was Heraclitean.

> unrelieved strain, endless return—all—all—
> The eternal fire-wheel. (67)

And, as we have seen, Heraclitus described the cosmos in similar language:

> This cosmos, the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, and ever living fire, being kindled in measures and extinguished in measures. (B 30)

(4) Jeffers' universe is also characterized by a thoroughgoing divine unity:

> …there is not an atom in all the universes
> But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagne-
> tism, light, heat, and the other
> Flamings, the nerves in the night's black flesh, flow them
> together; the stars, the winds and the people: one energy,
> One existence, one music, one organism, one life, one God:
> star-fire and rock-strength, the sea's cold flow
> And man's dark soul. (53)

In the same vein, in a 1934 letter to Sister Mary James Power, Jeffers wrote:

> I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole. (This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.) The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks and stars, none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole. This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine. [11]

Or as Heraclitus expressed the idea:

> It is wise for those who listen to the *logos* to agree that all things are one. (B 50)

> …out of all things comes one thing, and out of one thing comes all things (B 10)

> One and the same thing, present [in us] living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old… (B 88)[12]

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[11] Ridgeway 1968, 221-2. Zaller 2012, 341 comments on Jeffers' identification of the universe with the divine: "'All things are full of God' as Heraclitus says, or, as Jeffers might amend him, 'All things are God.''' However, the saying "all things are full of gods" goes back not to Heraclitus, but to Thales (see DK A 22).

[12] Coffin 1971, 178 notes the similarities between the two expressions of a belief in an underlying unity and comments: "In other words, the *logos* of Heraclitus appears to resemble Jeffers' doctrine of Inhumanism."

(5) Jeffers also shares Heraclitus' view of the universe as the product of perpetual conflict:

> This divine outer universe is after all not at peace with itself, but full of violent strains and conflicts. The physical world is ruled by opposing tensions. The world of living things is formed by perpetual struggle and irreconcilable desires; and pain is an essential part of life…The lion that kills is not a bit more evil than the lamb that is killed. The rock that falls on a man's head is no more evil than the rock he was standing on.[13]

Heraclitus had similarly held that:

> They do not understand how, while differing from itself it agrees with itself. There is a backward turning connection, like that of a bow or lyre (B 51)
>
> Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest. (B 111)
>
> For attunement would not exist unless there were a low note and a high note, nor living things without female and male—which are opposites. (A 22)

On two points, however, Jeffers and Heraclitus remain in fundamental opposition. For Heraclitus, but not for Jeffers, war (or more broadly, strife) makes a positive contribution in both its destructive and creative aspects:

> One must realize that war is common, and justice strife, and that all things come to be through strife and are so ordained. (B 80)
>
> Heraclitus criticizes the poet who wrote 'Would that strife would perish from amongst gods and humankind [Homer, *Iliad* 18.107], For he says, attunement would not exist unless there were a low note and a high note, nor living things without female and male—which are opposites. (A 22)

Moreover, for Heraclitus, but not for Jeffers[14], death in battle represents an admirable goal:

> Those slain by Ares, gods and mankind honor. (B 24)
>
> Greater deaths win greater destinies (B 25)
>
> The best choose one thing in place of all other things: ever-flowing glory among mortals. The majority, however, glut themselves like cattle. (B 29)

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[13] From "Themes in My Poems" quoted in Kaminski 2007, 24.

[14] *Pace* Coffin 1971, 178-9 who identifies Hoult Gore as a "Heraclitean warrior who has been killed in the heat of battle' before he becomes a 'beneficent *daimon*." Gore becomes a *daimon*, perhaps, but hardly a beneficent one.

At a number of points, however, Jeffers employs Heraclitean materials to express his view of nature as a dynamic system marked by conflict, beauty, and an all-encompassing unity. More broadly, both Heraclitus and Jeffers sought to express their understanding of the universe in poetic language, both spoke openly of their loves and hates, and both saw themselves as standing outside the main currents of thought in their own time and place.