

# THE CULTURAL CONTAMINATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE: DOS PASSOS' *MANHATTAN TRANSFER* AND JEFFERS' NATURE POEMS

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Although nature and culture may in principle be distinguished from each other, the very instant that natural phenomena are verbalized they seem to become suffused with cultural associations. This article looks at the evocation of nature in literary texts by John Dos Passos and Robinson Jeffers that envision the non-human environment in fundamentally different ways, yet both draw extensively on cultural discourse to describe it. My first text, Dos Passos' novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), suggests that a distinction between nature and culture in the portrayal of the modern city is impossible to draw; the imagery of the narrative deliberately amalgamates that which is generated by nature and that which is constructed by culture. A great many poems by Jeffers, Dos Passos' contemporary, seek on the other hand to express the diametrically opposite theme, namely that the natural world and human civilization are essentially disparate – to the detriment of the latter. A closer examination of the language of Jeffers' poetry reveals, however, that such a distinction between the worlds of nature and culture is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to uphold.

## ***Manhattan Transfer*: The Amalgamation of Nature and Culture**

Despite the fact that *Manhattan Transfer* is the archetypal American modernist novel and a precursor of Dos Passos' better known trilogy *U.S.A.*, little criticism has been published on the former novel in the last twenty years, and next to nothing about the significance and function of nature in it. The reason is probably found in the fact that it is such a quintessentially urban text; the main subject matter of Dos Passos' panoramic narrative is the metropolis itself. The novel tells the story of New York City from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-1920s by way of a series of fragmented and broken-up strands of parallel narratives about a great many characters from different classes. The characters, rich and poor alike, seem to grow more and

more alienated from the capitalistic, competitive society of Manhattan whose urban world is increasingly permeated by a commercial, mass-mediated discourse. Dos Passos' image-oriented evocation of New York is in many ways an accurate reflection of the social development in the 1920s: Magazine advertisements increased for instance 600 percent between 1916 and 1926,<sup>1</sup> and the streets and buildings were at the same time flooded with the advertising signs of mass consumerism. The cityscape as portrayed in Dos Passos' novel appears increasingly semiotic, fluid, and chimerical. It becomes a setting in which the material and the imagined, the sensory and the image-oriented, merge into one another.

Of particular interest in this context are the passages in which nature and culture increasingly appear to coalesce. The blending of nature and culture surfaces innocently, as it were, in some of the novel's brief imagistic characterizations of the bustling and variegated urban world of Manhattan of the 1920s. George Baldwin and Phil Sandbourne are for instance depicted walking up "Lexington Avenue quiet in the claretmisted afterglow,"<sup>2</sup> a metaphorical phrase in which the color of the sunset is linked to the red wine of evening festivities. In a similar vein, the street outside Jimmy and Ellen's apartment is presented as a "confusion of driving absintheblurred snow" (302), which combines the blur of the weather with their pleasure-oriented life style and the bitterness of the break-up of their relationship. Nature and culture seem also to merge in a curious fashion when Ellen towards the end of the novel brushes up against an unwashed immigrant lad and suddenly feels "the huddling smell" of poverty under "all the nickelplated, goldplated streets enameled with May" (395), a description which makes the nickel- and goldplating of the streets become inseparable from the "enamel" of spring, itself a metaphor by which May takes on the characteristics of an industrial product. In yet another street scene, George Baldwin feels invigorated by the "taxiwhirring gasoline gloaming" of the streets (279), an image that fuses the "sparkling autumn twilight" of the metropolis with the

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<sup>1</sup> The figure is from Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), 256. All subsequent citations from this novel will appear as page references inserted in the running text.

whirring of taxis and the smell of gasoline. This strange blurring of natural and urban phenomena is at the same times expressed through the technique of synaesthesia, the figure of speech by which one sense impression is presented in terms of another. When lights are described as “ciderfizzling,” sight is evoked in terms of taste and tactility; and when the twilight is presented as a “taxiwhirring gasoline gloaming,” sight is evoked in terms of both sound and smell. In their fusing of nature and culture, such techniques accentuate the imagistic and ephemeral character of modern urban life.

One of the most striking examples of this blending of nature and culture occurs in a vignette that is placed in the last section of the novel. In this passage the early evening cityscape is evoked through a strange amalgamation of human and non-human features exemplified by its “glowworm trains,” its “foggy looms of spiderweb bridges,” people draining out of office buildings like “sap at the first frost,” and bankers being let out at night by “lightningbug watchmen” (305). The constructions of civilization and the creations of nature are thus experienced as being one and the same. At the same time the imagism of such descriptions make the reader conscious of a nightscape constituted, as it were, primarily through language. Such literary techniques serve at the same time to make both nature and the city appear strange and defamiliarized, to use Victor Shklovsky’s term.<sup>3</sup>

Portrayals of the cityscape sometimes develop into potpourris of sense impressions, as in the following description of Ellen Oglethorpe, the novel’s female protagonist, as she is riding on a bus through the streets of Manhattan: “Sunshades, summer dresses, straw hats were bright in the sun that glinted in squares in the upper windows of houses, lay in bright slivers on the hard paint of limousines and taxicabs” (137). Here sense impressions of nature and culture seem to enhance each other as the sun shines on pedestrians and glints in the squares of windows and off the glaze of cars. People are at the same time only seen synecdochally as “[s]unshades, summer dresses, straw hats,” a type of Cubist technique which is used throughout the novel, evoking the fragmented and atomistic ways in which both the urban environment and nature are experienced and portrayed.

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<sup>3</sup> Confer Viktor Shklovsky’s well-known essay “Art as Technique,” in for instance Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 17-23.

The increasing sense of chimera and disorientation that typifies the urban setting of the novel is also reflected in its characterization. Ellen, actress and show star, is the prototypical example of this. She finds it increasingly difficult to retain a sense of some authentic identity as she performs one part after the other, on and off the stage, and is constantly pushed into various roles by the men who woo her. Stan, the only man she actually falls in love with, declares for instance that “[y]ou’re so lovely . . . you’re out of another world old kid. You ought to live on top of the Woolworth Building in an apartment made of cut-glass and cherry blossoms” (152). This is a vision that situates Ellen in a separate sphere in which both nature and culture become matters of mere spectacle (of “cutglass and cherry blossoms”), far removed from the world of work. She has at the end of the novel turned herself into a mere plaything, an image and commodity for male display, and in the last glimpse we have of her in the novel, she has just stepped out of the taxi “with dancing pointed girlish steps . . . her cheeks a little flushed, her eyes sparkling with the glinting seablue night of deep streets . . .” (400). The glinting of seablue streets in her eyes suggests that nature and culture have become equally performative and equally imagistic. In the end Ellen has become the decorative crown of George Baldwin’s success, a mere image of male wish fulfillment – and ultimately chimerical.

It is particularly the plot of the novel that brings out the main characters’ state of disorientation as they are engulfed by the imagistic insubstantiality of their urban world. Towards the end of the novel Jimmy Herf, news reporter and the novel’s male protagonist, has finally lost both his wife (Ellen) and his job and is restlessly walking the streets of Manhattan in a hyper-sensitized state of mind. The languages of the city’s publicity seem to represent a steady bombardment that increases his confusion as he walks “through the city of shiny windows, through the city of scrambled alphabets, through the city of gilt letter signs.” It is a sunny day, the sky is “a robin’s egg blue,” and in his muddled mind commodities of the billboards and advertisements have become randomly endowed with a mixture of attributes of both nature and culture:

Spring rich in gluten. ... Chockful of golden richness, delight in every bite, THE DADDY OF THEM ALL, spring rich in gluten. Nobody can buy better bread than PRINCE ALBERT. Wrought steel, monel, copper, nickel, wrought iron. *All the world loves natural beauty*. LOVE'S BARGAIN that suit at Gumpel's best value in town. (351)

When "gluten" is synonymous with "spring," bread with royalty, cosmetics with *natural* beauty, a suit with "love's bargain," both nature and culture lose their referential meaning. The natural as well as the cultural environment have turned into an exclusively imagistic, mass-mediated discourse, a strange amalgamation in which it is no longer possible to extricate the world of reference from the discourses of publicity.

As he continues to walk up and down the streets of Manhattan as if in a fever, Jimmy even feels his own self inflating and then deflating:

With every deep breath Herf breathed in rumble and grind and painted phrases until he began to swell, felt himself stumbling big and vague, staggering like a pillar of smoke above the April streets [...] Inside he fizzled like sodawater into sweet April syrups, strawberry, sarsaparilla, chocolate, cherry, vanilla dripping foam through the mild gasoline air. He dropped sickly forty-four stories, crashed. [...] He shrank until he was of the smallness of dust, picking his way over crags and boulders in the roaring gutter, climbing straws, skirting motoroil lakes. (352-353)

What is described here is the dissolution, in Jimmy Herf, of a sense of self. The nature of public language – its "painted phrases" – makes Jimmy swell, become "big and vague," and then shrink to "the smallness of dust." In his mind the sweetness of April has become inseparable from the mild gasoline air and ice cream sodas. In the world of New York City it is ultimately impossible to decide what is natural and what is cultural. Jimmy's fizzling like soda water into sweet "April" syrups and foam (of "strawberry, sarsaparilla, chocolate, cherry, vanilla") is a sickening evocation of the self turning into mush (evoked in terms of yet another symbol of people's leisure hours, the

soda fountain). In the modern metropolis, then, both the urban setting and the individual self have become an opaque and fabricated blend of nature and culture – a matter, indeed, of mere discourse.

At the end of *Manhattan Transfer*, Jimmy walks out of and away from New York City, the archetypal urban environment of commercial publicity and capitalist commodification, “taking pleasure in breathing, in the beat of his blood, in the tread of his feet on the pavement [...]” (404). The ending of the novel is sufficiently ambiguous to have elicited quite different interpretive responses. Some critics have seen Jimmy’s walking off as a gesture devoid of direction: E. D. Lowry seen this as “another dead end,”<sup>4</sup> and in the words of Ian Colley, Jimmy “cannot be ‘lightin’ out for the territory.’ There is no territory left.”<sup>5</sup> To Michael Clark, on the other hand, the ending signifies Jimmy’s “spiritual rebirth” in the spring, his “liberation” and “redemption.”<sup>6</sup> In Clark’s interpretation of *Manhattan Transfer*, the ending presents us with a Jimmy who is in touch with himself and with the abiding presence of nature that represents a positive force in the world of the text.<sup>7</sup> In my view, however, the last two sections of the novel have been bent on making the point, over and over again, that whatever may be “natural” has inevitably become contaminated by the discourse of a commercial civilization – an inflated language of “spring rich in gluten.” Even the spring wagon loaded with “merry” flowers that comes aboard Jimmy’s ferry at the very end of the narrative is described in terms that fuse nature and culture: “A rich smell of maytime earth comes from it, of wet flowerpots and greenhouses” (403); flowerpots and greenhouses are as much part of the society as the apartment of “cutglass and cherry blossoms” that Stan wanted as Ellen’s showcase. Within the world of Dos Passos’ novel, the image-fabrication and spectacles of mass consumption publicity have broken down and dissolved the boundaries between what is naturally created and culturally constructed.

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<sup>4</sup> Lowry, “*Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos' Wasteland*,” in Andrew Hook, ed., *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Colley, *Dos Passos and the Fiction of Despair* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, *Dos Passos's Early Fiction, 1912-1938* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna Univ. Press, 1987), 115, 110, 114.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Dos Passos's Early Fiction*, 122; see also 99-100.

### Jeffers' Poetry: The Disjunction of Nature and Culture

Jeffers' poetry is characterized by the opposite theme, namely that there is a fundamental ontological and experiential difference between life of the natural environment and life in human civilization. Whereas Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* sees nature and culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as becoming increasingly compounded of one another, Jeffers sees them as antithetical. His nature lyrics often evoke a wild world that is incommensurate to human standards and values. Nonetheless, as I will try to show, the language and tropes of his poetry constantly returns him to the anthropomorphic position that he tries to eschew.

Jeffers' main thematic objective, however, is to give expression to a vision of nature from, as it were, a detached, disinterested, non-human point of view. He chose a challenging and contentious term for his own outlook, namely that of "Inhumanism." Jeffers was deeply disturbed by our civilization's devastation of nature, including that of the United States and his own beloved California; and humankind, due to its self-serving desire and greed, he regarded, in Robert Brophy's words, as "something of an anomaly in the universe because of the race's megalomaniac fixations."<sup>8</sup> At times Jeffers, as James Karman puts it, "looked forward to the time when humanity would cease to exist. Though he thought of man as one of the nobler animals, and though he could see virtue in people, in his most pessimistic moments he regarded earth as a star and the human element as something which darkens it."<sup>9</sup> To describe one's point of view as "inhumanist," however – rather than for instance "non-humanist" – paradoxically situates one's position firmly in a human-oriented discourse. What is denominated "inhuman" is inescapably part of human ethics; it raises connotations of that which not humane, including ideas of barbarism, brutality, and amorality. No doubt the term "Inhumanism" was deliberately chosen by Jeffers, as it expresses, as it were, at one and the same time both a non-human and an anti-human vision of nature. It lands Jeffers, however, in a near insoluble dilemma in his nature poems: he wants to escape the fallacies of a human-

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Brophy, ed., "Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur," *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet* (New York: Fordham UP, 1995), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California* (Brownsville, Oregon: Story Line Press, 1996), 94.

centered position, but his philosophy of *Inhumanism* constantly affirms the human perspective that it seeks to undermine.

It is not my intention, however, to discuss Jeffers' complex and many-faceted expressions of his philosophy of *Inhumanism*; that stony but fertile ground has been plowed by far more knowledgeable Jeffers scholars than myself. My aim is more modest: to discuss some paradoxes that this type of outlook engenders in Jeffers' use of poetic language. In particular I want to discuss what I see as a repeated tension in Jeffers' language between a thrust towards a cosmic, detached vantage point and a constant slipping-back into an anthropomorphic frame of mind.

This frequent tension in Jeffers' *language* between a non-human and a human orientation is not surprising. Even today, in our age of ecology, it is still extremely difficult to endeavor to evolve a writing that may modify and even partly replace our human-oriented discourse of nature. Human-centered language about nature has been hegemonic for millennia, and is thus deeply imbedded and ingrained in our ways of thinking and speaking. Jeffers' poetry involves an early struggle – in an age of transition – with the problems of language that result from his need to hew out for himself a non-anthropocentric position. On the one hand his poetry does not view nature as existing for our sake or regard man as the final *raison d'être* of the universe – quite the reverse. On the other hand, the language of both his early and late poetry is suffused with anthropomorphic imagery. In this paper I would therefore like to take issue with the frequent critical assertion that Jeffers' poetry projects an Olympian detachment rather than a human-oriented worldview. More often, I think, the matter is somewhat more complex: Jeffers' so-called *Inhumanism* is no doubt marked by his desire, as he himself puts it, to shift “emphasis and significance from man to not man,”<sup>10</sup> but the language of his poetry, particularly its human-centered tropes, repeatedly draws them back into a sociocultural vision of the world. It is certainly true, as Robert Zaller asserts, that Jeffers “sought to pare away” anthropomorphism by rejecting “the categories of justice and mercy and embracing the full im-

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffers, “Preface,” *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1977), xxi.



plications of Darwinian materialism,"<sup>11</sup> but in my view Jeffers' poetry reflects *both* the desirability *and* the difficulty of defining nature in non-human terms.

Jeffers' nature poetry and his ideas of Inhumanism may be seen as a reaction to the ideas of Romanticism that had dominated nature writing far into the 20th century. According to Romantics such as Emerson and Thoreau, nature, infused with God's presence, was inherently good and virtuous and, not least for that reason, beautiful. Jeffers' vision of nature is of a much starker and harsher brand, whose beauty springs from its qualities of ferocity and severity. But it should be noted that this vision of nature's mercilessness does not abolish a human position. Instead it replaces the Romantic language of a beneficent and kind nature with an Old Testament discourse of a pitiless and stern environment. In poem after poem Jeffers expresses the idea that the God of this stark environment is not made in man's image; to quote from his poem "The Inhumanist," He is "[n]ot a tribal nor an anthropoid God./Not a ridiculous projection of human fears, needs, dreams, justice and love-lust"<sup>12</sup> (CP, III, 257). Jeffers constantly struggled, as Kirk Glaser writes of Jeffers' gender dichotomies, "to see and depict – 'painfully' and with 'the whole mind' – nature *as it is*, not as he or we would like it to be, not anthropomorphized, not as masculine and feminine, despite what the necessities of the poet, of metaphor and language, require."<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless it is precisely these "necessities" of language that prove so hard for Jeffers to circumvent and which at times make his poetry so strikingly paradoxical. As I will try to demonstrate, Jeffers is constantly caught in between two opposite movements in his nature poetry – on the one hand that of portraying a nature whose signification is beyond human conventional ethics and understanding, and on the other hand that of describing a nature that is, time and again, evoked by way of conventional human attributes and norms.

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<sup>11</sup> Zaller, "Jeffers' Heavenly Meditations," *Jeffers Studies*, 3.4 (Fall 1999): 70

<sup>12</sup> *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt, vol. III (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988), 257. All subsequent quotations from Jeffers poems are taken from this standard collection. Citation will be referenced in the running text in the following manner: CP (*Collected Poetry*) + volume no + page no.

<sup>13</sup> Glaser, "Desire, Death, and Domesticity in Jeffers's Pastorals of Apocalypse," in Robert Brophy, ed., *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet* (New York: Fordham UP, 1995), 171.

In my discussion of Jeffers' poetic language I will limit my comments to his lyrics, as the complexity of Jeffers' numerous, long narrative poems with their polyphony of voices and multiple perspectives prevents their inclusion in this brief discussion. The anthropomorphic thrust of the language of Jeffers' short lyrics is evident, however, throughout his literary production, from his first volume to his last one. In *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924), the mountains are for instance evoked in terms of their "insolent quietness" ("Wise Men in Their Bad Hours," CP, I, 10). Birds of prey, Jeffers' favorite symbols of wild nature in volume after volume, are often described in terms of fierce relentlessness and impervious pride: the hawk in "Hurt Hawks" in *Cawdor and Other Poems* (1928) is endowed with an "[i]mplacable arrogance" (CP, I, 378); the eagle in "Fire on the Hills" in *Thurso's Landing and Other Poems* (1931) is portrayed as "[i]nsolent and gorged" and "sleepily merciless" (CP, II, 173); in *Solstice and Other Poems* (1935) we have "the cruel falcon" (CP, II, 412) in the poem by the same name; and in the latter volume we also encounter the sharp juxtaposition between "Rock and Hawk," the two respectively envisioned in terms of "bright power" and "dark peace," with

    . . . the falcon's  
Realist eyes and act  
Married to the massive  
Mysticism of stone  
Which failure cannot cast down  
Nor success make proud (CP, II, 416)

Despite the assertion that the stone signifies a state of being that is divorced from human concepts such as failure or success, the hawk and the stone are linked to ideas of power and peace, realism and mysticism, which serve to reinsert nature within a political and religious discourse. Thus stone and falcon are at one and the same time apart from, and yet reinscribed within, a human cultural context.

We also find the reverse metaphorical technique in Jeffers, namely the attribution of animal characteristics to human perverse drives, as in the poem "Sinvergüenza" from the volume *Such Counsels You Gave To Me and Other Poems* (1937), where Jeffers speaks of the Spanish Civil War:

They snarl over Spain like cur-dogs over a bone; then look at  
each other and shamelessly  
Lie out of the sides of their mouths.  
Brag, threat and lie, these are diplomacy; wolf-fierce, cobra-  
deadly and monkey-shameless,  
These are the masters of powerful nations. (CP, II, 548)

Thus, in his poetry Jeffers does not only attribute anthropomorphic qualities to animals, he attributes animalistic qualities to human beings. Both of these metaphorical strategies testify to the same dilemma in Jeffers nature lyrics, namely that of a language that ends up affirming the human-oriented position that it appears to reject. As David J. Rothman argues in a very interesting essay on Jeffers and the pathetic fallacy, the “debate over nature, language, knowledge, and representation is also the backdrop for Jeffers’ Inhumanism ... Jeffers’ passionate balancing of the inanimate world and the animating mind is present on page after page of his work, especially the lyrics.”<sup>14</sup>

Let me illustrate this more closely by an analysis of the nature lyric entitled “Birds and Fishes” from his *Last Poems*:

Every October millions of little fish come along the shore  
Coasting this granite edge of the continent  
On their lawful occasions: but what a festival for the sea-fowl.  
What a witches’ sabbath of wings  
Hides the dark water. The heavy pelicans shout “Haw!” like Job’s  
warhorse  
and dive from the high air, the cormorants  
Slip their long black bodies under the water and hunt like wolves  
Through the green half-light. Screaming the gulls watch,  
Wild with envy and malice, cursing and snatching. What hysterical  
greed!  
What a filling of pouches! the mob-  
Hysteria is nearly human – these decent birds! – as if they were  
finding  
Gold in the street. It is better than gold,  
It can be eaten: and which one in all this fury of wildfowl pities the  
fish?  
No one certainly. Justice and mercy

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<sup>14</sup> Rothman, “‘I have fallen in love outward’: Robinson Jeffers and the Pathetic Fallacy,” *Hellas*, 6.1 (Spring/Summer 1995): 51.

Are human dreams, they do not concern the birds nor the fish nor  
eternal God.  
However – look again before you go.  
The wings and the wild hungers, the wave-worn skerries, the bright  
quick minnows  
Living in terror to die in torment –  
Man's fate and theirs – and the island rocks and immense ocean  
beyond, and Lobos  
Darkening above the bay: they are beautiful?  
That is their quality: nor mercy, not mind, not goodness, but the  
beauty of God.  
(CP, III, 426)

This is a poem that affirms a non-anthropocentric view of the world. It insists that life on earth reflects a stark and terrible beauty that is unconnected with human ethics or philosophy and inimical to sentimentalization. As Jeffers puts it in the very last line, this scene of birds feeding ferociously on a school of minnows has nothing to do with “mind” or “goodness,” with human consciousness or conscience. Nonetheless the speaker of the poem evokes this scene of nature in terms that are strikingly anthropomorphic; it attributes to the agents of this natural drama qualities that are consistently human.

The speaker ends up declaring that the concept of justice is a matter of human dreams and has no bearing on the scene, yet his first description of the small fish emphasizes that they are there “on their lawful occasions,” which on the one hand implies that their arrival at the coast is part of the laws of nature, but on the other hand the expression “lawful” also strongly evokes ideas of human legality and suggests that this arrival of the minnows is warranted and legitimate – that there is, in fact, some sort of justice at work here. The speaker proceeds with other descriptions of this scene which disclose his deeply grounded human perspective: this is a high and festive occasion – a “festival” – for the sea-fowl. The “mob-/Hysteria is nearly human,” says the speaker, a paradox which the poet surely must have inserted tongue-in-cheek, as “hysteria” derives from *hysteria*, the Greek word for uterus, a human attribute that birds most decidedly lack. What a “filling of pouches!” the speaker goes on to declare; this may refer to the pelicans filling the pouches under their beaks with fish, but it may also bring to mind the idea of purses and money, which is further

accentuated with the postulation “as if they were finding/Gold in the street.” The speaker appears to find this hysteria among the birds somewhat shocking: “these decent birds!” he exclaims with what the reader suspects is considerable irony, since the word “decent” connotes something refined, proper, and decorous, a human discourse totally malapropos of natural phenomena. In sum, although the speaker ends up emphasizing the non-human quality of the scene, he is unable to evoke it in other than human terms.

The speaker suggests in the last line of the poem that the concepts of goodness and mercy are inappropriate for understanding this scene, yet he jokingly endows this drama, from the very beginning, with the qualities of wickedness. The scene is described as a witches’ Sabbath in which the gulls are seen to scream with “malice,” which evokes a universe of good vs. evil. Jeffers is much more ready in his poetry to view the natural world in harsh rather than merciful terms, which is of course quite consistent with his philosophy of “Inhumanism” – yet this position does not escape the paradox of being deeply grounded in religion and culture.

In “Birds and Fishes” this human vision of animal behavior is most strikingly imbedded in the imagery that evokes – with considerable humor – some of the seven deadly sins. The gulls are “[w]ild with envy”; interestingly enough, their behavior is further defined not as gluttony but as “greed,” something which further accentuates the anthropomorphization of this natural seascape and deepens its connotations of sinfulness; when the speaker goes on to describe this drama as a “fury of wildfowl,” the idea of anger is introduced, another of the deadly sins. In this manner, this non-human spectacle is thoroughly humanized, as it were.

In my view, Jeffers’ anthropomorphisms are quite deliberate. The poem seems to take considerable, tongue-in-cheek pleasure in its own paradoxes. What is more, its ironies are highly self-reflexive ones: Jeffers seems also to satirize the anthropomorphic frame of mind that his poetry appears unable to do without. Thus Jeffers’ poem ultimately invites a complex reading: First, it certainly evokes in great detail the material and sensory qualities of the oceanscape itself and convinces us of nature’s unique, stark beauty, full of organisms “[l]iving in terror to die in torment”; second, its language nonetheless testifies to the in-

evitability of a human perspective; and third, it satirizes such a perspective at the very same time.

Although Peter Quigley is right in stressing that, to Jeffers, "the beauty, the reality principle, is out there, not inside the human,"<sup>15</sup> it is a truth in need of some modification. Certainly the speaker of "Birds and Fishes" ends up declaring that the essential quality of this scene is not of mercy and not of mind; nonetheless it is infused with human ideas and norms. Jeffers wrote that his Inhumanism represented "the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence,"<sup>16</sup> yet he is unable in many of his poems to avoid projecting his human consciousness onto nature. He may in his poem "Credo" prefer the ocean's ocean to "[t]he bone vault's ocean" (CP, I, 239), that is, the brain's ocean, yet the latter plays no small part in the description of the seascape that we just analyzed. Jeffers' poetry thus reflects the ironies of anthropomorphic tropes that language constantly gives rise to. Although Jeffers notes in one of his last poems, that "[m]ountain and ocean, rock, water and beasts and trees/Are the protagonists" and human beings "only symbolic interpreters" (CP, III, 484), his own role as human interpreter inevitably casts him into the very role of protagonist that he so often tried to escape.

## Conclusion

Language is a treacherous medium. In Dos Passos' mass-mediated Manhattan of the 1920s, the world has been transformed into a semiotic one of images and spectacles, and language is shown to have permeated our perception of both the natural and the social environment to the extent that it is no longer possible to distinguish between what has been organically created and what has been culturally constructed. At first glance, the thematic implications of Jeffers' poetry seem to be the exact opposite, reflecting a desire to establish some fundamental ontological dichotomies between culture and nature. Nonetheless, as I have attempted demonstrate, the very nature of the language of Jeffers' poetry entangles and ensnares him in

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<sup>15</sup> Quigley, "Carrying the Weight: Jeffers' Role in Preparing the Way for Ecocriticism," *Jeffers Studies*, 6.4 (Fall 2002): 58.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffers, "Preface," *The Double Axe & Other Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1977 [1948]), xxi.

anthropomorphic paradoxes that seem all but inescapable. Even the descriptive and figurative imagery of Jeffers' nature lyrics, therefore, becomes a blend of non-human and human perspectives, an amalgamation of the discourses of culture and nature. Although Dos Passos and Jeffers view nature differently, their problems of language are in some respects closely related. In addition, they may also be said to present interconnected critiques of society: The texts of both writers represent profound rejections of a culture that so radically has alienated the human self from the living world that it used to be part of.