

2014

“Hewing Against the Grain”: John Haines’s Critique of Robinson Jeffers

Recommended Citation

(2014). “Hewing Against the Grain”: John Haines’s Critique of Robinson Jeffers. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 6(1).

Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol6/iss1/7>

This Article (refereed) is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol6/iss1/7>

"Hewing Against the Grain": John Haines's Critique of Robinson Jeffers

By Scott Riley

American poet John Haines homesteaded for twenty-five years in the Alaskan forest southeast of Fairbanks and lived a unique life of solitude and self-reliance. His body of work, since the publication of *Winter News* in 1966, would have made Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson proud to be his compeer. Yet Haines has often been remembered within literary circles as a regional poet with relevance stretching only as far as the Alaskan border. This critical reception recognizes only a single aspect of a literary corpus that engages an impressive variety of registers. As Dana Gioia has argued, Haines's "confraternity" of themes and literary models makes his poetry relevant to modern readers, both above and below the fifty-fifth parallel (xvii). Haines's poetics, of course, were not created *ex nihilo*. All writers have their mentors and predecessors; for Haines, one writer in particular was most influential—fellow American poet Robinson Jeffers, who burst onto the American literary scene in 1912 with a poetry "both distinctly regional and unequivocally universal" (Gioia, xi).

That Haines was in some way influenced by Jeffers is difficult to dispute. Literary critics have especially noted the similarity between Haines's and Jeffers's biographies. Both men moved from the East Coast to the rural West, where they grounded themselves in a remote landscape. Jeffers moved to California from Pennsylvania and by 1913 had taken up residence in Carmel. Indeed, prior to travelling to Alaska, Haines moved to a redwood cabin on the Carmel River to "absorb the 'elements of rock and water' where Jeffers lived" (Felstiner, 287). John Felstiner argues that the presence of the elder poet "spurred [Haines] 'like a spring in the desert'" (287). The most pointed assertion of Jeffers's impact on Haines's poetics comes from Haines himself. In a keynote address given at the Robinson Jeffers Association Conference, Haines unambiguously describes his indebtedness to Jeffers and his continued admiration for Jeffers's poetics:

Robinson Jeffers has long been one of my models in poetry, someone whose work I discovered at a fairly young age when I was just beginning to write seriously; he remains one of my lasting affections among modern poets" ("The Poet as Prophet," 12).

Haines's poetry itself, of course, can be seen as further testimony of Jeffers's influence on Haines. Perhaps most notable is Haines's cultivation of a prophetic tonality, comparable to the tone Jeffers developed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Like Jeffers, Haines was a political and moral poet, who looked to denounce "the comforting illusions of society" (Gioia, xvi). Moreover, Haines's writing style and voice—especially as they appear in his first two books of poetry *Winter News* and *The Stone Harp*—bear a strong resemblance to Jeffers's. Haines himself acknowledges this similarity when he states that several of his early poems have "something of [Jeffers's] voice and verse style" ("The Poet as Prophet," 13).

While a number of distinct parallels join these poets, perhaps more interesting are the ways in which Haines's poetics differ from Jeffers's. Haines is, as Robert DeMott writes, "a

maverick poet, less out of step with his times than energetically working in that grand Western American literary tradition of hewing against the grain” (10). Jeffers, too, is a member of that “grand Western American tradition;” in particular, his notion of “inhumanism” set him at odds with the modernist aesthetic, which Jeffers considered to be anthropocentric (Milosz, 79). As Jeffers writes in *The Double Axe*, inhumanism is “a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence” (vii). Jeffers crafted a poetics that consistently situates humankind as “only a part of nature” (Stark, 3). As Hunter Stark writes, “Jeffers intentionally turns away from humanity to reveal the nature of the ‘divinely superfluous beauty’ that he sees manifest in Nature” (4). John Haines, meanwhile, incorporates Jeffers’s notion of “inhumanism” without “turning away from humanity;” while he denounces humanity’s self-centeredness and indifference toward the “astonishing beauty of things” (Jeffers, 3.369), Haines retains a compassion for humanity that protects him from claims of misanthropy. In this way, he utilizes Jeffers’s concept of the “inhuman” for his own purpose—namely, that is, to investigate the protean border between human artifice and the natural world. Haines utilizes a unique, often elegiac, voice to do so, ultimately arriving at a decidedly generous tone.

This generosity is best observed in Haines’s description of the human world. After all, Haines’s uniqueness does not lie in his choice of theme—a number of European writers from Rousseau to Yeats have considered the extent to which humanity is “out of tune” with nature (Wordsworth, 95). Jeffers himself explored this theme, not only looking to reject human solipsism but also seeming to prioritize the nonhuman over the human. While discussing “inhumanism” in *The Double Axe*, he writes, “it offers a reasonable detachment as a rule of conduct” (vii); perhaps it was this emphasis on “detachment” that spoke to Haines when as a young artist he first encountered Jeffers’s work. Haines’s uniqueness then lies in his generous approach to this boundary between humanity and nature—an approach that prioritizes neither humanity nor nature, but rather integrates them both into a cohesive, mutable whole.

The American conservationist George Marshall, in a letter to Wallace Stegner, pointed out that Jeffers’s poetry often seems “antihuman or a-human.” Stegner agreed, stating that if American conservationists took Jeffers’s poetry to heart, “we wouldn’t be trying to conserve a coast, we’d simply wade out and breathe deeply” (Cohen, 347). The human protagonists central to Jeffers’s poetry are compared to “nature dreaming, but rock and water and sky are constant...” (3.369); human life in other words is almost necessarily synthetic for Jeffers. This aspect of Jeffers’s poetry has led some critics to deem Jeffers a “misanthrope extraordinaire” (Bowden), though others, such as Gilbert Allen, argue that Jeffers is not so much a misanthrope as a relentless advocate for the non-human world. “Jeffers,” Allen writes, “redefines misanthropy to avoid falling under its heading: he loves not man the less but raptor more” (64). Indeed, to denounce Jeffers as a mere misanthrope is to misinterpret his entire project of “inhumanism,” which looks to undermine humanity’s self-centeredness. Such a criticism interprets Jeffers’s call to “uncenter our minds from ourselves” as an act of violence against humanity rather than an act of compassion for the non-human world (3.199). Jeffers does at times prioritize the non-human world over the human world. In “Hurt Hawks,” he famously proclaims, “I’d

sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" (1,377). Jeffers's poetry should not be merely dismissed as misanthropic, but there is some basis for the criticism that Jeffers's poetry dislocates the human from the non-human world. John Haines's poetry, on the other hand, explores both the beauty of nature and humanity together, while still retaining Jeffers's emphasis on social and political commentary. In this way, Haines tempers Jeffers's inhumanism by describing the human world as inextricably embedded within the natural world.

Haines's reinterpretation of Jeffers's notion of inhumanism seems particularly apparent in a book of poems that appears to have been largely neglected by literary critics, *For the Century's End: Poems 1990-1999*. The book, his last collection of poems, was published a decade after his landmark *New Poems*, which many literary critics proclaimed as the "shattering" of Haines's early poetics (Walzer and Bezner, 3). *New Poems*, as Dana Gioia points out, includes only one poem specifically about Alaska; most of the poems in the collection are about art and sculpture, both of which Haines studied as a young college student. Gioia writes in his introduction to *New Poems*, "If one views Haines's poetic development as a journey from the specific geography of the Alaskan wilderness to the uncharted places of the spirit, then that journey is now complete" (xviii). But his journey was not complete. Breaking free, to some extent, from his role as "Alaska's wilderness poet," Haines did in fact put together one more collection of poems. "For the Century's End" continues the trajectory Gioia saw in Haines's *New Poems*. That is, even more than *New Poems*, Haines's "For the Century's End" is focused on the "uncharted places of the spirit," rather than the Alaskan landscape that dominates his earlier poems. This interest in broad, mythopoeic themes, moreover, is reminiscent of Jeffers's prophetic voice. It seems as if this last collection returns in an oblique way to Haines's earliest poems, which Haines himself recognized as imitations of Jeffers's work. And yet, at the same time these poems are deeply involved in a subject that placed Haines at odds with Jeffers—that is, the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature. This subject is central to *For the Century's End*, and therefore the collection serves as an excellent example of the way Haines subtly critiques Jeffers's "inhumanism," while still emulating Jeffers's prophetic voice.

If *For the Century's End* resembles some of Jeffers's more prophetic poems, this resemblance was inflected by Haines's work as an essayist. Haines published an essay "On Robinson Jeffers" in *Fables and Distances: New and Selected Essays* in 1996, the same decade he was writing the poems that appear in *For the Century's End*. Moreover, in 2002, a year after the publication of *For the Century's End*, he gave his keynote address to the Robinson Jeffers Association, where he considered his indebtedness to Jeffers. In these works, Haines is especially interested in Jeffers as a social critic and someone who watched his rural property in Carmel, California become inundated with human civilization:

Among the things I was shown was a photograph of the first small house he had built on that shore, with nothing but space and ocean around it. Standing at the top of the tower with Donnan Jeffers, I compared that photograph with the densely settled scene before me, and I felt acutely how discouraging and embittering that intrusion on his solitude might have been to him, taking from him finally all but a piece of land not much larger

than a normal city lot. It was a lesson in how relentless and cynical in its regard for the intrinsic nature of a place our society has always been. In the face of that encroachment, fulfilling his own prophecies, Jeffers's patience (or resignation) seems exemplary." (*Fables and Distances*, 54)

Haines's analysis of "Jeffers's patience" seems a decidedly generous act. As Marc Hudson has said of Haines's criticism of Jeffers, "It is not satisfying criticism—Jeffers's limitations, his brutal misanthropy, and his hieratic monotone are not probed..." (vii). Even in his analysis of Jeffers, then, Haines demonstrates a deference toward humankind distinct from Jeffers. Haines does not critique Jeffers as misanthropic or "hieratically monotone," but rather sees Jeffers as "patient," considering the drastic changes Jeffers witnessed in the Carmel landscape. Haines's work as an essayist informs Haines's poetry, giving him a renewed—if rose-colored—respect for Jeffers.

A case can therefore be made that in writing *For the Century's End*, Haines was embroiled in a kind of imitation of Jeffers. The first poem itself, a long, narrative poem about Gilgamesh and Enkidu, resembles Jeffers's somber and violent narrative poems. The poem depicts the brutal "axe-blow" that murders the "great, stomping bull," while retaining an elegiac tone that mourns such brutality: "Rain only speaks there now on the pelted leaves" (9). Moreover, this poem becomes in its final stanzas a meditation on humanity's fall from paradise: "I understand/through what repeated error/we were driven from paradise" (9). This prophetic assertion again mimics Jeffers's voice, and especially Jeffers's role as a social critic.

Haines's rendition of the Gilgamesh story implies a relationship between nature and humanity that undermines Jeffers's prioritization of the nonhuman over the human. The first stanza reads:

I understand the story of Gilgamesh,
of Enkidu, who called the wind by name,
who drank at the pool of silence,
kneeling in the sunburnt shallows
with all four-footed creatures. (7)

The syntax here does not differentiate between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The honored man of the city—Gilgamesh—and the wild man—Enkidu—are intertwined from the very outset of the poem to the extent that syntactically both characters are "kneeling in the sunburnt shadows/with all four-footed creatures." This subtle ambiguity about the protagonist of the poem is decidedly different from Jeffers's perspective on the relationship between humanity and the natural world in which Jeffers consistently defines humanity as at odds with nature.

By the end of the first section, it becomes clear that the protagonist of this epic as far as Haines is concerned is Enkidu, not Gilgamesh. This first section retells how Enkidu is exiled from the natural world that nurtured him as a child: "And when Enkidu awoke, called/from his changed, companionless sleep...the beasts vanished..." (7). In the second section, meanwhile, the poem states plainly that "the forest bond has been broken;" in order to regain his lost connection to the natural world, Enkidu must "...go forth, to try

the roads/become that wasted pilgrim, familiar/with dust, dry chirps and whispers..." (8). Haines implies that not only does Enkidu's dislocation from nature warrant sorrow, but also the "cure" for that dislocation itself lies in sorrow, the ability to "die as a man dies, seeing the death in the life of things" (8). Finally, the third section describes how Enkidu kills the Bull of Heaven, which had been sent down by Ishtar to punish Gilgamesh for rejecting her advances; as a punishment for this act, Enkidu is sentenced to death. The poem describes this punishment as just, the result of Enkidu's original departure from the natural world. At this point the poet makes the prophetic statement, "I understand/through what repeated error/we were driven from Paradise./The nailed gate and the fiery angel/are true" (9). The poem is a commentary on the relationship between humanity and the natural world, the way in which humanity's "repeated" departure from the natural world results in its exile from that "Paradise."

Returning to the first poem after reading the entirety of *For the Century's End*, however, one gains a different outlook on the poem and the initial understanding of the poem as the story of humanity's exile from nature is reversed. Instead, it is with nature that Haines's true sympathies lie. Rather than affirming the notion that humanity and nature are inextricably split, Haines's poetry, and especially his elegiac "In the House of Wax," implies a fundamental unity in which human artifice is eventually enveloped in the natural world. "In the House of Wax" is a long, narrative poem about a trip to a wax museum, which becomes a metaphor for the superficiality of human artifice and humanity's departure from the natural world. Moreover, this superficiality seems a trap, a kind of elaborate prison: "The rooms are large and numerous/and we in our restless striding/find that they never end" (36). Through this extended metaphor, Haines is able to voice his distrust not for humanity itself, but for "our own lamed misrule, its slick banality and crime without passion" (28). He seems willing even to forgive crimes performed with passion; his disgust lies not with human beings exactly, but with crimes of "slick banality," like "Bismarck...endlessly dividing Europe" (25) or:

To Ike, to Kennedy and Ford,
golfers and temporizers;
to perennial candidate Nixon,
whose cheek was never turned. (28)

In this way, Haines refuses to implicate all humanity in this "slick banality." Unlike Jeffers, Haines is willing to temper his social criticism, aiming it not unequivocally at humankind, but at a certain type of human activity, albeit seemingly pervasive.

The natural world intrudes on this world of artifice in a striking way. At the close of the poem Haines writes: "We who are standing here/with our guidebooks suddenly closed/and all the exits darkened.../until another gallery opens,/or the sun through that skylight/strikes us all..." (38). Immediately, the reader is aware of the presence of the outside world. The sudden appearance of the sun is foreshadowed throughout the poem by references to the fact that the sculptures might melt in the summer heat: "How easily in the live heat/of truth and summer/these actors wilt and perish" (24). The world outside the wax museum is also the world of "truth;" this is the world clearly inaccessible to the wax sculptures and those "souls in torment, pilgrims and doting fathers" (38), who wend

their ways through the gallery. And yet, at the close of the poem, the outside world breaks through “the skylight;” the gallery is not in fact a prison. Small though it may be, the skylight offers a way for the outside world to burst into the wax museum, metaphorically humanity’s industrial artifice.

Haines’s skylight offers a means for the natural world to relate to the world of human artifice. It is not humanity itself, but the world of artifice that Haines looks to critique; the artificial world which, as Hannah Arendt said, “separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms” (2). Indeed, metaphorically, the skylight is the way the speaker of the poem relates to—or becomes aware of—“all other living organisms.” Haines refuses to juxtapose human beings and nature. Haines’s interest instead lies in the way in which humankind has trapped itself within a museum of its own artifice. It is this “restless striding” through never-ending hallways that has created the situation where the speaker of the poem finds himself. It is therefore necessary to return to the first poem, to investigate what alternative readings that poem might allow.

Doing so, it becomes clear that the first poem of the book is interested in questioning the origin of human artifice. This is the world Enkidu is inculcated within when in the epic story he sleeps with the prostitute, whom Gilgamesh himself sent to Enkidu. And yet, Haines does not refer to the prostitute; instead, Enkidu is shunned from nature because he “stirs the envy of God:” “I know too, in its utter strangeness,/that whoever asks the sun its rising, of the night its moonstruck depths,/stirs the envy of God in his lofty cabin” (7). This stanza is immediately followed by Enkidu’s “awakening,” when he realizes that the birds and animals now flee from him. For Haines, then, it is not a sexual act but rather the desire for knowledge of grand truths that represents the original “Fall.” This desire for complete knowledge of nature’s workings comes to represent the removal of humanity from paradise. This removal, meanwhile, is a removal into the world of human artifice, where “...the tongued leaves no longer/speak for the dumb soul lost/in the wilderness of his own flesh” (8). Enkidu’s connection to the primal forest is severed at this point, and all he can do is contemplate the sorrow of that loss.

This understanding of knowledge of grand truths as the origin of humanity’s severance from nature is reiterated in “In the House of Wax,” when Haines refers to the “deliberate, bald summations” written on plaques and guidebooks (23). These summations explain the various historical characters depicted by the wax sculptures. In the wax museum, everything that exists is explained in terms of historical knowledge—a startling contrast to the sun, which refuses to explain “its rising.” Indeed, the image of the sun emerges in both of these poems as that which breaks through artifice, or rather, refuses human artifice.

In “Be Angry at the Sun,” Jeffers writes:

That public men publish falsehoods
Is nothing new. That America must accept
Like the historical republics corruption and empire
Has been known for years.

Be angry at the sun for setting
If these things anger you. Watch the wheel slope and turn,
They are all bound on the wheel, these people, those warriors.
This republic, Europe, Asia. (24)

For Jeffers, the sun is not a force that can alter human activity. Human activity, instead, is simply as reliable as the sun. Jeffers implies that there is no need to get upset with men who "publish falsehoods" any more than one might get upset with the sun for setting. America's "corruption and empire" in this sense are not to be refuted but simply accepted as a matter of course. This understanding of humanity as innately "corrupt" stands in stark contrast to Haines's assertion that humanity itself is not vile, but rather humanity's desire for comprehensive knowledge of nature is to be repudiated. Haines has exposed the workings of human artifice, whereas Jeffers looks simply to accept them as inescapable.

For Haines, human artifice arrives from the desire to "ask the sun its rising," to know the inner-workings of nature itself. This desire for knowledge is exposed not only in mythopoeic terms, but also with decidedly contemporary examples—namely, a wax museum. Moreover, however, and most importantly, Haines does not simply expose this world; he looks to subvert it. In "The Legend," he states that the only possible cure for Enkidu's dilemma is to ask not after grand truths but after seemingly insignificant truths:

And then descend, deep into rootland
—not as temple-gardener, planting
with laurel the graves of gods and heroes,
but as one grieving and lost...

To ask the dead, of their fallen
web faces, the spider's truth,
the rove beetle's code of conduct.

By such knowledge is he cured... (8)

It is not knowledge itself that severs humanity's tie with nature, but knowledge of grand schemes, "the sun its rising, of the night its moonstruck depth" (7). Indeed, the cure for this severance lies in knowledge of "the spider's truth, the rove beetle's code of conduct." These minute truths, told to Enkidu by the dead, cure him, and that cure is nothing less than a journey back toward paradise, where "the nailed gate and the fiery angel" stand. Humanity and nature, then, for Haines, are not inextricably divided, but neither are they wholly in accord. The skylight in the wax museum is not an exit; it is simply a means of reminding the "lost souls" within that museum that they are embedded within a larger world, a world where wax sculptures melt in summer's heat.

John Haines pushes back against Jeffers's juxtaposition of the human and nonhuman even as he recognizes Jeffers as a literary kinsman of the first order. He follows the masters of the "grand Western literary tradition," one of whom surely is Jeffers himself, but the poetry that arrives from that pursuit pushes back even "against the grain" of that tradition (DeMott, 10). This challenge is made through a reconsideration of the relationship

between humanity and the natural world, and especially the means by which humanity might escape to some extent from the “large and numerous rooms” of artifice. For Haines, the severance of humanity’s connection to nature—as well as the subsequent creation of a supposedly artificial world—is founded upon the desire for complete knowledge of the world and cosmos. The antidote for that desire, meanwhile, is the knowledge of the miniscule, the regional and specific. In this light, the notion of Haines as the poet of Alaska’s wilderness is perhaps not altogether demeaning or even inappropriate. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a title more complimentary to a poet who understands the specific, the regional as not only a gateway to the “uncharted places of the spirit,” but also the very “cure” for humanity’s dislocation from nature.

Works Cited

- Allen, Gilbert. "Jeffers and Yeats." *Robinson Jeffers and a Galaxy of Writers*. Ed. William B. Thesing. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995. 60-68. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. Print.
- Bowden, Jonathon. "Robinson Jeffers: Misanthrope Extraordinaire." 9th New Right Meeting. London. 13 January 2007. Lecture.
- Cohen, Michael. *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*. New York, NY: Random House, 1988. Print.
- Demott, Robert. "Close to Religious Aspiration: Notes on John Haines's Poetry." *Literature and Belief* 23.1 (2003): 1-20. Print.
- Felstiner, John. *Can Poetry Save the Earth?: A Field Guide to Nature Poems*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. Print.
- Gioia, Dana. Introduction. *New Poems: 1980-1988*. By John Haines. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1996. xi-xviii. Print.
- Haines, John. *Fables and Distances: New and Selected Essays*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 1996. Print.
- . *For the Century's End: Poems, 1990-1999*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001. Print.
- . *New Poems: 1980-1988*. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1990. Print
- . "The Poet as Prophet: Some Notes on Robinson Jeffers." *Jeffers Studies* 4.4 (2000): 12-20. Print.
- Hudson, Marc. "A Certain Gravity and a Moral Depth." *Sewanee Review* 119.1 (2011): vi-viii. Print.
- Jeffers, Robinson. *Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*. Ed. Tim Hunt. 5 Vols. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991. Print.
- . *The Double Axe and other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1948. Print.
- Milosz, Czeslaw. *Milosz's ABC's*. London: Macmillan, 2002. Print.
- Stark, Hunter. *Metaphysics and the Charge of Misanthropy: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Circles" as a Cipher for Understanding the Connection between Robinson Jeffers and Herman Melville*. MA Thesis Marshall University, 2010. *Dissertations and Theses*. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.

Walzer, Kevin, and Kevin Bezner, eds. *The Wilderness of Vision: On the Poetry of John Haines*. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1996. Print.

Wordsworth, William. "The World is too much with us." *Selected Poems*. Ed. Roger Sharrock. London: Heinemann, 1958. 94-95. Print.