

the relation of desire and drink. "Why go on about the suggestion of seduction?" she asks herself and the reader. "No one can speak with as many voices as a woman discovers in herself, shouting, rasping, whispering, telling of desire and reluctance. . . . If only between the parlor and the boudoir there was no hallway."

A similar passage—a moment of intense reflection—occurs in one of Eaton's best stories, "The Case of the Missing Photographs." The narrator asks of a friendship that is drying up: "Why didn't it end there? Why do human beings keep toying with each other past the point of reason and civilized endurance? Loneliness provides part of the answer, but I think one must look elsewhere into some basic lust for human encounter, some fascination with what's difficult in the face of the absurdities of human coexistence."

Mrs. Packer's stories, like Mr. Eaton's, are often laid outside the South, but she has no interest in what James called the international theme and confines herself to such exotic spots as California and New York City as well as the South. She also occasionally writes about the academy, which is the scene of the title story of her new collection and of "Lousy Moments" and "The Waiting Game," stories about commonplace academic situations. But "The Women Who Walk" actually explores the bereft loneliness of a woman caught by divorce, intense loneliness that could occur in any setting. Indeed the best stories here—"Breathing Space," "Jellyfish," "Homecoming," "Making Amends," and "The Women Who Walk"—are about lonely people, mainly women, trying to come to terms with solitude and, often, isolation and alienation. "She had lost touch with the world, gone stale and sour inside herself. Her life had lost its shape. . . . She had to rebuild her life again," Marian, the protagonist of "The Women Who Walk," thinks forlornly. This powerful thematic statement applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to many of the stories here, some of which—such as "Making Amends" and "One Man's Poison"—are comedies of manners.

All of these writers are Southern, but none is confined to the region. All

of them write out of a profound knowledge of the South and its literature and culture, but all are more interested in what Bishop called the arts of living than in the fine arts. Even though the Southern civilization's manners are becoming attenuated, they still exist and are often seen best in the clash between manners and morals that provide the essential theme and action of much American fiction from James to the present time. This clash can be seen in such representative stories as Hoffman's "Faces at the Window" and "Altarpiece," Eaton's "The Case of the Missing Photographs," and Packer's "Jellyfish" and "Making Amends."

The stories presented in these three books are set in the world of the present, and the best of them remain contemporary—in touch with the currents of modern life as well as solidly rooted in the past. "Without a past," Bishop observed, "we are living not in the present, but in a vague and rather unsatisfactory future." He continues: "We have this [past] for our encouragement. That is a start, and a good one, in these days when everyone is ready to make civilization in which nothing so fallible as grandfather will be left, but all will be ordered for the best in the best of dehumanized

worlds." Although we often feel the pressure of dehumanization in these stories, we also find the clean well-ordered space of civilization.

*George Core is the editor of the Sewanee Review.*

## The Symbolic Interpreter

by William H. Nolte

### The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers

Edited by Tim Hunt

Stanford: Stanford University Press;

Volume I, 1920-1928;

521 pp., \$60.00;

Volume II, 1928-1938;

610 pp., \$60.00



Nearly thirty years after his death in 1962, Robinson Jeffers occupies a secure niche in the pantheon of American poets. I suspect, indeed, that his place may well be the most secure of all. He has long since weathered the storm of disapproval that centered on his prophetic verse written before, during, and after World War II. Over the past

### BRIEF MENTIONS

#### THE PUZZLE OF THE SOVIET CHURCH: AN INSIDE LOOK AT CHRISTIANITY AND GLASNOST by Kent R. Hill

Portland: Multnomah Press; 417 pp., \$15.95

For a good thirty years the National Council of Churches has been defending and apologizing for the policies and conditions of the Soviet Union. The charitable interpretation for this unusual exercise of faith is that those involved were trying to get Western Christians to promote peace and a better tomorrow by overlooking massive evil. Kent Hill, a self-proclaimed Christian, takes a different tack.

Hill, a well-credentialed Sovietologist who currently leads the Washington-based Institute for Religion and Democracy, documents, in order to bring the Soviet devil to heel, the persecution of the faithful. The historical sweep from 1917 through 1985 relies on a few major sources known to specialists, but there is also much current material since the Gorbachev regime. Of special interest is the case study of the "Siberian Seven," seven Pentecostals who took refuge in the American embassy in Moscow from 1978 through 1983. Their faith and leap for protection, if not freedom, confounded both Soviet and American bureaucrats. Hill befriended these persecuted Christians while studying in Moscow, and the encounter changed his life, as he began to see the great gulf that separated complacent Christians in the West from their brethren in the Soviet Union.

Hill takes a sober look at the current limits to religious belief and practice in the Soviet Union. Government persecution still occurs, even as we watch the party on the Berlin Wall, and the apparatus and legal mechanisms, fully documented in Hill's appendices, are still in place.

—Michael Warder

two decades his out-of-print books have been reissued in various editions. And now we have the first two of the four volumes of his collected poetry, beautifully printed and bound; they are, in fact, models of the art of bookmaking.

Certainly no other American poet has approached Jeffers in his ability to endow character with life; his people, tormented and tormenting creatures, haunt the memory like grisly phantoms rising from some atavistic depth of which we were unaware. Passing before the mind's eye, they reveal those gulfs over which we daily pass. In their strengths and weaknesses we see ourselves; they reveal to us, above all else, how slippery is our hold on reason and how tempting are the lures of irrationality in all its forms. Which is to say, Jeffers did what all great writers have done: he provided insight into the human condition.

Insight, above all else. And that insight does not stop with the human condition, but extends outward into the larger and, for Jeffers, more important natural world. No other poet of this century strove more successfully to "catch the inhuman God" in his lens. In this area, indeed, Jeffers had few peers in all of literature. It was, of course, the "inhuman God" — cleansed of the least taint of anthropomorphism — that Jeffers most cherished, and besought his fellows to turn to as a means of realizing their true humanity and at the same time escaping the introversion and narcissism inherent in merely human-centered concerns. In a late poem, "My Loved Subject," he commented that though old age prevented him from walking the mountains as in the past, his beloved subject remained unchanged:

Mountains and ocean, rock,  
water and beasts and trees  
Are the protagonists, the human  
people are only symbolic  
interpreters.

In another poem written in his final years he spoke of "the business of poetry" as being essentially a celebration of the physical world — God's body, so to speak, of which man makes up a miniscule part:

To feel and speak the  
astonishing beauty of things  
— earth, stone and water,

Beast, man and woman, sun,  
moon and stars —  
The blood-shot beauty of  
human nature, its thoughts,  
frenzies and passions,  
And unhuman nature its  
towering reality —  
For man's half dream; man,  
you might say, is nature  
dreaming, but rock  
And water and sky are  
constant — to feel  
Greatly, and understand greatly,  
and express greatly, the  
natural  
Beauty, is the sole business  
of poetry.  
The rest's diversion: those holy  
or noble sentiments, the  
intricate ideas,  
The love, lust, longing: reasons,  
but not the reason.

In several poems, and also in the remarkable essay "Poetry, Gongoriam, and a Thousand Years," Jeffers expressed his *ars poetica* — most notably in "Apology for Bad Dreams," written circa 1925, at the beginning of his great renown. There he disavowed any "moral" intention in the artistic *impulse*, which was both creative and destructive, similar in nature to the creative-destructive "artistry" of God, Who "brays humanity in a mortar to bring the savor / From the bruised root: a man having bad dreams, who invents victims, is only the ape of that God." He expressed this essentially amoral aesthetic in a letter when he remarked that "poetry does not necessarily have a 'message' except 'How beautiful things are' — or 'How sad, or terrible' — or even 'How exciting.' These are the only messages that Homer or Shakespeare — for instance — have for us."

The amazing thing about the poetry in these two enormous volumes, both the lyrics and the long narrative poems, is that all of it may be read with interest by any intelligent reader. One may be disturbed by the poetry, but it is hard to imagine that one might be indifferent to it. By 1920 Jeffers had found his unmistakable "voice," having left behind him the insignificant efforts of his teens and 20's; as everyone knows, he matured late. (That early poetry, incidentally, will be published in Volume IV, along with various of his prose statements.) But here we have the fully

integrated personality from the very beginning. "To the Stone-Cutters," for example, appears on the third page of Volume I. Its somber rhythm conveys stoicism in a manner that we have come to regard as typically Jeffersian; its every line bears his unmistakable imprint:

Stone-cutters fighting time with  
marble, you foredefeated  
Challengers of oblivion  
Eat cynical earnings, knowing  
rock splits, records fall down,  
The square-limbed Roman  
letters  
Scale in the thaws, wear in the  
rain. The poet as well  
Builds his monument  
mockingly;  
For man will be blotted out,  
the blithe earth die, the brave  
sun  
Die blind and blacken to  
the heart:  
Yet stones have stood for a  
thousand years, and pained  
thoughts found  
The honey of peace in  
old poems.

Jeffers was preeminently a "loner," always keeping his distance from the creeds and faiths of the great masses of men, and of those who pretended to speak to the masses. In a word, he was an aristocrat in the classical sense of the term. He most resembled, in thought and temperament, such solitary figures as Heraclitus, Lucretius, and, to a lesser extent, Nietzsche — and, yes, Emily Dickinson. I have always relished his bemused wonder at those who professed admiration for the Many (as Heraclitus called them). The opening lines of "Wise Men in Their Bad Hours" express a view that seems almost heretical in this age of the Common Man:

Wise men in their bad hours  
have envied  
The little people making merry  
like grasshoppers  
In spots of sunlight,  
hardly thinking  
Backward but never forward,  
and if they somehow  
Take hold upon the future  
they do it  
Half asleep, with the tools  
of generation