

# The Tower

By Aaron Kramer

*I am sick after steadfastness  
Watching the world cataractlike  
Pour screaming onto steep ruins . . .  
If anywhere . . .  
Were a tower with foundations,  
or a treasure-chamber  
With a firm vault, or a walled  
fortress  
That stood on the years, not stag-  
gering, not moving. . . .*

—from "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," by Robinson Jeffers.

*. . . this pragmatism, preposterous  
pig of a world,  
its farrow that so solid seem,  
Must vanish on the instant if the  
mind but change its theme:  
. . . In mockery I have set  
A powerful emblem up,  
And sing it rhyme upon rhyme  
In mockery of a time  
Half-dead at the top. . . .*

—from "Blood and the Moon," by W. B. Yeats.

IT is a literary phenomenon of our time that so many readers and poets hold in reverent awe the Tower symbol. Building at a distance of 6,000 miles, from differently metamorphosed rock, and working with dissimilar blueprints, William Butler Yeats and Robinson Jeffers must be recognized as the wizard twin-architects. A hermit outpost beyond time, expelling all signs of humanity from the nearby landscape, high overlooking this planet with its swarming things, their tower is supposed to grant view of truth smiling up from the sence of stone, staring down from the calm, wise moon.

That such an odd piece of real estate should find popularity is due to more factors than the poets' advertising skill. Conditions that stir writers exist for others as well; Jeffers and Yeats struck a responsive chord because they felt the "mist and snow" sharply enough to run away, screaming that the old shelters leak. When they bugled triumphantly from afar, describing the soundness and majesty of their new shelter, was it not natural that others should follow, hoping to find some comfort from the storm? For unquestionably the old house was rent. Anyone with eyes could see, before the new century had gone far, that all the remodelling—new coats

of paint, heating system, rugs, sofas and chandeliers—could not stop the "mist and snow"; everything shook in that old hodge-podge temple of Greek, Gothic, Victorian and Romanesque design. In Darwin's day religion had temporarily patched the roof: Man is intended for the pinnacle of God's planning genius: knowledge-thirsty, ingenious, energetic—just wait and see—the long agony would soon be justified: weren't we about ready to roll up our sleeves and drag out the sun? . . . But here it was, Miracle Age already, planes in the sky, trains and bridges, cable and telephone wire; yet things were all still the same—only worse. Where could one turn: hating the shiny exultation of iron and steel and billionaire, hating the desperate bludgeonings of religion (furious at being worn through), seeing oneself and all life as in a huge mirror: laughable, contemptible pygmies strutting between geologic ages on a "splinter" called Earth?

Though there was a real need for shelter among thinking people, these poets created their tower not out of compassion, but for self. Jeffers, having speedily read all the books and ploughed through the university, was terrified by the prospect of setting up house among the crowd of Mankind. "I have outgrown the city a little . . ." and so he built on the desolate Pacific shore a house, where he could play at God with his "puppets" undisturbed. Yet what actually bothered him into writing the epics we know?

*It had occurred to me that I was  
already a year older  
than Keats when he died, and I  
too had written many verses,  
but they  
were all worthless. . . .*

At that moment, his confession goes on, he forgot that "life's value is life," determining that he must accomplish something huge and original, to bring his name prominence and endurance (back there in the cities he'd outgrown). The admission of Yeats is similar: describing walks as a youth through the streets, when he could strike a "Byronic pose" and watch his reflection admiringly in store windows. As much as anything else, it was this assurance of inner superiority over the "common man," this urge to be a Byron, a Keats, any-

thing but a nobody on the street, which drove these men to come away from civilization and "stare gigantically down."

GOING to their poetry we find, despite the fierce element of agony which lends dramatic strength (as per recipe), passage after passage of ecstatic joy in the warm, high safety of their dwelling. Yeats squeezes his lemon of sour pleasure by posing as a martyr to the cause of impartial, truthful vision: ambition has not been allowed to stain his honor: he sees all, and that all is nothing: "What had the Caesars but their thrones?" Yeats, at least, has a "sweetness" (never clearly defined). "Bound neither to Cause nor to State" he is proud of total independence—a God-head, creating his own soul, triumphing against bodily ruin, joyously drunk atop his tower "from the whole wine" even the intangible "fume of muscatel" which the mere living kind down on earth cannot taste; knowing in pure moonlight "the abstract joy/ The half-read wisdom of daemonic images"; comforting himself with the thought that Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith and Burke had gone up the same "winding stair," and that he may "dine at journey's end/ With Landor and with Donne."

Jeffers likewise tells us that he is a martyred devotee of Truth:

*Dear is the truth. Life is grown  
sweeter and lonelier. . . .  
A stone is a better pillow than  
many visions. . . .  
Though joy is better than sorrow,  
joy is not great. . . .  
I bruised myself in the flint mortar  
and burnt me  
In the red shell, I tortured myself,  
I flew forth,  
Stood naked of myself and broke  
me in fragments. . . .*

Yet he, too, admits, and with a more dazzling honesty than Yeats, how basic to his work is the motive of personal comfort:

*I said in my heart,  
"Better invent than suffer:*

**RIGHT: "Deliver Us from Evil," lithograph by John Wilson, runner-up for Art Young Memorial Cartoon Award (announced Dec. 19, 1944).**

