

IN THE ROOT OF WISDOM: THE ROLE OF THE DOUBLE-BLADED AXE IN ROBINSON
JEFFERS'S "THE INHUMANIST"

by

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(Under the Direction of Carl Rapp)

ABSTRACT

Although largely ignored by Jeffers scholars, the old man's double axe cuts quite a figure in Robinson Jeffers's long narrative poem "The Inhumanist." In both its symbolic and dramatic roles, the double-bit axe elucidates the central components of Jeffers's mature metaphysical and spiritual worldview. In addition to its role as a metaphysical symbol, the double axe also functions as an emblem of Jeffers's poetry—one that articulates his underlying concerns and enduring aspirations for his work.

INDEX WORDS: Robinson Jeffers, Double Axe, Poetry, Metaphysics, Religion, Symbol, God, Conflict, Cycle

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DEDICATION

To Dorothy, Michael, Katy, and James—for all your help and encouragement.

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CHAPTER ONE
OF METAPHYSICS AND RELIGION

Even given the relatively limited scope of Jeffers scholarship, it is still surprising that critics have failed to adequately acknowledge the symbolic and dramatic significance of the old man's double axe, which plays a vital role in Robinson Jeffers's long narrative poem "The Inhumanist." This critical oversight seems particularly odd, especially when one considers that the volume *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948) takes its name from the old man's weapon. Furthermore, "The Double Axe" is also the name of the aforementioned volume's title poem, of which "The Inhumanist" is the second part. Certainly, the fact that both the entire volume and its title poem are named after the double axe indicates that it holds some level of significance.

But in their analyses of "The Inhumanist," most scholars have, at best, only alluded to the deeper meanings of the double axe, and, at worst, almost completely overlooked it. Bill Hotchkiss, an example of latter, in his twenty-two page afterword to *The Double Axe* collection, devotes one and a half pages to the old man's double axe. In this section, Hotchkiss makes some interesting assertions, but his claim that the "axe, ultimately, is the two-hemisphered human brain," in addition to lacking sufficient textual evidence, is almost completely unwarranted (Hotchkiss 187). Arthur Coffin's ten page treatment of *The Double Axe and Other Poems*, however, hits closer to the mark. Coffin's essay offers two brief declarations about the axe: that it is "possibly a symbol of the Revaluation of Values," and that it is an "ancient, generative symbol" associated with

the celebration of the Heraclitean logos (Coffin 176, 180). Like many other critics, Coffin makes interesting assertions about the axe, but he does not substantiate them with textual evidence or follow them to their logical conclusions.

In this sparse critical landscape, Robert Zaller and James Karman stand as the only scholars who have seriously treated the double axe, and, given this state of affairs, it is worth considering the most compelling aspects of their respective essays. In “The End of Prophecy: ‘The Double Axe’ and the Nuclear Sublime,” Zaller declares that the double-bit axe is the poem’s “reigning symbol [and] co-protagonist,” a symbiotic partner to the old man with a will of its own, a magical implement, a symbol of technology run amok, and a manifestation of the Divine (Zaller 51-54). Karman, in “The End of Prophecy: A Response,” expands on Zaller’s analysis and suggests that the axe “seems to be poetry itself, Jeffers’s poetry, the weapon he wields but does not control, the tool he uses but does not understand, the force he adores but also fears, the instrument of his own destruction” (Karman 60). As this sampling of critical assessments from Hotchkiss to Karman suggests, the diversity of claims made by scholars about the axe are myriad.

This state of affairs is appropriate, for the double axe is a complex and enigmatic figure, a figure whose shadowy nature, as the old man reveals, has a precedent in the *labrys*, or double-bladed axe, of the ancient civilizations of Asia Minor. But even if one ignores the ancient roots that the old man imputes to his axe, a brief description of its characteristics, as well as of its role in “The Inhumanist,” will reveal why critics have appropriately found its depths to be largely unsoundable.

Until section fifteen of “The Inhumanist,” the axe appears to be just what it seems: an appropriate, even if eccentric, tool for the old man, a Zarathustra-esque

protagonist who is the solitary, self-appointed “caretaker” at the fire ravaged “Gore place” (Jeffers, *Collected Poetry* 3: 258). At this point in the narrative, however, the reader probably suspects that there is something special about the axe: its dual blades make it an archaic implement in a modern setting, and the old man’s description of its ancestral functions suggests a powerful symbolic value.

In section fifteen, though, the axe rears its head—literally. In this unexpected turn of events, the reader is, no doubt, surprised to find that the double-bit axe responds to the old man’s meditative expostulations by “twitch[ing] and giggl[ing] in his hand,” an event that is an augur for the axe’s behavior for the rest of the poem (*CP* 3: 264). Certainly, the axe’s reaction here is the first indication of its unique importance to the poem—a significance that Zaller aptly describes by asserting that the axe is “not only the poem’s reigning symbol but its co-protagonist as well” (Zaller 51). Zaller’s use of the term “co-protagonist” is fitting, for the axe is a sentient being with a will of its own, and, throughout the poem, it acts and responds in a variety of ways (Zaller 51). Zaller glosses some of the axe’s behaviors, writing, “It sounds of its own accord through a full range of vocalization (screaming, barking, neighing, buzzing, yelling, and giggling) that stops just short of articulate speech, and expressively exceeds it in the way that natural force (thunder, earthquake, storm) can” (Zaller 51). The axe’s discordant vocalizations, however, are not isolated oddities; they form a perfect complement to the violent figure that it cuts throughout the narrative. The list of its brutalities is not a short one: the old man employs it to behead both Vere Harnish and the man of terrors, and, by itself, the axe murders two robbers, as well as the giant octopus when the old man hurls it into the sea.

The preceding description of the axe, though necessarily brief and incomplete, hopefully gives an indication of the complexity and downright uncanniness of the old man's double-bit axe—a complexity that has, no doubt, led the few critics who have addressed it to offer diverse, multifarious, and incomplete speculations about its deeper meanings. In fact, Karman admits as much when he follows his acknowledgment of the axe's dense symbolic value and its importance to "The Inhumanist" by confessing that he "[does not] think that the symbol of the double axe has ever been adequately explored" (Karman 60). A journey through Jeffers scholarship on *The Double Axe* definitely corroborates Karman's comment; there is still a lot of work to be done.

Although Coffin, Zaller, and Karman provide intriguing insights about the double axe, which certainly deserve further consideration, they neglect one of its most important aspects—one which seems to lie at the heart of axe's symbolic meaning. They fail to recognize that, in both its symbolic and dramatic roles, the double axe elucidates the central components of Jeffers's mature metaphysical and spiritual worldview. As a close analysis of "The Inhumanist" reveals, the axe is simultaneously a literal manifestation and a symbol of the Divine. Thus, in addition to its role as an extension of the Godhead, the axe serves as a paradigm for the way that the universe functions, as well as an emblem for the ontological truths on which all existence rests.

Exploring the core aspects of the axe's symbolism can lead to a more profound understanding of Jeffers's poetic vision, for Jeffers's poetry—especially his mature work—revolves around his metaphysical and religious beliefs. In "Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur," long time Jeffers scholar Robert Brophy makes a similar point: "The themes of Jeffers's poetry follow his overview of life and remain consistent

throughout his mature period” (Brophy 8). Later in the same essay, Brophy expands on this statement, asserting that “Jeffers’s art was his life, a consequence of his philosophy and of his sense of vocation. Once one grasps the dimensions of his beliefs, it becomes evident that Jeffers’s poetry is impressively centered and predictable. His every poem’s theme, one way or another, is the divine beauty of the cosmos and mutability of the individual” (Brophy 9). Although there may be a bit of hyperbole in Brophy’s assertions, they are consistent with the intent of his essay, which aims to introduce new Jeffers enthusiasts to some of the poet’s major concerns. Even with this concession in mind, it seems clear that Brophy is speaking truthfully. Certainly, Jeffers’s poetry should not be viewed as an unchanging, monolithic entity, but, at the same time, his poetry is centrally concerned with and informed by the exploration of enduring themes—themes which, in one way or another, grow out of his metaphysical and theological views. In fact, the close connection between Jeffers’s worldview and his poetry reveals yet another aspect of the axe’s symbolic meaning. In addition to its role as a metaphysical symbol, the double axe also functions as an emblem of Jeffers’s poetry—one that articulates his underlying concerns and enduring aspirations for his work.

Before exploring the symbolic and dramatic role of the double axe, though, it is worth providing a brief overview of Jeffers’s most fundamental beliefs. In “Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur,” Robert Brophy glosses some of the central aspects of Jeffers’s mature worldview:

[Jeffers] was a pantheist who believed that God is the evolving universe, a self-torturing deity who discovers himself in the violent change which is at the center of life’s dynamism. Jeffers’s images are reductively cyclic. To

him cycle is the truth of the stars, the vitality of the planet, the fate of human, animal, insect, and flower life. Cycle moves inexorably through birth, growth, fullness, decay, and death. For him *Being* in all its manifestations necessarily involves change brought about by violence and pain, because every form resists its own dissolution. If these realities are customarily repugnant to humans, they are essential to beauty and divinity. For Jeffers there is only matter and energy, no spirit, no soul, no immortality. God endures forever; mankind is a temporary phenomenon, something of an anomaly in the universe because of the race's megalomaniac fixations. (8)

Brophy follows this densely packed passage by expanding on his assertions about Jeffers's view of the Divine, humanity, and the cyclical nature of existence:

[For Jeffers,] the world in its various rhythms is determined. The universe itself expands and collapses; oceans condense and evaporate; mountains and civilizations rise and fall; nations emerge and grow feeble. The mass of mankind is fated in its course, but the individual may choose to remove self from the downcycle, the breaking wave; he can stand apart and contemplate instead of being blindly caught ("Shine, Perishing Republic"). God himself (the pronoun is of course an abhorred anthropomorphism for Jeffers) is in no way like humankind; he is savage, unconcerned, and reckless, encompassing both good and evil, ever seeking new discovery ("Contemplation of the Sword"). If seen wholly, all things are sacred and

in harmony. Evil itself is only part of the mosaic of beauty (“The Answer”). (8)

As Brophy’s comments indicate, Jeffers’s religious beliefs and his metaphysical views are intimately connected, as he held that the God of the universe was the evolving universe, and that all elements of existence were part of the Divine whole. Jeffers’s cyclical worldview, his determinism, and his holistic pantheism, however, are also informed by his belief that conflict and pain are the most basic and inescapable ontological facts.

In “Themes In My Poems,” Jeffers addresses this fundamental condition of being: “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” (*CP* 4: 413). Thus, in the Jeffersian worldview, the cyclical nature of existence, and the ontological status of pain, violence, and change are intimately intertwined: for Jeffers, the ceaseless tension and interplay between opposing forces (like life and death, or expansion and collapse) keep the wheel of space and time turning.

Although the preceding description of Jeffers’s worldview is necessarily brief, it helps set the stage for a detailed exploration of the old man’s double axe. But, before lifting the opening curtain, it is worth talking about the significance of Jeffers’s choice of the double axe for such a crucial role in “The Inhumanist.” 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. A close reading of “The Inhumanist” suggests that Jeffers understood the ancient significance of the double-bladed axe, and that he drew upon this knowledge while shaping the old man’s weapon.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LABRYS, THE BOW, AND THE HANGED GOD

Because the old man's description of the double axe in section six of "The Inhumanist" is the most direct explanation of its significance, it provides a suitable starting point for a serious analysis of the double-bladed figure. In the sixth section of "The Inhumanist," the old man takes a break from cutting oak fence posts, and, while whetting the edges of his axe, he considers his double-bladed weapon:

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. (*CP* 3: 258)

Before closely examining this passage, it is worth noting the way that the old man merges both his description of the ancient Cretan double axe and his commentary on the pre-Christian cross with his assertions about his double-bladed weapon. By interweaving his thoughts about the axe with his description of its ancient lineage, the old man indicates that his double axe is intimately tied to the meaning and symbolic values of its distant ancestors.

This link to the past is a great asset for any serious exploration of the axe's deeper meanings. But two ancient figures in particular—the Cretan double axe and the Heraclitean bow—provide an invaluable resource for this journey of explication. Like

the key figures in the legend of a map, the Cretan axe and the Heraclitean bow can help the reader negotiate and interpret the complex geography of “The Inhumanist.” This declaration, however, does not imply that the old man’s double axe is a paltry shadow of its ancient roots. In fact, the old man’s assertion, “this one can clip heads too,” indicates that his double axe has all the potency of its ancestors (*CP* 3: 258).

Certainly, the first line of the above passage (“In Crete it was a God, and they named the labyrinth for it.”) expresses the powerful significance of the double axe in ancient Crete. But the old man’s next sentence (“That’s long before the Greeks came: the lofty Greeks were still bushmen.”) specifies a particular period in the history of ancient Crete. As Karman notes, the first two sentences in this prose paragraph indicate that “Jeffers [. . .] is referring to the Minoan civilization which flourished in the second millennium B.C.—before the Greeks and before the Mycenaeans” (Karman 61). The opening lines of this passage, however, are much more than a neat historical allusion.

The old man’s explanation of the divine status of the double axe and its association with the labyrinth, during the period “long before” the emergence of the “lofty Greeks,” suggests that Jeffers was familiar with the theories, popular in the early twentieth century, about the significance of the double axe in the religion of the Minoan civilization. Arthur J. Evans, the first scholar to excavate and study the great prehistoric Palace at Knossos, the largest Bronze Age archaeological site on Crete, was the first to discuss the role of the double axe in Minoan religion, and the old man’s assertion (“In Crete [the double axe] was a god, and they named the labyrinth for it.”) suggests that Jeffers knew and understood Evans’s theories.

In his 1901 essay “Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cult and Its Mediterranean Relations,” Evans, drawing on archaeological evidence, concluded that the Palace at Knossos was the site of the infamous Cretan Labyrinth (Evans 110). Evans constructed his theory about the connection between the double axe and the labyrinth on the basis of philological and archaeological evidence (Evans 109). Expanding on Max Meyer’s earlier supposition that “labyrinthos” was etymologically related to “labrys,” which was the “Lydian (or Carian) name for [. . .] the double-edged axe,” Evans asserted that the Cretan Labyrinth “may have taken [its] name *directly* from the sacred axe, meaning simply, ‘the place of the *labrys*’” (Evans 109). In addition to these apparent linguistic connections, Evans saw the numerous inscriptions of double axes at the Palace at Knossos as an indication that the Cretan Labyrinth was “essentially ‘the House of the Double Axe’” (Evans 109). For Evans, the double axe figures inscribed on the chief corner stones and doorjambs of the Palace and on two pillars inside the structure implied consecration to the Cretan Zeus, as the “Double Axe” was the “special aniconic form” of this particular deity (qtd. in Waites 27). Thus, for Evans, the double axe was a symbol of the Cretan Zeus, but it was also worshiped as the “material form or indwelling-place of the divinity, in the same way as his aniconic image of stone or wood” (Evans 107). The old man’s comment that in “Crete it was a god,” seems to reference the axe’s status as “the material form or indwelling-place of the divinity” (Evans 107).

The old man’s statement about the divinity of the axe in ancient Crete—and its similarity to Evans’s theory—seems to indicate that Jeffers understood the aniconic significance of the Minoan double axe, and, furthermore, that he used this knowledge to shape the development of the old man’s weapon. This claim for Jeffers’s knowledge—

and its application—is strengthened if one examines the way that the axe is described, as well as the way it behaves, throughout “The Inhumanist.” A close inquiry will reveal that, like its ancient counterpart, the old man’s double axe is an aniconic object, a quality that is most clearly depicted in section thirty-six of the poem, when the axe shrieks in apparent response to the German scientist’s heretical remarks about God.

When the German scientist denounces God to the old man, the axe begins “to scream like a hawk” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 292). When the old man offers a rebuttal to the scientist’s remark, the axe’s hawk-like qualities link it with the old man’s description of God: “[. . .] God is a hawk gliding / among the stars — / If all the stars and the earth, and the living flesh of the night that flows in / between them, and whatever is beyond them / Were that one bird. He has a bloody beak and harsh talons, he pounces and / tears—” (*CP* 3: 292). This passage is vitally important, for it creates an enduring connection in the reader’s mind between the axe and the Divine.

In fact, the old man’s use of the hawk as a metaphor for the Divine is a common enough device in Jeffers’s poetry—one that Jeffers scholars would certainly anticipate.¹ This particular passage, then, creates an association between the double axe and the divine, an association only strengthened by the commonality of the metaphor. But the description of both the double axe and the Divine in hawk-like terms creates more than just an association: it suggests that the hawk’s identity, as well as its very being, is in

¹ It should be remembered, though, that, in Jeffers’s poetry, the hawk is a complex symbol whose diverse connotations and shades of meaning are contextually determined. In fact, in “Themes In My Poems,” Jeffers himself makes a similar point when he declares that “the hawk has symbolic values that are all the better for being diverse and multiform” (*CP* 4: 415). Despite the hawk’s diverse symbolic resonance, it often figures in Jeffers’s work as a metaphor for the Divine itself, or for the inhuman, savage, and reckless quality that Jeffers attributes to the Divine nature.

some mysterious way, aligned with God's. Thus, the axe seems to be an extension or manifestation of the divine.

Two other instances in the poem, where the old man ascribes bird-like qualities to the axe, only strengthen this connection. In section fifty-one, after the old man attempts to throw the axe away and it promptly returns to him, it starts screeching and jerking in his hand. The old man responds by telling the axe, which he calls "[b]ird with two beaks," to hush (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 309). Earlier in the poem, while conversing with the old man, the German scientist hears the axe "[h]umming and yelping to itself," and he asks the old man, "What for a / thing is that?" (*CP* 3: 290). The old man responds by saying that the axe is "[a] hungry eagle-chick" (*CP* 3: 290). Certainly, the axe's bird-like qualities and its link to the Divine indicate that the axe was influenced by Jeffers's awareness of the aniconic significance of the ancient double axe.

But another glance at the prose paragraph in which the old man describes his weapon suggests that Jeffers had more than just a superficial understanding of the symbolic and religious import of the *labrys*. As the old man's words indicate, the double axe, like its ancient counterpart, is both a "symbol of generation" and of destruction, as it "can clip heads too" (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 258). The old man's identification of the fructifying and annihilative capacities of the axe suggest that Jeffers was aware of the deeper meanings held by the double axe in Minoan culture. According to Karman, Jeffers knew and understood that the Minoan civilization was

a goddess-based culture, as the evidence at Knossos attests. Votive figurines of snake goddesses, decorative moon symbolism on household objects, stylized bull horns everywhere—all point to a cyclical, feminine

view of the world and a religion of eternal return [. . .] The double axe was indeed a feminine symbol *par excellence*, standing for life, death, and rebirth. In the hands of the Great Mother, the womb and tomb of the material world, it was a symbol of creative and destructive power” (61).²

Karman speculates that Jeffers was aware that the double axe’s status as a symbol of the Divine Mother, because the old man identifies the feminine nature of the axe at the end of the poem (Karman 61).

As “great disasters” and “black rain,” which appear to represent a destructive bombing, fall, and the end of the world seems imminent, a young man, fleeing the danger, approaches the old man and addresses him, saying, “Are you laughing? [. . .] / No one else laughs” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 310). The old man responds, “No [. . .] it was my axe. She / Has the last laugh” (*CP* 3: 310). By calling the axe “She,” and by asserting that “She / Has the last laugh,” the old man identifies it as a symbol of the eternal feminine, an ancient figure of generation and destruction which will survive the forces of human devastation (*CP* 3: 310).

Although Karman’s suggestion that the old man’s double axe is a symbol for the ancient Mother-Goddess is enlightening, his observation requires further exploration, as it ignores a centrally important feature of the female deity—a feature that Jeffers appears to have understood. According to Waites, an archaeologist who responded to and expanded on Evans’s findings at Knossos, the “Goddess-Mother, as the supreme source of life, unites in herself the male and the female elements, and such a combination finds

² Margaret C. Waites, a prominent archaeologist working in the early twentieth century, corroborates Karman’s assertions about the predominance of the female deity in Minoan religion: “Though in many of the cults of Asia Minor the axe survived as a special attribute of Zeus, the predominance of the female over the male element in divinity, manifested in the religions of both Crete and Anatolia, makes it antecedently probable that the axe originally belonged rather to the Mother-Goddess than to the Father-God” (26).

appropriate expression in the double-axe” (Waites 29). It seems that this aspect of the supreme female deity, which the ancient *labrys* symbolically expressed, was known by Jeffers, for, in “The Inhumanist,” the double axe is identified as both male and female.

The old man’s remark that the axe, as a “symbol of generation,” contains “two lobes and [a] stiff helve,” makes it a fairly overt phallic symbol, as well as an emblem of aggression (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 258).³ Additionally, the fact that, according to the Oxford English dictionary, one of the meanings of the word “lobe” is “a rounded projection or part of an organ” further reveals the axe as a masculine emblem. A second glance, however, at the old man’s statement about God as a hawk only adds to the phallic symbolism of the axe. In this passage, the old man directly refers to God as “He”: “[. . .] He has a bloody beak and harsh talons [. . .]” (*CP* 3: 292).⁴

Acknowledging that the double axe unites male and female elements—a detail that, as Waites suggests, finds appropriate expression in its dual blades—enables one to see it as a fitting emblem of generation and procreation—or, to put it quite frankly, sex. With this thought in mind, it seems that, in addition to being an obvious phallic symbol, the axe also represents intercourse; if one visualizes the appearance of the double axe, it becomes clear that, in the meeting of its dual blades, which form a v-shape, with its helve, the axe symbolizes the union of penetration in sexual intercourse. Pointing out the axe’s sexual imagery is fitting, for sex is an archetypal symbol for both generation and destruction, as, to pick a random example, the Renaissance notion of “to die” evinces.

³ Although Nolte does not explore his observation of the axe as a masculine emblem, he also finds the axe an “obvious phallic symbol” (138).

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Carl Rapp for this insight. Dr. Rapp also pointed out that masculine qualities of the axe are emphasized in section fifty, when the narrator observes that the axe “[is] neighing like a stallion” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 308). Of course, the comparison between the axe and a stallion only heightens the weapon’s status as a figure of generation, and, more specifically, masculine sexual power.

Ultimately, the axe's association with sexual union, and, thus, with generation and destruction once again link it to the ancient *labrys*. This time, however, the link is the ancient practice of bull sacrifice. Like many other aspects of Jeffers's metaphysical and spiritual worldview, the notion of divine sacrifice finds symbolic expression in the old man's double axe. As mentioned previously, Minoan civilization was a goddess-based culture, as manifested by the "predominance of the female over the male element in [its notion of] divinity" (Waites 26). According to Waites, in this ancient culture, the deity the Greeks would later call the Cretan Zeus was "worshipped in his double function [as the Mother-Goddess's] son and lover" (Waites 37). Recognizing this aspect of the Cretan Zeus is important, for it is applicable to the practice of bull sacrifice. Waites makes this connection explicit when she states that "a lingering survival of the destructive fury exercised by the Great Mother toward her lovers may be found in the sacrifice of the bull, symbolizing the heaven-god, a sacrifice regularly accomplished by the double-axe" (Waites 37). Significantly, the axe's status as a symbol of creation and destruction indicates that bull sacrifice was a ritual of rebirth and renewal—one that symbolically ushered in new life through the animal's death.

The practice of bull sacrifice, however, carries deeper implications: it provides a fitting emblem for the notion of divine sacrifice that was so important to Jeffers. According to Case, "In Cretan ritual the bull figures largely as a sacrificial beast (there is a representation of a bull-sacrifice with double-axe and horns of consecration on an unpublished larnax from Phaestos), and perhaps also as the very god to whom the sacrifice was made" (Case 77). As Karman suggests, it appears that Jeffers understood the significance of bull sacrifice in Minoan society: "In regard to the bull symbolism—

which brings the ancient practice of bull sacrifice to mind—we should at least mention that in Part I of *The Double Axe* a bull is killed: Bull Gore” (Karman 61). Karman’s assertion here definitely hits the mark: the fact that Jeffers selects the name Bull for a father who is murdered by his son seems to imply a certain degree of knowledge on Jeffers’s part.

The fact that the ancient double axe was the ritual weapon regularly used in bull sacrifice is quite significant. The bull, as both the sacrificial victim and the deity to whom the sacrifice was consecrated, brings to mind a central aspect of Jeffers’s metaphysical and spiritual worldview: the notion of self-sacrificing deity or, as Jeffers himself puts it in “Themes In My Poems,” the “*self-torturing* God” (CP 4: 413). The axe’s connection with bull sacrifice, however, gains another level of complexity if one considers that the axe also functioned as the aniconic form of the deity—a detail that intensifies the notion of self-sacrifice. Karman clearly articulates the importance that divine sacrifice holds for Jeffers, noting that Jeffers views “divine sacrifice” as the “*agon* that turns the wheel of space and time” (Karman 61). Ultimately, as the double axe itself indicates, for Jeffers, violence and sacrifice are woven into the very fabric of being; they allow the cycle of life and death, and the resultant renewal and rebirth, to continue.⁵

This aspect of the axe’s symbolism is most clearly illustrated in section twenty-nine of “The Inhumanist,” when the old man grinds his axe in the night. The old man’s daughter, awakened in the night by a “high angry noise,” is surprised to find her father

⁵ While on the topic of divine sacrifice, it is worth referencing Karman’s analysis of the old man’s assertion, which appears in his description of the double axe. The old man proclaims that, like the ancient *labrys*, the “Cross” was “a symbol of generation” and destruction “before they christened it” (*Selected Poetry* 594). Responding to the old man’s declaration, Karman observes, “Jeffers, as we know, always thought of Christianity as one attempt among many to comprehend the primal mystery of life. Its central image—the crucifixion—perfectly expresses the notion of divine sacrifice that Jeffers believes in, the *agon* that turns the wheel of space and time” (61). Karman’s explanation deserves mention, for it reveals yet another way that the double axe elucidates Jeffers’s metaphysical and religious views.

“[w]orking the treadle grindstone behind the house, grinding an axe, leaning / the steel on the stone / So that it screamed, and a wild spray of sparks / Jetted on the black air” (*CP* 3: 282). After recovering from his daughter’s intrusion, the old man once again “stoop[s] over the / stone, the steel scream[s] like a horse, and the spark-spray / Sprout[s] from the high hill over land and sea” (*CP* 3: 282-83). The narrator observes that this spark-spray “was like the glittering night / last October / When the earth swam through a comet’s tail, and fiery serpents / Filled half of heaven” (*CP* 3: 283). Responding to this passage, Zaller astutely points out that the “grinding of the axe is symbolic of natural process,” as the “spray that ‘jets’ and ‘spouts’ in the heavens clearly suggests a kind of celestial genesis” (Zaller 55). In addition to the spray of sparks spouting from the axe, Zaller asserts that the axe’s dual blades are endowed with vital significance: “The ‘serpents’ figure the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction symbolized by the opposed blades of the double axe itself” (Zaller 55). Zaller’s comment about the serpents’ emblematic meaning seems to rely on the mythical implications of the Ouroboros, or the ancient symbol of a serpent or dragon forming a circle by swallowing its own tail. Among its multifarious connotations, the Ouroboros often represents eternal return and the cyclical nature of the universe, as well as primordial unity and the union of opposing forces.⁶

At this point, though, it is worth returning to Zaller’s analysis, as his words provide a helpful perspective from which to consider the symbolic and dramatic role of the axe. For Zaller, the axe’s main theme is “regenerative violence, and in the midst of human carnage it suggests the divine proclivity for renewal by destruction. [. . .] at the

⁶ Jeffers appears to have been aware of this aspect of the serpent’s symbolic meaning. While addressing a critic’s question about Gudrun’s reference to the snake at the end of “At the Birth of An Age,” Jeffers asserts that “[s]ymbolic imagery is capable of expressing many things at the same time.—The serpent is repulsive, treacherous, and beautiful. It is also—as phallic in appearance—a well-known symbol of life and renewal” (qtd. in Bennett 157-58).

same time, it is associated with the ‘wisdom’ of divine process, and the Inhumanist suggests that his own wisdom is lodged in the axehead (*CP* 3: 272)” (Zaller 52). Zaller’s point about the wisdom of the axe—but, more particularly, the old man’s implication that his wisdom is lodged in the head of the double axe—reveals the connection between the old man’s weapon and Heraclitus.

In fact, the passage that Zaller cites comes from section twenty-four of “The Inhumanist.” Not incidentally, Heraclitus is explicitly mentioned in this passage and his name is linked with the old man’s double axe. This direct reference to Heraclitus occurs when a “gray-haired walker,” who is “troubled about the future” of humanity, asks the old man for advice (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 272). This man tells the Inhumanist that he seeks his counsel because “they say [he has] a harsh / wisdom, unperfumed, untuned, untaught, / Like Heraclitus’s Sibyl” (272). The old man completes his supplicant’s statement by adding, “Whose voice [. . .] reaches / over ten thousand years / Because of the God” (272). The closeness of the diction and syntax of these verses to the Heraclitean fragment that they reference strongly suggests that Jeffers had encountered at least some of Heraclitus’s writings. According to Coffin, Jeffers’s words here closely correspond with Plutarch’s rendition of Heraclitus’s statement about the Sibyl: “The Sibyl with raving mouth, according to Heraclitus, uttering things mirthless, unadorned and unperfumed, reaches over a thousand years with her voice through the god” (qtd. in Coffin 177). In spite of this provocative connection, it is the conclusion of the conversation between the old man and the walker that can ultimately links Heraclitus with the double axe.

After finishing the walker’s broken Heraclitean fragment, the old man asks him, “Who [. . .] / was Heraclitus? I have some wisdom— / In the head of my axe” (Jeffers,

CP 3: 272). Although the old man disavows knowledge of Heraclitus, he does mention the philosopher's name immediately prior to his claim that he has "some wisdom— / [i]n the head of [his] axe" (272).⁷ As a result, Heraclitus becomes associated with the axe's wisdom, the nature of which is intimated by the walker's response: "I am more humble than you [. . .] / I am willing to be taught, and I am willing to teach, and the world wants / wisdom. The axe / Is in its root" (272). Here, due to the ambiguity of the pronoun usage, it seems that the walker is asserting either that the axe is in the root of wisdom, or that the axe is in the root of the world. Upon closer inspection, though, both interpretations appear to be true: the axe is in the root of wisdom, and it is in the root of the world. In other words, the axe contains the wisdom of natural process, or, as Zaller suggests, the "'wisdom' of divine process" (Zaller 52). Thus, the axe's wisdom of divine process becomes associated with Heraclitus. It should be noted, though, that the walker's statement meets with the old man's approval, as his statement ("I have noticed that.") suggests (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 272).

By uniting within itself male and female elements, as well as the forces of creation and destruction, the old man's double-bit axe is a powerful emblem for Jeffers's metaphysical and spiritual worldview. Ultimately, the axe reveals how Jeffers, much like Heraclitus, views the real nature of the world as "simultaneously and equally a unity and a plurality" (McKirahan 134). But, before drawing out this connection, it should be emphasized that Jeffers also resembles Heraclitus in that the Heraclitean worldview stresses "unity in diversity more than diversity in unity" (McKirahan 134).

⁷ The old man's disavowal of Heraclitus is significant—and in keeping with the Jeffersian worldview. His apparent ignorance of Heraclitus indicates that the old man's wisdom is natural and intuitive—and, most importantly, not a shadow of another human being's wisdom.

This connection, however, does not suggest that Jeffers was directly influenced by Heraclitean thought, nor is it necessary to prove such a claim. But it does indicate that Heraclitean philosophy may provide a useful lens through which to interpret the symbolic and dramatic meaning of the double axe. Additionally, noticing points of similarity between the Jeffersian and Heraclitean worldviews will provide further clarification about the axe.

Significantly, Jeffers's notion of the Divine resonates at several important levels with the Heraclitean logos, the "general principle" or "active nature in the universe" in accordance with which "all things that take place or come to be do so" (McKirahan 133). For Heraclitus, the logos ensures that "all things are one," an idea that he expands by declaring, "out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things" (McKirahan 120). Thus, the logos "permits all things, which merely appear to be plural and totally discrete, to be united in a coherent complex of which men themselves are a part" (Coffin 178). More strikingly, especially with reference to the old man's statements about the Divine, Heraclitus often identifies "God [with] the Logos that governs the world" (McKirahan 145). These Heraclitean sentiments certainly resonate with Jeffers's comments, which he included in a letter he wrote in 1934, about his own "religious attitudes":

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. (Ridgeway 221)

This passage lucidly describes Jeffers's pantheistic and organically holistic view of the Divine. For the prophet of Tor House, the God of the universe is the universe, in addition to being the underlying dynamic energy behind all things.

In "The Inhumanist," Jeffers provides many poetic expressions of these religious sentiments. At the beginning of the poem, the old man contemplates the nature of God's existence and declares that

[. . .] there is not an atom in all the universes
 But feels every other atom; gravitation, electromagnetism, 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. (*CP* 3: 256-57)

Here, the assertion that everything in the universe is interconnected because God is all things reflects Jeffers's view of the divine. Despite all of these affinities, Heraclitus's use of the bow as an emblem to illustrate the way that the logos operates in the universe ultimately illuminates the symbolic nature of the old man's double-axe. More specifically, examining the bow in conjunction with Jeffers's axe makes its status as a paradigm for the functioning of the universe more readily apparent.

Heraclitus describes the bow in two powerful statements. But, before discussing them, it should be noted that Heraclitus's remarks about the bow are grounded in his statement that "[w]hat is opposed brings together; the finest harmony (HARMONIA) is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be [or, occurs] in accordance with strife" (McKirahan 121). Ultimately, the bow illustrates the fact that the harmony of the universe arises from the tension between oppositional entities; it also shows that the nature of the universe is strife. This declaration can be taken as a useful preface to Heraclitus's first declaration about the bow:

They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself [or, how by being at variance with itself it agrees with itself; more literally, how being [or, by being] brought apart it is brought together]. It is a backwards-turning [or, backwards-stretching] attunement like that of the bow and lyre. (McKirahan 121)

As McKirahan comments, this fragment asks the reader to imagine an unused bow, in which "the cord and the wood are under equal tension in opposite directions, [with] the cord being pulled apart by the wood and the ends of the wood being pulled together by the cord" (McKirahan 135). Ultimately, the Heraclitean bow illustrates how harmony arises from the tension between oppositional entities. Thus, the "bow's unity and ability to function depend on the tension between the wood and the cord [. . .], yet the tension cannot exist without the cord and the wood" (McKirahan 135). Furthermore, the bow represents how unity arises from diversity (the unified structure of the bow is made possible by the opposing tension between the cord and the wood), and how diversity arises from unity (although the bow is a unified entity, its two parts, the wood and the

cord, stand in opposition to one another—a relationship they could not have unless united in the bow). Ultimately, the bow is “paradigmatic of how the world works and how we are to understand it” (McKirahan 135). Thus, the bow represents a fundamental aspect of the Heraclitean worldview: the simultaneous discord and tension between opposites.

Not incidentally, this concept of unity in diversity and diversity in unity is also a fundamental aspect of Jeffers’s worldview. Jeffers provides perhaps his most direct explanation of this central motif in “Themes In My Poems”:

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. This is the old dilemma of religions. Some of them run away from it, by regarding the outer world as mere illusion; others explain it by inventing a devil, Satan or Ahriman, and the conflict becomes a struggle between good and evil. But clearly that is not true. 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. (*CP* 4: 413)

According to Jeffers, “the old dilemma of religions” is founded on the fact that the foundation of all being is the irreconcilable conflicts created by opposing tensions and forces (Jeffers, *CP* 4: 413). Some religions retreat from this difficult aspect of existence by regarding “the outer world as mere illusion,” while others make the irreconcilable conflict that is being a “struggle between good and evil” (Jeffers, *CP* 4: 413). Jeffers, however, judges these methods of escape and explanation as untrue.

Throughout his career, in both his poetry and his personal correspondence Jeffers dismissed the notion that the outer world is a “mere illusion,” and that the irreconcilable conflict of being is “a struggle between good and evil” (Jeffers, *CP* 4: 413). Before further pursuing this point, however, it is worth discussing another point Jeffers discussed in “Themes In My Poems,” as the two are closely intertwined. While discussing a central theme of his poetry, Jeffers declares,

Another theme that has much engaged my verses is the expression of a religious feeling, that perhaps must be called pantheism, though I hate to type it with a name. It is the feeling . . . I will say the certainty . . . that the universe is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things; and is so beautiful that it must be loved and revered; and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it. (*CP* 4: 412)

Jeffers follows this statement with an important qualification, noting that his religious attitude “is, in a way, the exact opposite of Oriental pantheism. The Hindu mystic finds God in his own soul, and all the outer world is illusion. To this other way of feeling, the outer world is real and divine; one’s own soul might be called an illusion, it is so slight and so transitory” (Jeffers, *CP* 4: 412).

Jeffers’s words here bring to mind two of Brophy’s comments about Jeffersian metaphysics and theology: that God encompasses “both good and evil,” and that if “seen wholly, all things are sacred and in harmony,” for evil “itself is only part of the mosaic of beauty” (Brophy, “Poet of Carmel-Sur” 8). At first glance, Brophy’s assertions seem valid: Jeffers does see good and evil as two sides of the same coin. This statement, however, requires qualification. In a letter written in October of 1934, Jeffers declares

that “moral beauty” is “one of the qualities of humanity, though it seems not to appear elsewhere in the universe” (Ridgeway 221). This letter indicates that Jeffers holds morality to be solely a human concept—a concept that is projected outward onto the world by humanity, even though it has no connection with or basis in divine reality.

In fact, in section eight of “The Inhumanist,” the old man meditates on God’s utter lack of concern for and indifference to human feelings and morality: “I see [God] despises happiness; and as for goodness / he says What is it? and of evil, What is it? / And of love and hate, They are equal; they are two spurs, / For the horse has two flanks” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 259). The old man’s words here indicate that God sees good and evil as mere paper tigers, and that the Divine views “love and hate” not as morally or qualitatively different, but as equal in that they are two manic passions that spur human action. In section forty-one of “The Inhumanist,” the old man proclaims God’s indifference to human judgments and emotions (also that human judgments and perceptions are not connected to, or based in Divine authority): “God does not judge: God *is*. Mine is the judgment” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 299).

Ultimately, instead of fleeing from the essential religious conflict (by viewing the outer world as a “mere illusion,” or by viewing existence as a battle between good and evil), Jeffers embraces it. And, the perfect symbol for Jeffers’s acceptance is none other than the old man’s double axe. Its dual blades emblemize the ceaseless tension and discord between opposing forces (like male and female, life and death, and creation and destruction), but the fact that these blades are joined in the axe’s helve symbolizes the union of these opposing forces, and, ultimately, the harmony or oneness of being. As the

axe suggests, for Jeffers, binary opposites are two intertwining aspects of the same ultimate reality—not two immortal opposites perpetually clashing for dominion.⁸

It is essential to note, though, that, in the Jeffersian worldview, opposites are united by the regenerative violence, which fuels the cyclical nature of existence. The second Heraclitean fragment deals with a similar metaphysical notion, as it describes the paradoxical nature of reality which the bow encapsulates: “The name of the bow is life, but its work is death” (Wheelwright 91). Wheelwright observes that this statement derives its significance and impact from a linguistic pun:

One of the two Greek words for ‘bow’ is BIOS with the accent on the final syllable, whereas one of the two main words for life is BIOS with the accent on the initial syllable. The linguistic accident, whereby a death-dealing instrument has a name so similar to a word for life, seems to Heraclitus to be significantly related to the great paradoxical fact that life and death are but two intertwining aspects of the same thing, both of them being present and producing an ever-changing tension in every phenomenon” (Wheelwright 100).

In this second Heraclitean fragment, the generative and destructive nature of the bow reveals that life and death are two interconnected aspects of the same ultimate reality; and the continual tension between them enables the continued existence of the universe.

⁸ This unifying feature of Jeffers’s worldview evokes a statement the old man makes while describing his axe in section six of “The Inhumanist.” After asserting that, like the ancient labrys and the pre-Christian cross, his axe “can clip / heads too,” the old man declares that it has “[a] blade for the flesh, [and] a blade for the spirit” (CP 3: 258). The fact that these opposing blades, which represent the two notorious elements of Cartesian dualism, are combined in the axe elucidates a major aspect of Jeffers’s worldview—one that is expressed in a note transcribed by Melba Bennett from Jeffers’s papers but not used in her *Stone Mason of Tor House*: “God is not the ‘spirit of the universe’: spirit and body, energy and matter are one substance” (qtd. in Brophy, “The Prose of Robinson Jeffers” 76). This note underscores that Jeffers’s worldview is monistic, a fact that is revealed by the way the axe unites the “blade for the flesh” and the “blade for the spirit” (CP 3: 258).

The notion that “opposing tensions” and “irreconcilable desires” form the very fabric of existence is powerfully expressed in Jeffers’s poem “At the Birth of an Age.” This long saga culminates in what Jeffers describes as “a vision of the *universal* God, self-hanged on a mountain far beyond Caucasus. Voices of the world and the people and the stars cry to him, and at last he answers” (“Themes In My Poems,” *CP* 4: 414). Out of the thunder, the Hanged God offers his reply:

If I were quiet and emptied myself of pain, breaking
 these bonds,
 Healing these wounds: without strain there is nothing. Without pressure,
 without conditions, without pain,
 Is peace; that’s nothing, not-being; the pure night, the perfect freedom, the
 black crystal. I have chosen
 Being; therefore wounds, bonds, limits and pain; the crowded mind and the
 Anguished nerves, experience and ecstasy. (*CP* 2: 482)

As this passage suggests, “without strain there is nothing,” for “peace,” or the absence of conditions and pain, is “nothing, not being” (*CP* 2: 482). In the context of this passage, then, Brophy’s contention that “[p]eace, a cessation from strife, is an illusion in life. True peace is found in death” is fitting (Brophy, “Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Carmel-Sur” 8-9). Brophy seems right here: for Jeffers, the absence of suffering and conflict is a state of non-being—a state of death.

This passage, however, implies much more about Jeffers’s metaphysics and spirituality. In particular, God’s assertion that He “[has] chosen / Being” indicates that His suffering is self-inflicted, which he explains:

Whatever electron or atom or flesh or star or universe cries to me,
 Or endures in shut silence: it is my cry, my silence; I am the nerve, I am
 the agony,
 I am the endurance. I torture myself
 To discover myself; trying with a little or extreme experiment each nerve
 and fibril, all forms
 Of being, of life, of cold substance; all motions and netted complications of
 event,
 All poisons of desire, love, hatred, joy, partial peace, partial vision.
 Discovery is deep and endless,
 Each moment of being is new: therefore I still refrain my burning thirst
 From the crystal-black
 Water of an end. (*CP 2: 482*)

Here, the Hanged God proclaims that every instance of suffering—no matter how small—is His suffering. But, by exclaiming, “I torture myself / [t]o discover myself,” the Hanged God offers an explanation for the existence of pain and suffering (*CP 2: 482*). As these words indicate, God’s suffering is self-inflicted, and he suffers in the name of discovery. But, significantly, because discovery “is deep and endless, [e]ach moment of being is new” (*CP 2: 482*). Thus, the unique nature, or the newness, of each moment indicates that God’s self-inflicted violence is regenerative. Later in his response, the God asserts, “I have not chosen / To endure eternally; I know not that I shall choose to cease; I have long / strength and can bear much” (*CP 2: 483*). In other words, God’s self-sacrifice is the basis of all existence—and its continuation.

CHAPTER THREE

DOUBLE-BLADED VERSES

Ultimately, the double axe's status as a symbol of divine sacrifice also links it with Jeffers's poetry. As Jeffers indicates, in a letter written in November of 1936, the "self-inflicted" nature of God's suffering is an "idea [that] carries psychological as well as cosmic or religious implications. Man as well as God must suffer in order to discover; and it is often voluntary—self-inflicted—suffering" (Ridgeway 240). Considering Jeffers's comments here with his assertion that poetry is "a means of discovery, as well as a means of expression" allows one to see his poetic efforts from a new perspective ("Themes In My Poems," *CP* 4: 416). Karman reaches a similar conclusion, when he remarks, "Self-sacrifice is central to Jeffers's understanding of himself as a poet [. . .]" (Karman 63). Furthermore, according to Karman, Jeffers's view of poetry as self-sacrifice is reflected in "The Inhumanist" when the old man "kills his double, the man of terrors, his younger self who lived in the world of love and hate" (Karman 63). As expected, the old man uses the double axe to dispatch his doppelganger—a fact that creates an obvious link to Jeffers's notion of divine sacrifice. To further substantiate the aspect of discovery in this action, Karman references the old man's reflections after killing his "half-self": "No man has ever known himself nor surpassed himself until / he has killed / Half of himself" (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 301). Of course, Karman's claim is based on

the common assumption that the old man is “a spokesman for [Jeffers], if not a self-portrait *in extremis*” (Zaller 53).⁹

Certainly, Karman’s observation is insightful, and it is also one that, as Zaller observes, critics have been quick to point out (Zaller 53). There is, however, another facet of the axe’s symbolism that has not been explored—one that is also tied to the notion of self-sacrifice. Of course, a discussion of self-sacrifice in connection with the double axe naturally brings to mind the ancient *labrys* and its association with the old man’s weapon. This association is only strengthened by the extent to which the double axe’s symbolic and dramatic meanings are rooted in the past of its ancient predecessor. In fact, a quick evaluation of this state of affairs reveals that the double axe, with its ties to the ancient past, seems quite out of place, or, in colloquial terms, old fashioned in the modern setting of “The Inhumanist.”

To recognize this particular aspect of the axe’s symbolism, one must focus on the temporal background, as well as the technological environment, of “The Inhumanist.” The poem is set in the ravaged aftermath of the first two World Wars, with the imminent approach of a third World War and, as the old man’s doppelganger puts it, the “death-rays, the fire-hail, / [t]he horrible bombs” of a nuclear holocaust looming on the horizon (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 297).

Throughout the narrative, there are intermittent signs of this great conflict, but it arrives, inexorably, in the second to last section of the poem. The Inhumanist, calm and meditative in the fiery melee, encounters people attempting to flee the ubiquitous terror, from which there seems to be no escape. The nature of these fugitives’ comments

⁹ Appropriately, Zaller tempers this common claim, noting that “[t]here is truth in this [supposition], of course—was Zarathustra not Nietzsche?” (54). He also adds that this biographical reflection of the poet is only one aspect of the old man’s significance.

indicates the severity of the situation. One young man tells the Inhumanist, “Death is hunting us / [. . .] The fire, the blast and the rays. The whiffs of poisoned smoke that were cities” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 310). In the last section of the poem, a dying young man, who the old man attempts to comfort, stammers, “This is the end of the world” (*CP* 3: 311). The old man, of course, knows that the mountains and the ocean will survive this conflict; he also assures the dying man that “the human race [. . .] / won’t die. / [Although] slightly scorched [. . .] It will slough its skin, and crawl forth / Like a serpent in spring” (*CP* 3: 311). This image of renewal is appropriate, for the poem ends with the narrator’s observation that “[a]bout midnight [the old man] slept, and arose refreshed / In the red dawn” (*CP* 3: 312). According to Zaller, this is no ordinary sunrise, but the “aftermath of the nuclear conflagration with which the poem ends” (Zaller 51).

This terrifying landscape is populated by the technological innovations of what for Jeffers was modern warfare: the “bombing-plane” that unexpectedly crashes on the rock-ridge in section eighteen, the haunting presence of the atomic bomb (recalled when the old man exclaims, “Oh Hiroshima.”), and the equation of the German scientist, which is capable of making either “mortal weapons or immense power” (Jeffers, *CP* 3: 265-66). Amid these terrifying innovations, the old man wields his double-bit axe; significantly, the stark contrast between the poem’s various modern technological implements and the double axe make it a self-conscious archaism. This eccentricity, however, is not without symbolic resonance.

Of course, as an antiquated object in an environment filled with modern technological innovations, the axe recalls the situation of Jeffers’s anti-modernist poetry in the artistic climate of its day. This observation resonates with Hunt’s assertion that

Jeffers's poetry offered a "significant alternative to the High Modernism of Pound, Eliot, and Stevens" (Hunt 1). This insight, although important, does not reveal the deeper significance implied by the eccentricity of the axe in a modern environment. As a brief description of the setting, as well as the technological environment, of "The Inhumanist" suggests, the narrative unfolds a landscape of awesome and imposing terror.

Consequently, the fact that the double axe serves as one of the old man's only barriers from this harsh and intrusive world seems quite significant. When the situation is described in this manner, it appears that, at best, the axe only offers a paltry resistance to the ominous powers of the nuclear bomb, the fighter planes, and the looming presence of total annihilation.

In this respect, then, the double axe articulates a concern about the efficacy of poetry in a modern world—a world where humans are increasingly trapped in the nets of desire, and where the will to power is terribly realized in the horror of atomic weaponry. As Zaller notes, Jeffers regarded human technology with a skeptical eye, viewing it as a "Promethean enterprise, epitomized in the sacred power of the atom that has now been 'tricked down / Into the common stews and shambles' ('Moments of Glory,' *CP* 3: 198)" (Zaller 54). Throughout his career, Jeffers tried to mitigate the horrifying impact of the modern world in several ways. He reflected on the fact that, given the cyclical nature of existence, all human civilizations are doomed to decline. He also acknowledged that, from an astronomical perspective, the "bitter end waiting modern man, / [d]isappers" into "pattern with the perpetual / [b]eauty of things" ("The Inhumanist," *CP* 3: 307). Despite his best efforts, though, the horror of modernity still plagued Jeffers. Perhaps, this sense of frustration prompted the despairing question that appears in "Northern Heather": "[I]n

the ebb of the mind / Between two poems, / When imagination is clearly a trap and all words / A noise about nothing [. . .] / Why will you climb up the turrets of another folly?" (*CP* 2: 413). If one can take Jeffers's oeuvre as an answer to this question, it becomes clear that he never, so to speak, stopped climbing.

In fact, the double axe itself can be viewed as an answer to this question—and as a willful response that overshadows any doubts about the efficacy of poetry in the modern world. Here, it should be remembered that, ultimately, the double axe is a symbol of regeneration and renewal—one that will outlast the destructive force of one particular culture-age of humanity. This statement, however, must be considered in conjunction with Jeffers's poem "The Stone Axe," another piece that focuses on the figure of the axe. This poem describes the rise and fall of human civilization, and the subsequent return to a hunter-gatherer existence. It ends with a man holding an ancient stone axe, which has survived all the vicissitudes of humanity. Significantly, he claims the axe as his own, taking it to be the one he had previously lost. The poem closes with a sentiment that is inextricable from the way that the axe figures in Jeffers's poetry. While watching the man hold the ancient axe, his wife says, "How lovely the / world beginning again" (*CP* 2: 308).

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