

## The myth of nature in Robinson Jeffers' inhumanist poetry

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**Abstract:** The present article attempts to explore both theory and practice of Robinson Jeffers' inhumanist nature poetry. Jeffers' ideas (presented mostly on the basis Jeffers' original preface to his 1948 volume of poetry *The Double Axe*) are placed in the context of Joseph Hillis Miller's concept of "the poetry of reality." Miller's chief contention was that the poetry of reality embraced reality and focused on things as they are, which constituted a radical break from the nineteenth century forms and ideas, shaped by romantic dualism (mind vs. body, spirit vs matter, ego vs. the world). Since Miller emphasizes the ethical dimension of this way of writing, various controversies related to Jeffers' moral position cannot be omitted from discussion. This problem will be discussed in the context of Czesław Miłosz's critique of Jeffers' poetry. The article discusses to what extent Jeffers' nature poetry fulfills the criteria of Miller's poetry of reality. I conclude that rather than write about nature without imposing any ideas on it, Jeffers creates a powerful myth which is clearly a projection of human desires.

**Keywords:** Jeffers, nature, Miłosz, inhumanism

A characteristic feature of American modernist poetry, exemplified best by early Pound ("go in fear of abstractions" and William Carlos Williams ("no ideas but in things," Williams 1986: 263), was a distrustful attitude towards great romantic/Victorian narratives and the highly embellished styles that they usually employed. This vision of modernism in general, and American modernism in particular, was popularized by Joseph Hillis Miller's book *Poets of Reality*. Joseph Hillis Miller's chief contention was that the most interesting early twentieth-century literature (both English and American) embraced reality and focused on things as they are, which constituted a radical break from the nineteenth-century literary forms and ideas. As Miller argues, shaped by romantic dualism (mind vs. body, spirit vs matter, ego vs. the world), nineteenth-century literature rejected reality as mere surface beneath

which the true meaning is hidden. The new poetry of reality was characterized by preference for things over symbols. The poet supposedly stepped "barefoot into reality"<sup>1</sup> (Miller 1974: 1-12).

Although Miller's book, first published in 1965, must appear quite dated today, some of his assertions sound surprisingly relevant and resonate very well in the times of postcolonialism and trans/posthumanism. Miller denounces the romantic tendency to impose man-made meanings on reality. According to Miller, romantic dualism inevitably leads to "man as subjective ego opposing himself to everything else" (1). The human self needs to take control of the world, to reassert its dominance over it. Miller criticizes this approach:

The devouring nothingness of consciousness is the will to power over things. The will wants to assimilate everything to itself, to make everything a reflection in its mirror. Seen from this perspective, romanticism and technology seem similar rather than antithetical. (1974: 4)

These words might serve as a good introduction to Robinson Jeffers' nature poetry (Jeffers for some reason was not included in Miller's study of "poets of reality"). They indicate an ethical imperative for a postromantic nature poetry (i.e., poetry in which nature would cease to be a mere mirror of the human self). They imply, without fully spelling it out, that treating nature with proper respect, which goes against the spirit of both romanticism and technology, could be the remedy for the ailments of the contemporary world. Miller does not discuss nature poetry per se (he is more concerned with what Emerson defined as "nature in its philosophical import," that is, "all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME"). Still, what he says could be directly applied to traditionally understood nature poetry (i.e., poetry about natural environment). He demands that a poet be a champion defending nature against human possessiveness, as it cannot defend itself: "Though the struggle of mind against mind might lead to an impasse, non-human nature seemed to yield passively to man's sovereign will" (Miller 1974: 6).

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1 Miller borrows this phrase from Wallace Stevens' poem "Large Red Man Reading" (Stevens 1954: 423; Miller 1974: 7).

In greater detail he discusses the philosophy behind the poetry of reality in the following passage, emphasizing difficulties in creating such poetry:

To walk barefoot into reality means abandoning the independence of the ego. Instead of making everything an object for the self, the mind must efface itself before reality, or plunge into the density of an exterior world, dispersing itself in a milieu which exceeds it and which it has not made. The effacement of the ego before reality means abandoning the will to power over things. This is the most difficult of acts for a modern man to perform. It goes counter to all the penchants of our culture. To abandon its project of dominion the will must will not to will. Only through the abnegation of the will can objects begin to manifest themselves as they are in the integrity of their presence. When man is willing to let things be then they appear in a space which is no longer that of an objective world opposed to the mind. (Miller 1974: 7-8)

In the light of this passage, Jeffers' absence from Miller's study may be even more puzzling. Miller's words seem to echo very closely Jeffers' philosophy of inhumanism. Jeffers' argument was that, since to be human inevitably means to struggle to control the outside world, and, as a consequence, to see it as a projection of our desires, "We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;/ We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident/ As the rock and ocean that we were made from" ("Carmel Point," Jeffers 1991: 399).

The present article attempts to explore both theory and practice of Jeffers' inhumanist nature poetry. It will endeavor to determine to what extent Jeffers' nature poetry fulfills the criteria of Miller's poetry of reality. Since Miller emphasizes the ethical dimension of this way of writing, various controversies related to Jeffers' moral position cannot be omitted from discussion. This problem will be discussed in the context of Czesław Miłosz's critique of Jeffers' poetry, or, to be more precise, the philosophical assumptions behind Jeffers' poetry. Miłosz, who was a very outspoken representative of Christian humanism, could not accept the vision of the world in which man would lose his status as the pinnacle of creation. Moreover, writing from the perspective of an East European, Miłosz, in a sense, deconstructs Jeffers' inhumanism, by implying that this idea could emerge only in a relatively safe western country, which

has the power to oppress others and which is the colonizer rather than the colonized. Thus, its main problem is the excess of power and its potential abuses rather than the lack of power.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that in the case of Jeffers' inhumanism (but also in the case of Miller's poetry of reality) the relation between theory and practice is highly problematic. Genuine inhumanism must appear a wild dream, beyond the reach of a human being. Jeffers probably understands that, and that is why he does not call for an immediate makeover but seems to be satisfied with taking small steps in this direction (he says: "we must unhumanize our views **a little**" – emphasis mine). What is really problematic, though, is the application of this theory to literature. Can one truly "step barefoot into reality"? That is, can one really write about nature without imposing any ideas on it?

The theory behind the idea of inhumanism was best explained by Jeffers in a preface to his volume of poetry *The Double Axe* (which he believed should rather be called "The Inhumanist"). Jeffers writes,

I take the trouble of this note, not for the sake of verses, but because it seems to me that the attitude they suggest – the devaluation of human-centered illusion, the turning outward from man to what is boundlessly greater – is a next step in human development; and an essential condition of freedom, and of spiritual (i.e. moral and vital) sanity; clearly somewhat lacking in the modern world. [...]

It [inhumanism] is based on a recognition of the astonishing beauty of things, and on a rational acceptance of the fact that mankind is neither central nor important in the universe; our vices and abilities are as insignificant as our happiness. [...]

Certainly human relationships are necessary and desirable; but not to this extent. This is a kind of collective onanism, pathetic and ridiculous, or at noblest a tragic incest<sup>2</sup>, and so I have represented it.

But we have all this excess energy: what should we do with it? We could take a walk for instance, and admire landscape: that is better than killing one's brother in war or trying to be superior

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2 Incest is a recurring theme in Jeffers' poetry (it is the main subject matter of Jeffers' long narrative poem "Tamar"). The speaker usually has a sympathetic attitude towards incestuous lovers, seeing them as heroes (or rather heroines) who defy conventional morality.

to one's neighbor in time of peace. We could dig our gardens, the occupation that seemed to Voltaire's man, after he had surveyed the world, least foolish. (Jeffers 1977: 171-173)

Jeffers' inhumanism clearly anticipates the contemporary ideas of trans/posthumanism,<sup>3</sup> which is one of the reasons behind the current revival of interest in Robinson Jeffers' poetry and his ideas. Jeffers claims that in order to grow, human beings need to transcend their human limitations. He likens the present condition of humanity to that of an infant that "feels himself to be central and of primary importance" (Jeffers 1977: 172). "An adult knows better," adds Jeffers (1972: 172). In Jeffers' poetry the speaker frequently longs to abandon the imperfect human form and to become reunited with nature. In "Inscription For a Gravestone" the speaker declares:

I am not dead, I have only become inhuman:  
That is to say,  
Undressed myself of laughable prides and infirmities,  
But not as a man  
Undresses to creep into bed, but like an athlete  
Stripping for the race.  
The delicate ravel of nerves that made me a measurer  
Of certain fictions  
Called good and evil; that made me contract with pain  
And expand with pleasure;  
Fussily adjusted like a little electroscope:  
That's gone, it is true;  
[...]

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3 For the difference between transhumanism and posthumanism see Klonowska, Kolbuszewka, Maziarczyk "Brave New Human in (Post/Trans)Humanist Utopias: an Introduction." Although both terms are sometimes loosely applied to different intellectual movements, it is generally assumed that transhumanism is an extension of traditional humanism, emphasizing the need for the human species to evolve beyond the traditional notions of human nature in order to lead better (more satisfying) lives, which should be possible thanks to advanced technology. Transhumanism shares with humanism the belief that the quality of human life is a very important (if not the ultimate) value. Posthumanism, on the other hand, challenges this belief, arguing that the anthropocentric paradigm should be abandoned. Its most important representatives are Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington, N. Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway (see Klonowska et al. 2018: 10).

But all the rest is heightened, widened, set free.  
I admired the beauty  
While I was human, now I am part of the beauty.  
I wander in the air,  
Being mostly gas and water, and flow in the ocean;  
    Touch you and Asia  
At the same moment; have a hand in the sunrises  
And the glow of this grass.  
(Jeffers 1989: 125)

The sentiment expressed in Jeffers' poem resembles the sentiment of Nick Bostrom's famous transhumanist manifesto "A Letter from Utopia." They both embrace new, radically different, "posthuman" modes of being, claiming that they are far superior to the old human form. Bostrom writes,

And yet, what you had in your best moment is but a beckoning scintilla at most. Not close to what I have. No closer than the word "sun" written in yellow ink is to the actual sun. For I'm beyond words and imagination.

My mind is wide and deep. I have read all your libraries, in the blink of an eye. I have experienced human life in many forms and places. [...]. And I've seen the shoals of biography fishes, each one a life story, scintillate under heaving ocean waters.

You could say I am happy, that I feel good. That I feel surpassing bliss and delight. Yes, but these are words to describe human experience. They are like arrows shot at the moon. What I feel is as far beyond feelings as what I think is beyond thoughts. Oh, I wish I could show you what I have in mind! If I could but share one second with you!

Jeffers develops Nietzsche's idea that man is a sick animal, alienated from its instincts. Consequently, humans should aspire to become more like animals. They should regain their place in nature. They should not live as separate from it, but as part of it. In the poem "Vulture," evoking the tradition of the Tibetan sky-burial, the speaker fantasizes about his body being eaten by a vulture:

To be eaten by that beak and become part of him, to share those wings and those eyes--  
 What a sublime end of one's body, what an enskyment; what a life after death. (Jeffers 1991: 462)

In contrast to contemporary transhumanism, however, obviously Jeffers does not believe that transcending human limitations may be realized by enhancing human body by means of technology. His ideas are much closer to posthumanism understood as an intellectual movement which is critically engaged with the tradition of humanism, challenging its most basic assumptions: that man is in the center of the universe, that human life is the highest value, that the virtues of *humanitas* (humanity, civilization, kindness) should be pursued as they give life true meaning, that the endeavors of human spirit and intellect should be preserved and cherished (as they constitute an important value), that every individual has the right to happiness and self-fulfillment, and, finally, that people have a moral responsibility to make the world a better place for other people to live. Many posthumanist ideas are derived from Nietzsche's philosophy, and Nietzsche was an important influence on Robinson Jeffers' poetry. Nietzsche's ambitious project of transvaluation of all values did not lead, as many would like to believe, to nihilism, but to a form of anti-humanism, since Nietzsche clearly pointed to an alternative to the Christian humanism which he rejected (and which he denounced as "slave morality"): the dark world of ancient Greeks and Romans, who held in highest regard strength and dignity (Nietzsche 2006).

Interestingly enough, in Jeffers' poetry the traditional great chain of being (man-animals-plants-minerals) is reversed. Inorganic matter (stone and water) occupies the top position, and becomes celebrated as the pinnacle of creation, "the astonishing beauty of things," which we, being merely human, fail to see. The true measure of perfection is the ability to resist the passage of time. Stone is perfect because it does not change: "For man will be blotted out, [...] / Yet stones have stood for a thousand years" ("To the Stone-Cutters," Jeffers 1988: 5).<sup>4</sup> In "Carmel Point," the speaker states:

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4 Jeffers love for stone is a well-known fact. The poet lived in a house made almost entirely of stone (the famous Tor House), which he built himself.

the people are a tide  
 That swells and in time will ebb, and all  
 Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty  
 Lives in the very grain of the granite,  
 Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff.  
 (Jeffers 1991: 399)

Paradoxically, Jeffers' logic might remind one of Plato's. In Jeffers' poetry, inorganic matter and humans are conceptualized in a similar way in which Plato conceptualizes ideas (stable, unchangeable, eternal, hence perfect) and phenomena (unstable, changeable, ephemeral, hence devoid of any true significance). In *Phaedo*, Cebes asks a rhetorical question: "Do absolute equality, absolute beauty, and every other absolute existence, admit of any change at all?" (78e). Similar ideas are echoed in Jeffers' "Oh Lovely Rock":

I shall die, and my boys  
 Will live and die, our world will go on through its rapid agonies  
 of change and discovery; this age will die;  
 And wolves have howled in the snow around a new Bethlehem;  
 this rock will be here, grave, earnest, not passive: the energies  
 That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole mountain above:  
 and I, many packed centuries ago,  
 Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this lonely rock.  
 (1989: 546-547)

In *Timaeus* Plato juxtaposes "that which is always becoming" (the physical world) with "that which always is" (the world of ideas). Christian commentators saw this as part of the argument about the radical ontological heterogeneity between the Creator (being) and creation (becoming) (see Zamora Calvo 2020). Thus Jeffers, by stressing the immutability of the rock, establishes its divine nature.

Jeffers moves humans to the very bottom of the hierarchy of beings. Provocative statements, like "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" ("Hurt Hawks," Jeffers 1988: 378), or "a lone bird was dearer to me than many people" ("People and a Heron," Jeffers 1988: 113) earned him the reputation of a misanthrope. In "Carmel Point" he accuses people of spoiling the beauty of nature, defacing "this beautiful place" with "a crop of suburban houses"



(Jeffers 1991: 399). In Jeffers' poetry, the non-human is usually valorized, whereas what is human is treated with contempt.

In *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime* (2012), Robert Zaller places Jeffers in the tradition of the "pre-Darwinian sublime." He discusses Frederick Church's and Albert Bierstadt's paintings of Yosemite Valley, "a giant, glacier-carved gorge in the California Sierras" (Zaller 2012: 12), as best representations of this tradition:

One might call this a pre-Darwinian sublime, the pristine world of creation rough-hewn from God's hand before the taint of sentient life, which, as Darwin implied for many of Bierstadt's generation, led inexorably to human transgression, and the degradation of the divine handiwork evident in mass wilderness clearance and commercial exploitation. [...]

Nature is thus apostrophized, in Bierstadt and in other pictorial, photographic, and literary representations of Yosemite, as a transcendent value, at once the site, source, and symbol of divine manifestation. At the same time, man, formerly the bearer of divine signification and value, is excluded from this vision. If Yosemite is, as Bierstadt saw it, a Garden of Eden, it is one that may be glimpsed only from the outside. Man, having been expelled from the original temple and forever seeking it anew, has found it at last on the final, continental shore, only to realize that he can never reenter it, but only gaze from afar. It is not that his presence would profane it, but that he is profanation itself; the sacred repels him. Yosemite is not man's long-sought sanctuary from the postlapsarian world, but Nature's sanctuary from man, the haven denied him. (Zaller 2020: 12-13).

Californian nature had also an immense impact on Czesław Miłosz, a great admirer of Jeffers' poetry. Miłosz acknowledged the beauty of raw Californian nature but he was also terrified by its destructive potential. Like the true sublime, it completely overwhelmed him, reminded him of man's insignificance and powerlessness. He did not think there was a place for a human being there. Miłosz wrote:

The nature of the California coast, which is far from being gentle, as Europeans are inclined to imagine, is somewhat demoniac. In its immensity, in its landscapes of parched, cracked soil, of forests whose trees remind one of granite columns, there is something which seems to mock at and to annihilate our fragile humanity. (after Haven 2021: 89)

Miłosz's description of the California coast is more evocative of hell, rather than a Garden of Eden, which indicates an important difference between Miłosz, who subscribes to Christian humanism, and Jeffers, who embraces completely different values. Strangely enough, similarly to Emerson, Jeffers also believed that nature was a great teacher of morality.<sup>5</sup> According to Jeffers, however, it taught a lesson about transvaluation of human values. In "Bird and Fishes," Jeffers argues that nature is about a brutal struggle for survival. Unlike Darwin, though, he sees that as a manifestation of divinity. One should free oneself from human preconceptions and see this struggle as something beautiful.

Justice and mercy  
 Are human dreams, they do not concern the birds nor the fish nor  
 eternal God.  
 However – look again before you go.  
 The wings and the wild hungers, the wave-worn skerries, the bright  
 quick minnows  
 Living in terror to die in torment –  
 Man's fate and theirs – and the island rocks and immense ocean  
 beyond, and Lobos  
 Darkening above the bay: they are beautiful?  
 That is their quality: not mercy, not mind, not goodness, but the  
 beauty of God. (Jeffers 1991: 426)

This, of course, constitutes an interesting paradox. Similarly to William Carlos Williams and other poets whom Miller called "poets of reality," Jeffers

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5 In *Nature* Emerson writes: "All things are moral [...]. [E]very animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore is nature ever the ally of Religion [...]. This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made."

warns against the human tendency to distort reality/nature by imposing all kinds of human fictions and illusions upon it. In “De Rerum Virtute,” which Zaller sums up as “a clear rejection of Romantic subjectivity” (Zaller 2012: 169), Jeffers implores his readers to “Look – and without imagination, desire nor dream – directly/ At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful? (Jeffers 1991: 403).

On the other hand, though, Jeffers still subscribes to the view that nature does reflect a spiritual truth (the romantic conception of nature as a mirror of the spiritual world). The beauty of God that the poet sees is not necessarily antithetical to “imagination, desire or dream” (denounced by the speaker). Emerson claims in *Nature* that “The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye.” Consequently, the beauty that Jeffers sees could be a product of his imagination, the invention of the despised “sick microbe” (as Jeffers calls people in “De Rerum Virtute”).

This led Miłosz to expressing the following doubt concerning Jeffers: does he truly talk about nature in his poetry, or does he talk about the theory of nature, which he invented himself? (Miłosz 1991: 64).<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Miłosz accuses Jeffers of presenting in his poetry not the truth about nature but an elaborate fiction, inspired by biology textbooks and Nietzsche’s philosophy (Miłosz 1986: 162; see Tuz-Jarecka 2007: 43).<sup>7</sup>

Miłosz’s critique of Jeffers concerned not only Jeffers’ ontological/epistemological assumptions but also his ethics. Jeffers encouraged the attitude of a detached observer who contemplates the beauty of nature and refuses to be drawn into the petty squabbles of men. In the preface to *The Double Axe*, Jeffers writes: “We must always be prepared to resist intrusion” (1977: 173). Later, he adds: “‘Love one another’ ought be balanced by a colder saying [...] ‘Turn away from each other’ – to that greater presence of which humanity

6 In the original the quote reads as follows: “Czy jednak Jeffers stoi wobec Natury czy wobec teorii Natury? Przejął się nauką i ogląda Ziemię tudzież galaktyki oczami naukowca. Tak jak autorzy filmów telewizyjnych o przyrodzie. To znaczy jak naukowcy umieszcza siebie na zewnątrz, albo z boku wszechświata. Stąd chyba u niego nadmiar makro-wymiaru i niedostatek mikro-wymiaru, a także nieuprawnione uogólnienia zamiast ziarnistej tkaniny ludzko-historycznej” (Miłosz 1991: 64).

7 In the original the quote reads as follows: “A jednak, czytając Jeffersa, odkryłem, że te oranżowofioletowe zachody słońca, te loty pelikanów, te rybackie kutry w porannej mgle, tak wiernie przedstawione, że są jak zdjęcia fotograficzne, że to wszystko jest dla mnie zupełną fikcją i że Jeffers, [...] schronił się w świat sztuczny, który zbudował na myślowych przesłach zapożyczonych z podręczników biologii i filozofii Fryderyka Nietzchego” (Miłosz 1986: 162; after Tuz-Jarecka 2007: 43).

is a squirming particle" (1977: 174). Jeffers ingeniously reinterprets the Christian commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself." According to him, it sets a limit on how much we should love other people. It is a warning against loving them too much. Excessive self-love is a serious character flaw, and so is excessive love of other people (Jeffers 1977).

It is not an accident that in his preface Jeffers refers to Henry David Thoreau. Jeffers felt a close affinity with Thoreau not only because Thoreau was an early environmentalist but also because Thoreau preached the doctrine of non-interventionism. In "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," he famously stated: "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him." During the Second World War Jeffers was one of the most outspoken opponents of America joining the war. In "Great Men" (Jeffers 1991: 23), a poem published shortly before Pearl Harbor, he equated Hitler with Roosevelt (to Jeffers, they were both equally detestable representatives of the corrupt political system). What is probably even worse, somewhat inconsistently, he included a fairly sympathetic representation of Hitler in a dramatic poem "The Bowl of Blood" (Jeffers 1991: 81-100). After the war, he made the following unfortunate declaration: "America's intervention in the European war of 1914 had been bad for America and really fatal for Europe, [...] it will be clear a few years from now that our intervention in the war of 1939 has been even terribly worse in effect" (Jeffers 1977: 171). In the 1930s, Jeffers was one of the most popular American poets (in 1932 he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine - O'Leary 2004: 351), but, quite understandably, declarations like this one ruined his reputation completely. It could be argued that Jeffers' political views, in particular his pacifism, were to a large extent a consequence of his radical environmentalism. After all, wars are waged in order to protect the interests of people, even when they are fought for land or resources, and not to protect the interests of animals or inanimate nature.

In his poem "To Robinson Jeffers," Miłosz suggests that one's attitude towards nature is contingent on one's historical experiences. Jeffers, a descendant of the race of proud conquerors, who have successfully bent the outside world to their will for centuries, might see the philosophy of inhumanism, of letting things be what they are, a much needed corrective, an act of poetic justice. Miłosz, however, speaks on behalf of peoples of Eastern Europe, whom history taught a painful lesson in human vulnerability. Because of that, they

can neither glorify the destructive power of nature nor feel the need to turn away from the human towards the non-human. Speaking on behalf of the oppressed, Miłosz concludes:

Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses  
as was done in my district. To birches and firs  
give feminine names. To implore protection  
against the mute and treacherous might  
than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.  
(Miłosz 1982: 195–196)

Robinson Jeffers created a comprehensive vision of nature, antithetical to that of Christian humanism. This vision, however, is not free from contradictions. Although Jeffers ostensibly breaks from the tradition of appropriating nature, it seems that this is precisely what he does when, in the manner reminiscent of that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, he uses nature as a validation of his own inhumanist philosophy. Thus his nature poetry cannot be considered consistent with Miller’s idea of “poetry of reality.” There seems to be a wide gap between what Jeffers preaches and what he practices. Miłosz calls Jeffers’ representation of nature “a theory of nature,” stressing its fictional status; it just as well could be called a “myth of nature.” Possibly, Miller’s idea of “the poetry of reality,” or “stepping barefoot into reality” is an aspect of the same myth, impossible to realize. Viewed from the point of view of epistemology, it is an answer to a human desire to come into direct contact with the absolute truth, not something mediated by humans. Viewed from the point of view of ontology, it is an answer to a human desire for something, to paraphrase a famous passage from Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, that would be not only commensurate with but would even exceed human capacity for wonder.

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