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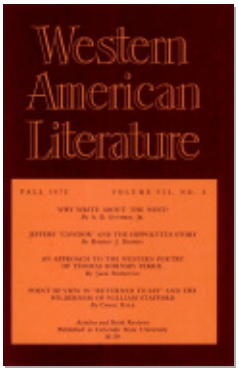

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Whatever the ultimate intricacies of its interpretation, "Apology for Bad Dreams" tells in bold statement and strong imagery Jeffers' reasons for writing "horror stories" which "intevitably ended in blood."[1] These are the narratives which dominate his poetic canon.

His poems are written, Jeffers says, to work out a personal "salvation," a salvation which seems to be three-pronged: a clarification of vision, a peace-giving therapy, and a deeper, more truly attuned participation in the cosmic life to which man should be oriented and unto which he is physically subsumed.[2] In each of his narratives, Jeffers exposes a different facet of this "salvation." In "Tamar" he reconciles a Luther-like obsessive world of corruption and human guilt with the beauty of the natural world. In "Roan Stallion" he examines the hazards, rewards, and consequences of natural mysticism. In "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" he subjects to scrutiny the human bias for power and possession. In "Cawdor" Jeffers seeks to purify the notion of "security" by reviewing the pit-falls of settling for anything less than the harsh reality of things.[3] Jeffers does this in a cosmic context of the Life-Force in which we, both the human race in general and as individuals, must find the "common sense of our predicament as passionate bits of earth and water."[4]

The title "Cawdor" is taken from "Macbeth"; Jeffers seems to have been singularly moved by the vanity-of-human-wishes theme

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[1] See "I am Growing Old and Indolent" in Jeffers' posthumous volume *The Beginning and the End* where he recapitulates this *ars poetica,* "Apology for Bad Dreams," and admonishes his old age in terms of it.

[2] The second strophe to "Apology" is crucial. The first sets up the problem of evil in almost classic terms. The second responds to this "evil" by postulating that all things demand tragedy (involvement in "evil") according to the first motion of their being. Thence the poet's concern becomes how to relate to this "evil" and how to participate in a tragic cosmos to the extent of one's powers (strophe IV).

[3] "Cawdor" (*Cawdor and Other Poems,* New York, 1928) has just been re-released by New Directions after having been out of print (and available only through rare-book dealers) for forty years. See *Robinson Jeffers / A long Poem Cawdor / Medea After Euripides* (New York: New Directions, 1970). Introduction by William Everson (Brother Antoninus).

[4] Jeffers' remarks on the origins of "Cawdor" are to be found in Sidney Alberts' *A Bibliography of the Works of Robinson Jeffers* (New York, 1933), p. 50 ff.

as dramatized in the Thane of Cawdor's recognition scene. All visions of power prove illusory; all security based on self-effort and calculated maneuvering is folly: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage . . . a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" ("Macbeth," V,v, 19-28).

The plot of "Cawdor" adapts the Hippolytus-Phaedra story. Theseus here is Cawdor, a prosperous farmer and rancher; Hippolytus is his son Hood, who has turned nomad-hunter in preference to crop -tending; Phaedra is Fera (which means "wild beast"), a girl whom a forest fire has orphaned and made homeless.

At the ritual level, which is the life-rhythm that underlies all Jeffers' narratives, the story enacts the impersonal, violent dissolution which is inevitable within the life-cycle of all being. Existence is renewed only through death and decay. "Cawdor" dramatizes this truth, the human figures acting out roles of elemental processes. All life, the poem teaches, is caged, maimed, and in pain; all life is aimed at decline and death.

Although it comprehends a complexity of many myth-motifs Hippolytus, (Labyrinth and Minotaur, Orion, Artemis, Oedipus, Christ and Mithra), the myth-pattern behind "Cawdor's" plot chiefly concerns the more primordial cycle of life as it was personified in primitive religions. Cawdor (and, in a subsidiary sense, Hood) is the year-spirit who must in autumn turn away from the earth-mother and her fertility principle and go into fatal decline and death.[5] In the ensuing sacrificial drama the year-spirit is symbolically castrated, slaughtered and/or fragmented—thus to be mourned till his reappearance in a spring epiphany. This castration (Jeffers characterizes Hood's self-stabbing as an "Attis gesture" and has Cawdor gouge out his eyes) signifies the end of an era, a final pulse of life, a down-cycle of existence. To be renewed, the world and all its parts must be continually devastated and reduced from particularized form to formless matter—so that new forms may arise. Emasculation here is not specifically sexual in intent but symbolizes the drying up of all life-nurturing fluids—semen, sap, rivulets and rainclouds. At this level, the story repeats Jeffers' primary equation for life: BE-

[5] Hippolytus as myth-hero is a variation of Attis, Osiris, Tammus, Dionysus, Adonis, etc., as Gilbert Murray has shown in his "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy" in Jane Harrison's *Themis* (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 341-63.

ING equals DYNAMISM equals CHANGE equals VIOLENCE equals PAIN equals DISINTEGRATION (SACRIFICE) equals RECONSTRUCTION (SACRAMENT) equals TRAGEDY equals BEAUTY equals GOD. The myth would instruct those who, like Hood and Cawdor, refuse to accept the death/risk implications of existence.[6]

"Cawdor's" structure is one of the most symmetrical and carefully articulated of Jeffers' art. He divides the text into sixteen sections, ranging from 180 to 360 lines. The dramatic development is separated into five act-like parts by four distinct lyric interludes which progressively comment on the action. They are: (1) the apostrophe to the kingfisher (section I), (2) the old man's death dream (section VII), (3) the young hunter's death dream (section X), and (4) the caged eagle's death dream (section XV).[7]

The first "act" (or introduction) brings the participants to the point of Cawdor's fateful marriage with Fera by which he has decided to reassert his vigor; the second act (the complication) develops Fera's frustration expressing itself in erratic seduction forays toward a baffled Hood; the third art (the crisis) encompasses the youth's self-wounding, Fera's attempted suicide (dressed in a lion's skin, drawing fire from Hood's gun), and the young hunter's death (hurled from the promontory rock by his maddened father); the fourth act (catasrophe) comprehends Cawdor's ordeal of reappraisal, endurance of guilt, and search for expiation. The final act (denouement) witnesses his public confession and self-blinding.

Through the four choral interpretations Jeffers directs his readers toward the deeper intonations of his drama. In "Cawdor" the deepest level of meaning is reached in the climatic fourth chorus, a fantasy on an eagle's death—the eagle which has lived in captivity on the ranch, caged, maimed, and in pain. Receiving the "gift" of

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[6] The equation is an attempt to interpret the second strophe of "Apology for Bad Dreams."

According to the specifics of the Hippolytus myth, Theseus is the sun-god (or year-god) who refuses to yield to the natural decline into night-womb and grave. Instead he snatches at life in the person of a young wife, while continuing the "old man" chores of established society. His son's problem is the same kind but takes place in the other (first) half of the life cycle. This son cannot overcome Oedipal diffidence, cannot detach himself from womb-security; he refuses to grow up and thereby (through the unresolved confusion) chooses death. See the first chapter of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949). This son's story is the story of Hood.

[7] The second and third choral pieces were excerpted by Jeffers as separate poems to be included in his *Selectd Potry* (New York, 1938).

death, the bird's spirit spirals toward the sun, leaving the ranch, the Coast Range, and the North American continent below. From cosmic heights the eagle sees dark night and the bright rim of dawn as light's cycle passes over the globe. Transcending even time, the bird's spectre overlooks the ebb and flow of races, emigrations, and the never-ending cycle of progress and decay in civilizations. Finally the Eagle achieves a sort of ultimate vision:

> It saw, according to the sight of its kind, the archetype
> Body of life a beaked carnivorous desire
> Self-upheld on storm-broad wings: but the eyes
> Were spouts of blood; the eyes were gashed out; dark blood
> Ran from the ruinous eye-pits to the hook of the beak
> And rained on the waste spaces of empty heaven.
> Yet the great Life continued; yet the great Life
> Was beautiful, and she drank her defeat, and devoured
> Her famine for food.
>
> There the eagle's phantom perceived
> Its prison and its wound were not its peculiar wretchedness,
> All that lives was maimed and bleeding, caged or in blindness,
> Lopped at the ends with death and conception, and shrewd
> Cautery of pain on the stumps to stifle the blood, but not
> Refrains from all that; life was more than its functions
> And accidents, more important than its pains and pleasures,
> A torch to burn in with pride, a necessary
> Ecstasy in the run of the cold substance,
> And scape-goat of the greater world.

We find Jeffers deep in myth-ritual terms here—archetype, body of life, scapegoat, return to sources, death beyond death, eternal return. For Jeffers the passage establishes certain realities fundamental to his understanding of any existential situation: (1) that all history is circular, not linear; there is no "omega point," only new, absolute beginnings; (2) that the cosmic whole is God who is characteristically blind, bleeding, self-tortured, and identical with the Life-Force itself; (3) that limitation and pain are of the essence of life-participation; (4) that life is the ecstasy of matter, that life exults in and suffers the ultimate complexities of which matter is capable; (5) that peace (escape from multimorphous pain) is only available in the moment of total death (reabsorption into the "white energy") before a new experiment in "being" arises out of the old to suffer its own ecstasy.

Each of the three preceding choral lyrics has led toward this final summary vision. In the first chorus, Cawdor is mocked by the enignatic kingfisher for refusing to accept his age and its death impli-

cations. Snatching for life in the form of a young wife, he has reneged on his own mature resolve; too he presumes on the invulnerability and security of his isolated ranch. Oblivious to his folly, he does not learn, till the final journey into darkness (when blindness and death have been accepted), that security, stability, and endurance are found only in a context of instability and the reckless process characteristic of Life-Force. Cawdor has fallen victim to *hubris*, an over-reaching pride, a presumption that he can manipulate his fate and alter life's imperatives. Inevitably the forces will reachieve their fateful balance and Cawdor will be subdued.

The second choral interlude presents the imagined brain-dissolution of Martial, Fera's father, following his death. The sequence contrasts the cruel world of pain and circumambient defeat (which was Martial's life) with a dream world of delight and illusion, made possible as the newly autonomous cells are freed from the hard, bright, cruel discipline of reality. Jeffers here writes a parable of man's wish-fulfillment fantasies—the embarrassing difference between what he *would like* the world to be and what it truly *is*. Martial's reverie significantly inverts the characteristics of the archetype Body of Life (section XV). Restriction falls away; pleasure replaces pain; grim reality is superseded; unreasoned disaster yields to a "flighty carnival" of joys never achieved in life. But the poet insists that flight from reality, no matter how comforting, is unworthy and can only be temporary. "Afterwards it [the brain nerve pulp] entered importance again / Through worms and flesh-dissolving bacteria. The personal show was over, the mountain earnest continued / In the earth and air."

The third choral meditation draws another parable out of the natural process of dissolution. Having fled his father, fearing his angry suspicions, Hood is hurled, a scapegoat figure, from the high rock into the precipice below. Far from losing its integrity thereby, the fragmented body overcomes its human isolation and enters again the "strained peace of the rock" which is "wild and shuddering" with its own desires but free of the "brittle iniquities of pleasure / And pain."

Characteristically Jeffers tells his stories on several levels simultaneously—e.g., on the levels of ritual (the underlying, inevitable process), of myth (the *humanized* dramatization of that process), and of realistic action (natural catastrophes and Freudian tensions).

One less obvious level on which the narrative unfolds is that of image and symbol. "Cawdor's" apocalyptic imagery is a case in point. The hovering forces of total dissolution—flood, storm, wind, and fire—each representing the Life-Force, continually tell their tale of mutability, violence, fragmentation, and renewal to whoever will listen. In them the end is foreshadowed long before the dramatic forces sweep the participants to tragic destruction.

Apocalyptic fire is the predominant image in the poem's first section. A forest fire precipitates a realigning of lives, but it also reveals the nature of life itself—by blinding Martial, maiming him, and caging Fera in bitterness. It drives them to a sanctuary whose security belies itself, at the same time revealing the predator-victim nature of life—in the lion and fawn which flee the fire together with the father and daughter. In the next set of scenes the apocalyptic imagery changes to tidal ebb and flood, as Fera and Hood gather shellfish singularly resplendent with sacrificial features (blind forms, blood hues, constricted existences). As the couple leaves the tidal rocks, waves swell, cutting off the setting sun, gulls' wings suggesting primitive ritual scythes. This same water imagery resumes in the fourth section where torrential rains impend chaos, eroding the mountain range and washing away Cawdor's garden. As fugue-like counter-movement, apocalyptic wind enters, splintering trees, wrecking fences, littering the slopes with debris, as a "roaring chariot of storm" comes to bring Martial "home."

Scapegoat and stain imagery has already been mentioned. Fera is obsessed with stain as she prepares for her father's burial which she intends to follow with suicide and betrayal of Hood; in heating water and donning the lion pelt she becomes a priestess going to ritual purification and ceremonial rites. As scapegoat, Hood takes on his shoulders the accumulated family passions and in his death allows his father a kind of rebirth. Sacrificial imagery (variations on the scapegoat motif) permeates the drama, intimating the story's meaning and anticipating its action. It is closest to the surface in the eagle's execution, in the suppressed violence of the tidal scene, in the breaking apart of Hood's flesh, and in Cawdor's bull qualities which are slowly immolated. Perhaps the most impressive scene is Martial's interment where a blood-red, wine-purpled sky overlooks a scene of human incomprehension, ineptitude, and isolation as Cawdor and his family gather around the grave. In Jeffers'

poetic imagery sacrifice is inseparable from sacrament; what is broken is broken for reintegration. Only continual fragmentation makes the world whole. Atonement is renewal. Out of dissolution "one glory / Without significance pervaded the world."

Among other theme-images, animal allusions are outstanding. Cawdor's bull-qualities mark him for slaughter. His *hubris* is expressed in "drooping eyes, like a big animal's / That never needs to look sideways." Cawdor's "blindness" involves a bull-like stolidness, precipitous anger, and solution by action. He is continually "charging" only to find an empty cape. Fera, on the other hand, is identified with the lion (animal surrogate for Dionysus whose pelt is ritual garment for his votaries). She enters Cawdor's world together with the fire- singed cat; she assumes the puma skin to lead Hood to his death. She is the Dionysian force which sends Cawdor's Apollonian world toppling; lion and bull symbolize these pposites.

Cawdor's story has an ending which Theseus' story does not share; sacrifice leads to an impressive renewal. Fulfilling the myth-motifs, Cawdor finally overcomes the challenge of the bull-monster's labyrinth—carefully groping his way out by a thread which Hood has earlier missed (section III) and which Cawdor has experienced before only darkly in a fateful tunnel of wrath (section X). Blinded for his folly as was Orion, Cawdor is led into the light by his blacksmith son George—to the ocean edge where in deep irony and paradox he receives full vision as he puts out his sinning eyes. This Oedipal act is not despair; neither is it, for a purified Cawdor, a merely melodramatic gesture. It completes his self-mastery. His eyes have been instruments of self-delusion; he makes them now symbols of unconditional submission. He has become like the eagle archetype: "Dark blood / Ran from the ruinous eye-pits . . . yet the great Life / Was beautiful, and she drank her defeat, and devoured her famine for food" (section XV). The blinding has been prefigured many times—from Martial's scarred eyes in section I to Fera's fate to be coal "between the eyelid and the eye" of Cawdor in section XVI. Freudian interpreters say that Oedipus in his rash act embodied a symbolic self-casteration. This makes much sense on

[8] The scapegoat figure, common in Jeffers' myth-symbol world, ultimately has no relationship to guilt. The burden to be expiated is that of existence itself. Jeffers' Hanged God (see "At the Birth of An Age") bears the pains of existence for the sake of continued being. Stain imagery in "Cawdor" relates to this; the stain that Fera bewails is the stain of cyclic being which is subject to corruption.

the ritual level which informs Cawdor's story. Cawdor is the year-god (Attis, Adonis, Osiris, etc.) from whose spilled life-fluid, sprinkled on earth, came the flowers of spring, and the possibility of a renewed self and a renewed world.