



Journal No. 9, 2000

## CONTENTS

Richard Jefferies: A Personal Discovery by Jeremy Hooker

Richard Jefferies in Germany by Peter Eyink

Introduction to the German edition of 'The Story of My Heart' by Ellen Key

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by Andrew Rossabi

Book Review: Wessex-Peter Tolhurst

# Richard Jefferies: A Personal Discovery

*Jeremy Hooker*

About thirty years ago, I wrote a poem called 'At Coate Water'. The poem didn't work, but it contained one line which I have never forgotten:

The man lived here who taught me how to see.

Later, I was glad that I had abandoned the poem, not only because it didn't work, but especially for the sake of that one line. How could I attribute my 'God's gift of seeing', as my father (after John Constable) would have called it, to any one influence? I can't remember having taken much notice of my father's landscape paintings when I was a boy, but his perception of nature must have affected me from an early age. The same would be true of my mother's love of nature, and from her I certainly acquired a strong feeling for lyric poetry, which in turn would have influenced my way of seeing.

But Richard Jefferies did open my eyes decisively at a particular moment. The problem I have in describing this is that I have continued to read Jefferies throughout my life, returning to a source but also developing a critical view of his work, so that I can't be sure of recalling my original reading without colouring it by later responses. Another problem is the question of influence itself: we alight upon common ground, and recognise ourselves in others; we make *different* uses of what we receive from them.

All the same, I will begin with a sketch of the moment when I first discovered Jefferies. At about the age of twelve, I took down *Jefferies' England* from my parents' bookcase: a 1947 reprint of the selection of nature essays made by Samuel J. Looker, and first published in 1937. Reading in that book was a physical and emotional experience: it opened my eyes, and I saw things as I had not done before. From before reading the essays, I remember a mainly active life in the Hampshire countryside where I was fortunate to live: playing, birds'-nesting, fishing, exploring on foot with a dog, cycling. But now I was seeing things - trees, leaves, grass, fields, landscape - as if for the first time; seeing their unique particularity, their beauty and the life in them, which are perhaps one and the same. The experience was very intense: ecstatic, and touched with a peculiar sadness.

Looking back on the experience, I realise that it probably had something to do with puberty. For at the same time as I was looking at nature with a new

awareness, I was more self-conscious, more aware of myself as a separate person, capable of solitude and loneliness, sensitized to the difference between self and other which causes desire. This self-feeling, I later realized, was also implied in the Jefferies vision, which has an erotic element.<sup>1</sup> In his way of seeing, Jefferies gives us, with and in his apprehension of nature, himself, his isolation, his longing; in reading his later writings in particular, it is hard not to form a personal relationship with him. Later, I would see that this has its dangers. Part of the Jefferies appeal is to romantic individualism, to an exaggerated and potentially arrogant and self-pitying sense of separation.

When I first read Jefferies, the essay to which I returned again and again was 'Meadow Thoughts'. I still do, and this is the essay I shall look at most closely now. The opening has continued to have a magnetic attraction for me:

The old house stood by the silent country road, secluded by many a long, long mile, and yet again secluded within the great walls of the garden. Often and often I rambled up to the milestone which stood under an oak, to look at the chipped inscription low down - 'To London 79 miles'. So far away, you see, that the very inscription was cut at the foot of the stone, since no one would be likely to want that information. It was half-hidden by docks and nettles, despised and unnoticed. A broad land this seventy-nine miles - and how many meadows and cornfields, hedges and woods, in that distance? - wide enough to seclude any house, to hide it, like an acorn in the grass. Those who have lived all their lives in remote places do not feel the remoteness. No one else seemed to be conscious of the breadth that separated the place from the great centre, but it was, perhaps, that consciousness which deepened the solitude to me.<sup>2</sup>

The word 'old' had an emotional appeal for me as a boy. The buildings I was most drawn to were old - weathered, with moss and lichen on the walls and roofs, they were like parts of the landscape. Here, Jefferies immediately establishes a tone, and he does so, I would now say, with a poet's art. This has been noticed by others, including H. S. Salt<sup>3</sup>, Looker, and W. J. Keith, who have responded to Jefferies' prose poetry. If we take prose poetry seriously as a form, as we should do, a case could be made for seeing Jefferies as one of the great Victorian poets, and as one who anticipates aspects of modern poetry. In this passage, alliteration and repetition are obvious poetic strategies, by means of which silence and seclusion are not words only, but feelings. Other poetic devices are indirection and implication. The milestone is 'despised and unnoticed', but Jefferies notices it, and quietly shows it to us. This sharing of vision harmonises with the intimacy of his 'you see'. But there is also a counter-movement to communion in the prose poetry, in the sense of aloneness Jefferies conveys.

Jefferies shows us the 'broad land'; he suggests depth, natural abundance, space. He defines distance by 'this seventy-nine miles' from 'the great centre'. This, we know, is London, but the whole essay bears out the implication that the old house, or 'any house', hidden 'like an acorn in the grass', is also a centre.

*Any house*. To my mind, this is one of the most important truths to which Jefferies draws our attention. It spoke to my instincts as a boy, and it has become one of my settled beliefs. Any place is a centre of inexhaustible significance and manifold local and universal connections, especially to the people who live there. Of course, Jefferies was lucky in his place, as I was in the area in which I grew up almost a hundred years later, so that, even after

the Second World War, I could still recognise 'Jefferies' England' in the places I knew. Coate gave Jefferies the sense of home on which much of his work was founded. Coate is no longer Coate as Jefferies knew it, of course. But Jefferies' idea of place as a centre does not depend on any pastoral ideal; he was acutely conscious of social change, as well as of the fact that nature never stands still. Another Jefferies book I read early on was *Wild Life in a Southern County*, the form of which corresponds to the place which is its subject. Starting on the Downs, it works down stream and brook and fields to the farm 'as a centre'.<sup>4</sup> This kind of movement is characteristic of Jefferies. In his more pedestrian books it is practical - the subject is an area that can be encompassed by walking - but the movement round about a centre had deep emotional roots for Jefferies, and, as I shall later discuss, it had planetary and cosmic significance. By centring on place we make the Earth our home; if we haven't learnt this from Jefferies, the environmental crisis will prove its necessity to us.

To return to 'Meadow Thoughts'. Jefferies risks sentimentality. The danger is inherent in his subject, 'the old house'. Jefferies compounds it with his tone and his repetitions: 'many a long, long mile', 'Often and often I rambled up to the milestone'. It is also a hazard of his quality of tenderness, to which I shall return. In the same opening paragraph from which I have just quoted, he writes: 'The oaks stand - quiet, still - so still that the lichen loves them. At their feet the grass grows, and heeds nothing. Among it the squirrels leap, and their little hearts are as far away from you or me as the very wood of the oaks' (99). The ascription of human emotion to plants and animals might be described as animism, as W.H. Hudson defined it.<sup>5</sup> Like so much in Jefferies, it is at once highly personal and part of the Romantic heritage. Whether or not he read them, Jefferies shared his perception of joy in nature with Wordsworth and Coleridge. In 'Meadow Thoughts' Jefferies writes of the happiness of the birds. Speaking of hares in *Wild Life in a Southern County*, he says: 'The joy in life of these animals - indeed, of almost all animals and birds in freedom - is very great'.<sup>6</sup> Jefferies' perception of intense emotion in nature, including the love of lichen, is close to Wordsworth's 'faith that every flower/Enjoys the air it breathes'.<sup>7</sup>

It also has to be said that another aspect of Jefferies' Romanticism is a certain vagueness. In 'Meadow Thoughts' he speaks of the 'presence' of 'an inexpressible thought... in the azure overhead'. There was something here that was not in the books'. A little later, There is something beyond the philosophies in the light, in

the grassblades, the leaf, the grasshopper, the sparrow on the wall' (103). The word something had a great, possibly at times a fatal, attraction for Jefferies. It manifests itself as the 'something that the ancients called divine' at the conclusion of *The Amateur Poacher*.<sup>8</sup> It recurs throughout Jefferies' writings. In *The Story of My Heart*, for example: 'there lives on in me an unquenchable belief, thought burning like the sun, that there is yet something to be found, something real, something to give each separate personality sunshine and flowers in its own existence now,'<sup>9</sup> and 'The mind goes on and requires . . ., something higher than prayer, something higher than a god'.<sup>10</sup> One may wonder whether Jefferies found the magic formula in Tennyson's 'The Two Voices', in 'something is or seems,/That touches me with mystic gleams,/Like glimpses of forgotten dreams - //Of something felt, like something here;/Of something done, I know not where;/Such as no language may declare.'.. ."Tis life .. /More life, and fuller, that I want'.<sup>11</sup> Or whether Jefferies came upon it where Tennyson himself perhaps first encountered it, in Wordsworth's 'sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused,/Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,/And the round ocean, and the living air, and in the mind of man . . .',<sup>12</sup> But, in any event, while at times Jefferies derives a genuine lyrical afflatus from use of the word, his habitual recourse to it invites the scepticism of a T. E. Hulme with his description of Romanticism as 'spilt religion' and of Romantic verse as flying 'away into the circumambient gas'.<sup>13</sup>

If Jefferies' perception of joy in nature has affinities with Wordsworth's, it is also distinct from it. In his thinking, Jefferies came to reject a 'fit' between nature and the human mind.<sup>14</sup> When he describes the grass as heeding nothing and the squirrels' hearts as being 'far away from you and me', Jefferies sees nature as concentrated upon itself, and utterly separated from the human observer. It is a question, though, whether Jefferies' apprehension of nature entirely supports his idea of it, or whether the one contradicts the other, or whether apprehension conflicts with idea in a way that feeds Jefferies' prose poetry. Certainly, with his mixture of animism and detached natural observation, in 'Meadow Thoughts' for example, Jefferies shows that nature is both like and unlike us.

'Meadow Thoughts' develops what Jefferies shows or implies in the opening paragraph: the concentration of nature. 'It is mesmerised upon itself'(99). By placing plants and creatures in their 'space'<sup>15</sup> Jefferies gives great depth and breadth to the country, showing: 'It is necessary to stay in it like the oaks to know it'(100). But what does he mean by knowledge? Jefferies both shows his sensitivity and speaks of it:

So sensitive to it as I was, in its turn it held me firmly, like the fabled spells of old time. The mere touch of a leaf was a talisman to bring me under the enchantment, so that I seemed to feel and know all that was proceeding among the grass-blades and in the bushes.(100)

'Fabled spells', 'talisman to bring me under the enchantment'; clearly, Jefferies' knowledge is not of natural history alone, his perception is magical. One consequence of this is his consciousness of the inadequacy of words -indeed, of all art - to capture the magic. As he says later in this essay: 'Never yet have I been able to write what I felt about the sunlight only. Colour and form and light are as magic to me. It is a trance. It requires a language of ideas to convey it'(102). But, we may ask, does it? Do we read Jefferies for his 'language of ideas'? Or do we read him for his perception of 'colour and form and light', his apprehension of 'magic'? And how would we define that? I shall return to this question.

Immediately after the last sentence quoted above, Jefferies risks breaking the spell he has cast by revealing that the experience occurred in the past. 'It is ten years since I last reclined on that grass plot, and yet I have been writing of it as if it was yesterday'(102). That this doesn't break the spell is due to the fact that Jefferies' immediacy is dependant upon retrospection, and his sense of Coate as a 'centre' upon his realisation of its distance from 'the great centre', London.

At this point in 'Meadow Thoughts' one registers more acutely the nostalgic tone, the peculiar note of Jefferies' pathos, which is so moving in his late essays - unless it overbalances into sentimentality, as it does in 'Hours of Spring', for example, when he says: 'All the grasses of the meadow were my pets'(2). Even when I was a boy, I sometimes found Jefferies embarrassing. But what caused embarrassment was a misjudgement in the personal note which was otherwise so moving. Now, I would ascribe the emotional Jefferies tone not only to his illness, the physical weakness and frustration and agony of mind of 'a worshipper of earth'<sup>16</sup> whose object was slipping away from him, but to the distance (in time and space) that separated him from Coate, and heightened his perception of it. In 'Meadow Thoughts' and other late writings, Jefferies is recording home thoughts and feelings, but as a man who no longer belongs. This, I think, is why Jefferies had such a strong appeal for me at the age of twelve, as he has had for others on the brink of adolescence. The appeal is to the newly realized sense of self of the growing person: growing *away* from the security of home and childhood, and growing *into* the position - the distance - from which one can see the home ground, and love it consciously, with a love inseparable from a sense of loss. In my view, this is the peculiar Jefferies position in relation to Coate, and in relation to nature, in his late essays. It is the position of a person who belongs and does not belong; more specifically, of a person who becomes fully conscious of the meaning of belonging in the process of realizing his separation.

'There seems always a depth, somewhere, unexplored/ Jefferies says in The Pageant of Summer'(31). There, he writes of 'the endless grass, the endless leaves'(41). Jefferies owed his sense of the endlessness of nature, and the depth of the country, to Coate, and, as I have described elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> he attempted in his

later writings to recreate this endlessness and depth; in effect, to restore a sense of 'wild England' to the age of Victoria. In 'Meadow Thoughts', he depicts nature's abundance, and writes, ironically: 'A blameable profusion this; a fifth as many [grass-blades] would be enough; altogether a wilful waste here'(103). He then says: 'The extravagance is sublime ... Nothing utilitarian - everything on a scale of splendid waste'(103-104). Implicitly, he is of course celebrating nature's challenge to Victorian values, especially utilitarianism. 'From the littleness, and meanness, and niggardliness forced upon us by circumstances, what a relief to turn aside to the exceeding plenty of Nature!'(104) Jefferies' view of 'divine waste'(105) is a riposte both to Natural Theology and Darwinism. This is the view he develops most fully in *The Old House at Coate*, in which he expresses his feeling that, in the sunshine, 'there is no contracted order: there is divine chaos, and, in it, limitless hope and possibilities'.<sup>18</sup>

'Meadow Thoughts' concludes with Jefferies' visit to the spring on the Down, which involves an ascent in which Jefferies is characteristically both explorer and pilgrim, This is a place within the place, a centre within the centre, yet more deeply secluded. 'A rocky cell in concentrated silence of green things'(107). Here too is abundance - like an epitome of nature's 'open-handed generosity'(108): 'the basin is always full and always running over'(107).

Stooping, I lifted the water in the hollow of my hand - carefully, lest the sand might be disturbed - and the sunlight gleamed on it as it slipped through my fingers. Alone in the green-roofed cave, alone with the sunlight and the pure water, there was a sense of something more than these. The water was more to me than water, and the sun than sun. The gleaming rays on the water in my palm held me for a moment, the touch of the water gave me something from itself. A moment, and the gleam was gone, the water flowing away, but I had had them. Beside the physical water and physical light I had received from them their beauty; they had communicated to me this silent mystery. The pure and beautiful water, the pure, clear, and beautiful light, each had given me something of their truth.(107-108)

The spring is both epitome and symbol of nature's plenty which the essay as a whole has shown. More, it is the source of Jefferies' imagination. Here is his ideal of pure beauty: an ideal springing not from Platonic vision alone, but physical touch. And the 'green-roofed cave', the womb-like opening, gives access - and egress - to an element that is both sunlight and water, and natural and more than natural.

What I first responded to in Jefferies, and periodically return to, was his depiction of the life of nature. Not nature as a history of separate objects, but the life in things, shining in individual entities and connecting them as a fluid force. It is a perception that might be described in both ancient and modern terms. One might fruitfully relate it to the Tao, 'the course, the flow, the drift, or the process of nature,' which Alan Watts calls 'the Watercourse Way'.<sup>19</sup> A critic discussing

Jefferies' 'visual perception' has recently made connections between Jefferies' way of seeing and modern physics and gestalt psychology, emphasising that all three 'portray a world composed of dynamic fields of force that ebb and flow round one another.'<sup>20</sup>

As a boy, I would not have understood Jefferies in either of these terms. Rather, Jefferies opened my eyes to the colours and movements of nature, as I would later learn to see them in my father's paintings. In Jefferies' description of the River Barle, for example:

Here is a pool by the bank under an ash - a deep green pool inclosed by massive rocks, which the stream has to brim over. The water is green -or is it the ferns, and the moss, and the oaks, and the pale ash reflected? This rock has a purple tint, dotted with moss spots almost black; the green water laps at the purple stone, and there is one place where a thin line of scarlet is visible, though I do not know what causes it. Another stone the spray does not touch has been dried to a bright white by the sun. Inclosed, the green water slowly swirls round till it finds crevices, and slips through. A few paces farther up there is a red rapid - reddened stones, and reddened growths beneath the water, a light that lets the red hues overcome the others - a wild rush of crowded waters rotating as they go, shrill voices calling. The next bend upwards dazzles the eyes, for every inclined surface and striving parallel, every swirl, and bubble, and eddy, and rush around a rock chances to reflect the sunlight. Not one long pathway of quiet sheen, such as stretches across a rippled lake, each wavelet throwing back its ray in just proportion, but a hundred separate mirrors vibrating, each inclined at a different angle, each casting a tremulous flash into the face. The eyelids involuntarily droop to shield the gaze from a hundred arrows; they are too strong - nothing can be distinguished but a woven surface of brilliance, a mesh of light, under which the water runs, itself invisible. I will go back to the deep green pool, and walking now with the sun behind, how the river has changed! ('Summer in Somerset', 48)

The colours are at once vivid and unstable, not appearances only, but integral to the moving, changing body of water. The truth of Jefferies' vision is in both its acuteness and its uncertainty: 'The water is green - or is it the ferns, and the moss, and the oaks, and the pale ash reflected?' ' . . .there is one place where a thin line of scarlet is visible, though I do not know what causes it'. Jefferies' painting of the river, one might say, is simultaneously a portrayal of his mind. Or one might rather say, as I prefer to, that Jefferies depicts a meeting, a relationship, between mind and matter. The meeting extends the power of his visual imagination to the limit, and overcomes it with the actuality of nature. 'The eyelids involuntarily droop to shield the gaze from a hundred arrows; they are too strong.' It is almost as if he has tried to wrest the heart from a mystery, and the sacred power had rebuffed him. He loses the visible in the invisible. It is a defeat; but the defeat is also the poet's victory.

The poetry in Jefferies is partly in his pictures. As he wrote in 'Wild Flowers':

In the mind all things are written in pictures - there is no alphabetical combination of letters and words; all things are pictures and symbols. The bird's foot-lotus is the picture to me of sunshine and summer, and of that summer in the heart which is known only in youth, and then not alone. No words could write that feeling: the bird's foot-lotus writes it.(125-126)

Writing in pictures is a poetic technique. It is prevalent in Victorian poetry, for example; and it was renewed (in a more complex form) in Imagism, which is a root of modernist poetry. It is prevalent also in nineteenth century prose -in Dorothy Wordsworth, for instance, and John Ruskin, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Thomas Hardy. It is not my case that all writing in pictures constitutes prose poetry; but when, as in Jefferies' late essays, it is combined with a distinctive personal rhythm, and when it reveals more than it says, I would claim that it is.

At his best, Jefferies' picturing is integral to his thinking. In fact, his most original thinking is primarily perceptual, with ideas emerging from what he apprehends - not only sees, but touches, hears, smells, tastes. As in his description of the Barle, it is vision gained, and lost, from his immersion in the life of nature. Sometimes meaning emerges suddenly from sensuous apprehension, and strikes Jefferies (and the reader) as a revelation, sometimes it remains implicit, charging the natural scene with a sense of mysterious presence. In both instances, Jefferies' poetic originality springs from his humility in face of nature. Paradoxically, he is most a poet when he sees that he cannot see, and knows that he does not know. There is a kind of poetry that assumes mastery over language and subject, and there is another kind that arises from the poet's awe and love in face of a reality which he or she knows language is inadequate to convey. Jefferies' was the latter kind.

In this mode, Jefferies wrote in response to the power nature held over him, not as the exponent of his own intellectual power. I have at this point to admit that when I first read Jefferies, and progressed from essays such as 'Hours of Spring', 'The Pageant of Summer', 'Meadow Thoughts', 'Wild Flowers', and 'Nature and Books' to *The Story of My Heart*, I was disappointed. There were parts that impressed me, such as the first chapter and the description of the morning on London Bridge, but the book did not move or excite me as the essays had. Moreover, I have also to say that I have read the spiritual autobiography on numerous occasions since, always in the hope of finding what I had missed, and always with disappointment. The reasons, I think, are its relative lack of particularity and immediacy, compared to the essays, and Jefferies' obsession with power - even spiritual power: his desire 'That my soul might be more than the cosmos of life'<sup>21</sup> - which takes the place of his submission to nature's power, in the essays. It is especially significant that, with few exceptions, *The Story of My Heart* lacks Jefferies' vivid colour sense. This follows from the fact that in moving from perceptual to conceptual thinking Jefferies has abandoned his magic.

Colour was integral to Jefferies' sense of the sacred:

To the heaven thought can reach lifted by the strong arms of the oak, carried up by the ascent of the flame-shaped fir. Round the spruce top the blue was deepened, concentrated by the fixed point; the memory of that spot, as it were, of the sky is still fresh - I can see it distinctly - still beautiful and full of meaning. It is painted in bright colour in my mind, colour thrice laid, and indelible; as one passes a shrine and bows the head to the Madonna, so I recall the picture and stoop in spirit to the aspiration it yet arouses. For there is no saint like the sky, sunlight shining from its face. ('Wild Flowers', 118)

The explicit Christian imagery is uncharacteristic, (in similar contexts, Jefferies usually cites Homer<sup>22</sup>), but not the physical embodiment of thought in relation to animate nature. This is a memory of Jefferies' perceptual imagination, which inhered in the relationship between his mind and nature. It was to this that he owed his sense of magic.

From tree, and earth, and soft air moving, there comes an invisible touch which arranges the senses to its waves as the ripples of the lake set the sand in parallel lines. The grass sways and fans the reposing mind; the leaves sway and stroke it, till it can feel beyond itself and with them, using each grass blade, each leaf, to abstract life from earth and ether. These then become new organs, fresh nerves and veins running afar into the field, along the winding brook, up through the leaves, bringing a larger existence. The arms of the mind open wide to the broad sky. ('The Sun and the Brook', 110)

In both passages the imagery is that of touch, physical embrace: 'lifted by the strong arms of the oak', 'carried up', 'invisible touch which arranges the senses', 'the leaves sway and stroke' the mind, grass blade and leaf 'become new organs, fresh nerves and veins', 'the arms of the mind'. This is original Jefferies; at the same time, it is in the Romantic tradition, which opposed poetic thinking to abstract philosophy. It shares the Romantic fascination with the relationship between mind and nature, and the connection between human creativity and nature.

It is also in line with the Romantic tradition that Jefferies' language of touch and physical embrace recalls the relationship with nature that he experienced as a boy, and ascribed to Bevis, and explored in *The Old House at Coate*. We are told of Bevis that, lying on the path at home in the summer evening, 'the touch of his mind felt' to the stars. Bevis's home feeling (which was Jefferies') can be described as an experience of planetary and cosmic 'centring':

The heavens were as much a part of life as the elms, the oak, the house, the garden and orchard, the meadow and the brook. They were no more separated than the furniture of the parlour, than the old oak chair where he sat, and saw the new moon shine over the mulberry tree. They were neither above nor beneath, they were in the same place with him ...

There was no separation, 'no severance', Jefferies says.

There was magic in everything, blades of grass and stars, the sun and the stones upon the ground.

The green path by the strawberries was the centre of the world, and round about it by day *and* night the sun circled in a magical golden ring.<sup>23</sup>

Even in *Bevis*, however, the 'magical golden ring' has an obverse side, which is exhaustion of all adventure, closure, the journey to which 'there was always an end.'<sup>24</sup> In the context of Jefferies' thought as a whole, the 'end' represents the taming of 'wild England', in which nothing remained to be explored, and the death of mystery - an exhaustion, that is, which was both terrestrial and metaphysical. As I have argued in *Writers in a Landscape*, this was Jefferies' personal apprehension of the crisis of an urbanised and industrialised society, in which nature had been reduced to a margin and a sense of the sacred lost.

In this respect, *Bevis's* fable of the traveller who finds in Thibet' a bronze door covered with 'magic' inscriptions is profoundly significant. Through the door the traveller 'could see the country which had no other side to it'. He is able to reach through the door with his hand and pick up one of the leaves that 'had a secret written on it - a magic secret about the trees, and the plants, and the birds, and the stars, and the opal sun'. The traveller is dragged back from the door, but his mind and soul succeeded in entering:

...and he saw a white shoulder, like alabaster, pure, white, and transparent among the grass by the golden dome flower, and a white arm stretched out towards him, so white it gleamed polished, and a white hand, soft, warm-looking, delicious, transparent white, beckoning to him. So he struggled and struggled till it seemed as if he would get through to his soul, which had gone on down the footpath ...

The traveller knows that, beyond the door, 'from secret to secret you might wander ... still you could never, never, never get to the other side'.<sup>25</sup>

*Bevis's* fable links Jefferies' boyhood experience with his mode of poetic perception as a writer. Colour and movement are integral to the vision in which Jefferies shows us that every leaf does have a secret. The secret is that 'The whole office of Matter is to feed life' (*The Pageant of Summer*', 26). Matter is not dead, but alchemic, source and substance of transformative magic. Another crucial essay for understanding the connection between colour and magic in Jefferies' perceptual thinking is 'Out of Doors in February'. There, he says: 'Pure colour almost always gives the idea of fire, or rather, it is perhaps as if a light shone through as well as colour itself. The fresh green blade of corn is like this, so pellucid, so clear and pure in its green as to seem to shine with colour'(88-89). He goes on to say that 'it is out from that under-world, from the dead and the

unknown, from the cold moist ground, that these green blades have sprung'. Here, we may recall that it was also from underground that the spring emerged to mingle sun and water, and communicate to Jefferies 'this silent mystery'. In 'Out of Doors in February', he writes: 'It is this mystery of growth and life, of beauty and sweetness, and colour, starting forth from the clods that gives the corn its power over me'(89). For Jefferies, qualities such as 'beauty, and sweetness, and colour', which philosophy generally designates as secondary, were primary, integral to 'growth and life'. Thus, colour, as Jefferies perceives it, discloses the magic of being, instead of painting appearances only. The secret of every leaf is this mystery.

There is an ambiguity in the passage from *Bevis* quoted above: is the traveller beckoned on by a female embodiment of nature, or is his own soul the female spirit that reaches out to him? But the ambiguity doesn't much matter perhaps; for the image recalls Andrew Rossabi's crucial insight, when, in introducing *The Story of My Heart*, he wrote: 'in his next book, *The Dewy Morn*, Jefferies' soul becomes what she always was - a woman, the beautiful Felise, perfect child of nature, pure and fresh as the dawn, the embodiment of love'.<sup>26</sup> The great virtue of this formulation is that it effects a virtual identification between Jefferies' soul and the spirit of nature to which he was most sensitive.

In *Bevis*'s fable of the traveller Jefferies projects an image of this soul. It is, of course, quite different from the conventionally male side of *Bevis*, the bossy, masterful boy, and from the same side of Jefferies, with his fantasies of military leadership and power in worldly affairs. Without indulging in generalisations about male and female 'principles', we can surely see the imbalance in Victorian ideas of the sexes, which opposed the dominant, rational male to the passive, sensitive, imaginative female. With this in mind, it is easy to understand the tension in Jefferies between will to power and the kind of sensitivity and tenderness which he showed in his writing, and ascribed to his fictional heroines. The pressure was upon him from boyhood to conform to 'manly' ideals, instead of 'dreaming'. It is evident from his writing that he internalised the conflict. Some time after abandoning 'At Coate Water', I wrote the following poem:

~Nobbut Dick Jefferies

('See'd ye owt on the downs?'  
'Nobbut Dick Jefferies moonin' about.')

No one but him  
Mooning in a backwater  
Of the nineteenth century

We've walked apart from the houses  
And here, on the edge

Of a common under pines  
Light in every facet  
Dances round his words

Such tenderness  
Is unbearable:  
The point of a grassblade  
On the eyeball

Even from the flowerhead  
Of a slender foxtail, a branch  
Grows over the earth's side  
And he has stopped where it bends  
Trying the body's weight  
Against the bough's strength

The knowledge  
Will not disclose itself,  
Nor the world make something  
Of him, though the extremity  
Starts from its roots.<sup>27</sup>

The poem pays tribute to Jefferies' vision of light, and records my early experience of it, on 'a common under pines'. The poem makes play with the contrast between 'common' and imagery of apartness and 'on the edge'. At the core, it identifies Jefferies as a man who was at once marginal and central, and associates his tenderness with pain. Jefferies himself acknowledged the pain of his seeing.<sup>28</sup> The pain, as well as being due to ill health, was inherent in his tender perception of a nature that did not return his love. It was also due to what I call 'extremity', and image as a branch growing 'over the earth's side'. The reference is partly to his isolation. A hostile view of Jefferies is that he was provincial in the narrow sense, belonging to 'a backwater/Of the nineteenth century'. Aspects of his writing lend support to this view; it isn't in his concentration on locality that he is provincial, but in his pedagogy, and his preaching, which, even at times in *The Story of My Heart*, sounds a note of soapbox oratory. As I have shown, his localism, in a positive sense, discloses the connection between place as 'centre' and the universe.

One thing I wanted to show in the poem was that Jefferies was a peculiarly exposed figure, and that his extremity was deeply significant - it started from the world's 'roots'. I meant by this to portray him as a figure of the modern spiritual crisis, a man who broke through the nineteenth century conventional framework of thought, and who saw and thought differently, and in consequence suffered from isolation and neglect. Later, in a paper which I incorporated in *Writers in a Landscape*, I drew a parallel between Jefferies and Vincent Van Gogh, with reference to the shared dynamism of their vision, the centrality of the sun to their consuming sense of the sacred, and their

isolation. Now, I want to quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's great essay, 'Cezanne's Doubt':

Cezanne's or Balzac's artist is not satisfied to be a cultured animal but takes up culture from its inception and finds it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before. What he expresses cannot, therefore, be the translation of a clearly defined thought, since such clear thoughts are those which have already been said within ourselves or by others, 'Conception' cannot precede 'execution'.<sup>29</sup>

I may at times in this paper, especially in my comments on *The Story of My Heart*, have seemed to be denigrating Jefferies the thinker. This has not been my intention. What I have tried to show is Jefferies' extraordinary poetic intelligence, which was based upon his gift for seeing nature as if no one had ever seen it before. His thinking was the product of his seeing, or, more accurately, his sensing. Jefferies' genius was perceptual; he did not see as people generally did, as a 'cultured animal', but as a great artist. Here, I deliberately choose the term that can cover both writer and painter. There is a good deal of evidence in Jefferies' work of his deep dissatisfaction with Victorian landscape art, and he provides in words, with his perception of colour and movement, a kind of verbal painting that corresponds to a new kind of painterly vision. My point is not that Jefferies substitutes words for paint, as a sort of imitation of Turneresque, Impressionist, Post-Impressionist effects, but that he shared the need to render nature anew, to which the great painters also responded.

My argument is that Jefferies' finest expression of his new apprehension of nature occurs in his later essays, and that is where we encounter him at his most convincing as a thinker. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, that is where Jefferies 'executed' his vision. To follow it with 'conception', as he attempted in *The Story of My Heart*, was not only extremely difficult, but perhaps not as necessary as he thought. We do not expect Van Gogh or Cezanne to explain to us in clear, abstract terms what their paintings are about. From a genuinely new painting or poem we do not expect 'the translation of a clearly defined thought'. What we receive is embodied vision; in Jefferies' case, a magical perception of life. It is this that changes our way of looking at the world, and enables us to see it as if for the first time. Although I could not have explained it, this was what Jefferies gave me when I first took down his book of essays from my parents' bookcase.

#### Footnotes

1. This must remain an assertion in the present context. I hope on a future occasion to discuss the erotic element in Jefferies' perception of nature.
2. Samuel J. Looker, ed., *Jefferies' England* (London: Constable, 1937), 99. All subsequent quotations from Jefferies' essays will be from this edition, and will be given in brackets in the text.
3. H.S. Salt, in *Richard Jefferies: His Life & His Ideals* (London: Arthur C. Fifield, 1905), refers extensively to Jefferies' 'prose poems'. Following Ellery Channing's application of the name 'poet-naturalist' to H.D. Thoreau, Salt places Jefferies in the 'class of literature' thus designated, and relates Jefferies to 'the idealistic tendency of modern poetry' (*Richard Jefferies:*

*His Life & His Ideals*, 49). In my view, this is an approach to Jefferies well worth pursuing further.

4. Richard Jefferies, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, 1879 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 22.

5. See W.H. Hudson, *Far Away and Long Ago* (1918), Ch. XVII, 'A Boy's Animism'.

6. *Wild Life in a Southern County*, 32.

7. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), 69.

8. Richard Jefferies, *The Amateur Poacher*, 1879 (London: Smith, Elder, 1914), 240.

9. Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart*, 1883 (London: Constable, 1947), 74.

10. *Ibid.*, 124.

11. *Poetical Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 35. I was alerted to the Tennyson reference in connection with Jefferies by W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1975), 139.

12. 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', *Lyrical Ballads*, 116.

13. T.E. Hulme, *Speculations*, 1924 (London: Routledge, 1960), 118,120.

14. 'By no course of reasoning, however tortuous, can nature and the universe be fitted to the mind. Nor can the mind be fitted to the cosmos. My mind cannot be twisted to it; I am separate altogether from these designless things.' (*The Story of My Heart*, 54).

15. For example: 'A grasshopper calls on the sward by the strawberries, and immediately fillips himself over seven leagues of grass-blades'. (101) Nature as Jefferies depicts it is not only the human province that can be measured in miles, but the domain of countless habitats, each with its own sense of space.

16. 'Never was such a worshipper of earth. The commonest pebble, dusty and marked with the stain of the ground, seems to me so wonderful; my mind works round it till it becomes the sun and centre of a system of thought and feeling.' ('Hours of Spring', 5)

17. Jeremy Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 16-55.

18. Richard Jefferies, *The Old House at Coate* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 67. It would be interesting to know more of the provenance of the autobiographical fragment, which Samuel J. Looker named and edited. It contains passages which are almost identical with passages in *Bevis*, and in thought it follows after *The Story of My Heart*. In my view, the relation Jefferies achieves in it between autobiography and ideas makes it a deeply attractive piece of work; more so, for me, than *The Story of My Heart* itself.

19. Alan Watts, *Tao; The Watercourse Way* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 41. The following words from this book are also suggestive in respect of Jefferies' idea of place as 'centre': 'Pick up a blade of grass and all the worlds come with it. In other words, the whole cosmos is implicit in every member of it, and every point in it may be regarded as its centre. This is the bare and basic principle of the organic view'. (35)

20. James Krasner, *The Entangled Eye* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 146.

21. *The Story of My Heart*, 26. The question of power in *The Story of My Heart* is an interesting and curiously poignant one. While Jefferies' spiritual autobiography expresses his intense desire for fuller 'soul-life' and for life in the body, which is partly a consequence of his debilitating illness, the desire is at times hard to separate entirely from more worldly ideas of leadership and mastery, which appear nakedly in *Bevis* and *After London*. Jefferies, of course, like all of us, was a person of his times. *The Story of My Heart* contains a larger admixture of Victorian and imperialist ideology than has generally been recognised.

22. See for example Richard Jefferies, *Bevis*, 1882 (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932), 323-4.

23. *Bevis*, 355-6.
24. *Ibid.*, 382.
25. *Ibid.*, 386-7.
26. Andrew Rossabi, Introduction, *The Story of My Heart* (London: Quartet Books, 1979), 19.
27. Jeremy Hooker, *Landscape of the Daylight Moon* (London: Enitharmon, 1978), 15.
28. 'Today, and day after day, fresh pictures are coloured instantaneously in the retina as bright and perfect in detail and hue. This very power is often, I think, the cause of pain to me. To see so clearly is to value so highly, and to feel too deeply.' ('Wild Flowers', 126)
29. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt', *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 69.

# Richard Jefferies in Germany

Peter Eyink

In 1906, a German translation of *The Story of My Heart* was published in Germany; it had an introductory essay by Ellen Key, also in German. Jefferies himself knew that his book was going to be translated into German: he mentioned the fact in an undated letter to his mother, written probably in 1886, but the book's actual publication came after his death. Although the German edition has been known about for a long time, little is known about its genesis, and several questions arise: who was Ellen Key, why was the book published in 1906, and what did the Germans make of it?

Ellen Key (1849-1926) was a Swedish feminist writer of Scottish extraction whose progressive ideas on the role of love and marriage and social conduct had already had wide influence. Her book *The Century of the Child* was a bestseller, but she wrote other books including one on Elizabeth and Robert Browning. Her publisher in Germany was Samuel Fischer of Berlin, and he published a volume of her essays which included the one, translated into English and published here, about Jefferies' book.

In 1905 she visited another publisher, Eugen Diederichs (1867-1930) of Jena, on the occasion of a festival in her honour; no records survive of their dealings but it can be surmised that it was she who brought Jefferies to his notice. He was country-born with a strong feeling for the importance of rural life, indeed the first emblem of his publishing house was the image of a sower with his back to a rising sun. As a publisher of unorthodox and controversial works by young authors, he was well suited to launch Jefferies' book in Germany.

To understand the interest in Jefferies' work in Germany at this time one needs to know something of the changes taking place there. In spite of an arms race between the two countries there was considerable admiration in England for things German and in Germany for England. Towards the end of the century, the old middle classes in Germany felt threatened by the changes taking place as a result of industrialisation, and Germans looked to England for guidance in how to adapt. The writings of John Ruskin and William Morris were especially popular and both were published by Diederichs. A general feeling of cultural decay had led to the formation of a 'life reform movement' and a demand for what might now be called 'defence of one's heritage' (*heimatschutz*).

Diederichs' most popular author was Herman Lons (1866-1914), who modelled his work on English country writing and who still today gives pleasure to a wide reading public. Schools are still being named after him. Diederichs also published Leo Tolstoy and W.S. Reymont (1867-1925), a Nobel prize-winner.

When Jefferies' book appeared in Germany, the publicity material stated 'Prospective customers will be principally those who have already bought works of Thoreau . . .' Thoreau was already popular in Germany, partly because of his opposition to slavery, but especially because of his closeness to nature and his

antimaterialism. A review of *The Story of My Heart* in *Neuen Philologischen Rundschau* in 1907 stated: 'Like Thoreau, the Englishman Richard Jefferies possessed an exceptional talent to express what he saw outdoors... .All matter recedes behind the soul. . . This is no run-of-the-mill book, and the editor deserves warm thanks for having produced a German version in such a fine binding. An essay by Ellen Key precedes it as Introduction though one can only appreciate it after reading *The Story of My Heart*. I have nothing but praise for the translation by Hedwig Jahn - it is correct, faithful and meticulous.'

Diederichs published no other book by Jefferies. Had he introduced some of the nature books to the Germans, Jefferies might have gained a wider audience there. As it is, only *The Life of the Fields* was published - as a school textbook. There was no second edition of *Die Geschichte meines Herzen*.

Further reading.

*Ellen Key: Her Life and Her Work*. Louise Nystrom-Hamilton (1904). New York, Putnam, 1913.

*A Greener Vision of Home: Cultural Politics and Environmental Reform in the German Heimatschutz Movement, 1904-1918*. William H. Rollins. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

*Versammlungsort Moderner Geister: Der Kulturverleger Eugen Diederichs und seine Anfänge in Jena*. Katalogbuch zur Ausstellung im Romantikerhaus Jena; 15 September to 8 December 1996. (The Culture Publisher Eugen Diederichs and his beginning in Jena; Catalogue for the Exhibition in the House of the Romantics.)

*Vollständiges Verzeichnis der Werke des Verlages Eugen Diederichs in Jena 1896-1912*. 1912. (Complete Directory of the Works of the Publishing House Eugen Diederichs in Jena 1896-1912.)

*Der Verleger als Organisator: Eugen Diederichs und die bürgerlichen Reformbewegungen der Jahrhundert-Wende*. Erich Viehofer, Frankfurt am Main, 1998. (The Publisher as Organiser: Eugen Diederichs and the Bourgeois Reform Movements of the Turn of the Century.)

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# Introduction to *The Story of My Heart*

*Ellen Key*

Maupassant once expressed the heart-felt wish that he had spent his whole life writing a single book which would be burned after his death.

A writer, even when he finds it necessary to write many other books, ought nevertheless to be single-minded enough to work all his life on one book, and it is always a piece of good fortune if such a book does not suffer the fate Maupassant intended for his.

Such a book is *The Story of My Heart* by the English prose-poet Richard Jefferies. It is an autobiography which does not relate a single event of the author's life. It is a book of thought alone but not a book of many thoughts. It really contains only one but this one appears with a strong, constantly repeating rhythm suggestive of the waves of the sea and the speech of the Hebrew prophets.

Born in 1848, Jefferies was the son of an English farmer and spent the first part of his life in the country in southern England. Later, he struggled to make a living as a journalist and minor novelist in the suburbs of London, in Brighton and elsewhere, until his death in 1887. His essays gained him a reputation as a nature poet. I shall leave this aspect of his activities as a writer untouched here in order to single him out as one of his generation who was, in the deepest sense, preoccupied with the problem of the growth of the soul.

Jefferies begins by describing how, for seventeen years, he was dominated by the passion to enlarge his soul. This passion was awakened and nourished by an ever more intimate communion with nature. All his impressions, the golden sun and the crops, the fragrant realm of the earth, the shining blue of the sky, the shadowy green depths of the woods were transformed by him into a single unceasing, nurturing desire to attain an ever more intensive life of the soul. This longing was powerfully nourished by the dazzling light of noon, and the glittering stars of the night, by the roseate clouds of the morning and the warm radiance of sunset, the waving grass and the flame-red poppy, the mossy trees and the flowering hedges - the whole of nature was, in the end, for him an awakener of this one great longing. When he finally came to the sea and felt the salt-laden wind, the roar of the waves, the heat of the sun, he touched the surge with his hand, lifted his face to the sun, opened his lips to the wind, and felt his longing rise up as strong as the sea; with all the might of the sea he prayed: 'Give me fulness of life like to the sea and the sun, to the earth and the air, give me fulness of physical life, mind equal and beyond their fulness; give me a greatness and

perfection of soul higher than all things; give me my inexpressible desire which swells in me like a tide - give it to me with all the force of the sea.'

The singular feature of Jefferies' understanding of nature is that he expects the growth and elevation of his soul to come almost exclusively from its immersion in nature, but he also describes how, in the middle of the crush on London Bridge, or in the City, he was overcome by his longing through the sudden awareness of the great cosmic forces which governed the mass of people in London moving about him.

Jefferies' feeling for nature was not only very modern in his awareness of the coherence of the laws of nature, it was even more modern in his clear perception that nature remains completely indifferent to man, that she is in the highest degree 'anti-human', and that man only receives from nature what he himself brings. This longing was nourished not only by the beauty of nature but also by the beauty of man, whether encountered in reality, in Renaissance paintings, or in antique classical sculptures. A fragment of a marble statue enabled him to thirst after a more intensive, more powerful life of the soul as the sand of the sea thirsted for the salty wave.

But it was not merely soul life that he demanded but also an ability to enjoy life more fully. He wanted to develop stronger physical organs, a body that was more resilient, and senses that were more responsive to his impulses. For he was deeply imbued with the Monist idea that soul and body are one and that they grow and diminish together. He himself was physically weak by nature, and he exhausted himself through the violent enthusiasm of his desire to increase his physical and spiritual existence. Just as his soul never thought a thought which gave rest to his soul, so his need for outdoor life could never be satisfied, however long his walks or swims were, from which he came home exhausted. He longed to feel the same intoxication in his own strength as the Assyrian lion-hunter, or the Homeric warrior who mowed down his enemies like corn. Yes, he wanted sixty-hour days in order to accomplish more and forty-hour nights for more complete rest. Jefferies' fate leads one's thoughts willy-nilly to Shelley who had the good fortune to be condemned to exile and as a result, was given the opportunity to live in full communion with nature in an Italy of which Jefferies could only dream; Shelley who wrote poems while sun-bathing, or rocked by the Mediterranean, or standing under the arch of a waterfall. To die young was the only privilege that Jefferies shared with Shelley, of whom he possibly thought with the feelings of awe that the disinherited younger brother feels for the older to whom the whole patrimony has been bequeathed. To reveal the ideal of freedom in its lustrous beauty through his own personality, to bring people a spark of the Promethean fire, to be the 'heart of hearts', to feel a love of everything which becomes sacramental, to live in men's memory not only with the eternal youth of genius but with that of the whole of nature - with the youth of the world and of the flame, the cloud and the wind - that

became Shelley's destiny, the most beautiful that can be given to mortal children. But Jefferies, in whom glowed a spark of the same fire which turned Shelley's soul-life and death into a lyric, had to see this spark extinguished in himself under the heavy pressure of responsibilities.

Jefferies vigorously attacked the modern tendency which sought to make the soul greater through a return to asceticism and medieval mysticism. The more strongly he felt a sensual blessedness, the more strongly he longed for intellectual fullness and the infinite circles of ideas. In his eyes, increasing the happiness of bodily life was the prerequisite for intensifying the life of the soul. Therefore he called asceticism a blasphemy against nature, and ascetics 'the only persons who are impure'. 'Asceticism has not improved the form, or the physical well-being, or the heart of any human being. . . Casuistry and self-examination are perhaps the most injurious of all the virtues ...' But this view did not prevent Jefferies from urging Spartan self-discipline as the unavoidable condition for making people of the future stronger and more beautiful. He says: 'I would submit to a severe discipline, and go without many things cheerfully, for the good and happiness of the human race in the future.' 'I believe in the human being, mind and flesh, form and soul.'

Just as for his great countryman and predecessor Blake, nature, its forms and impulses were, for Jefferies, holy, and the human being himself, but not his works, was the holiest. All strengths, all talents, all joys honour the whole human being and the unity of soul and senses through this - that the human being makes use of those means which are given to him as a dual being. Jefferies thought that man would attain an ideal of completeness at which we can now only guess. Humanity would find a new idea greater than the three greatest ideas which had been discovered up to then - the idea of the soul, immortality, and deity - a thought hitherto unthought, a completely new type of soul, an ocean over which the human spirit had not yet travelled - 'an ever-widening ocean of idea and life ...'

Then, in the endlessly widening soul, new notions of working life would spring up. It would be possible to find a better system of culture which would give 'each separate personality sunshine and a flower in its own existence now' and lend a soul and purpose to the striving of millions.

The way in which mankind proceeds had no ideal goal and no other purpose save satisfying material needs. But if a man came forward like Julius Caesar, says Jefferies, a man of high ideals, profound thoughts and far-reaching plans, then this one man would be able to guide the people in such a way that they would bring about a greater quantity of happiness. We must begin to take control of the guidance of the world ourselves, to remove the causes of suffering, to learn to prolong and beautify life, indeed why not conquer death?

For we must no more allow our ideas of human potential to be limited by the dogmas of science than by those of superstition. In our own inner sense there is a

consciousness that is greater than all our reason, our intelligence builds the wisest plans but our impulses force us to work against those plans, and our intelligence shows itself as folly, opposed to the deep wisdom in our unreasoning existence, opposed to our psyche which is dictated by our sensations, so subtle and intense that they defy all analysis and defeat all conscious will. Jefferies, like Maeterlinck, envisages the kingdom of the soul in which the psyche is made completely free of all values of humanity, is radically altered, and all conditions of life which have endured until now are subject to profound changes.

Then ways will be found, says Jefferies, to order outward relationships in such a way that work will no longer be a burden and will no longer be seen as people's highest duty. Idleness will be valued as highly as work, and all will be able to enjoy life in peace, to eat and drink and dance and sing and enjoy the beauty of existence and dream in the depth of the woods or by the raging sea.

Never to rest content with the circle of ideas in which we find ourselves but on the contrary to seek a wider one - according to Jefferies' deep conviction, this is the condition for that evolution of the soul from which he then expects the evolution of social life to develop.

Jefferies says man first discovered the laws of nature; now he must learn the laws of the soul, and not until these have become clear to him will he be able to discover the laws of social life; our knowledge of these will one day exceed our present inklings as far as today's astronomers' knowledge of space exceeds that of the shepherds on the hills of ancient Chaldea.

This short summary of Jefferies' thinking about the evolution of the soul should be enough to show the intensity with which he believed in the coming of the superman.

It is very probable that this idea of Jefferies unconsciously shows the influence of Darwin, as a critic has emphasized. He himself saw his belief as, to a certain extent, opposed to Darwin's evolutionary theory because he took the view that this limits the infinite potential of the soul and life to the realm of what is determined.

However, it is certain that it was not some external stimulus but his own inner self that gave Jefferies his belief in the limitless evolution of the soul. His hope was nourished by his unique feeling for life, a feeling for life so intense that many people would call it abnormal. And so it was, compared with the amount of feeling for life that, by present standards, is normal. Jefferies can only be understood by the few who know that intensity of passion is the decisive criterion not for the breadth of intelligence but for that of the soul. When Jefferies says that he longed for the exquisite sensation of feeling his blood stream out after 'pushing the eager breast against the sword', I am reminded of a French thinker who regarded the feeling for life as the symptom of spiritual nobility. He said, among other things, that the great soul revealed itself not only in its desire for happiness but even more in its desire for suffering, a will which expressed itself as the ability

to start life anew; if, he says, one woke such a great soul from the dead, it would immediately seek the pain which had been its downfall, ready to suffer that pain again, for the strongest feeling for life is inseparable from the greatest pain.

Jefferies had this typical trait of the superman\* in the highest degree. He died because his insatiable appetite for life was not matched by the corresponding opportunities of life and power of life; and this sublime burning out of himself reveals a nature which undoubtedly was as important as his one great thought was full of meaning. Jefferies was an original genius, a genius by virtue of the powerful one-sidedness of this one thought of his life. Through the most sensitive absorption of nature into his own being, he sought the future enlargement of the soul, in order to reach the fuller mental life that was his one inexhaustible desire. For him art had the same value as beautiful impressions of nature, and he seems to have expected no greater impetus for the soul from literature and learning. Nor does he seem to have expected to find this in intimate relationships with other people, or indeed in social intercourse with people at all. By contrast, it was precisely through this kind of sympathetic deepening of personal relationships that Maeterlinck chiefly hoped new psychic values would emerge, new finer forms for human relationships be created, and feelings, which were as yet so indistinct that there was no name for them, become great forces of life.

But for Jefferies, as for Maeterlinck, the main problem was the same: to expand the sphere of the soul. Both have the same intense nervous sensitivity, Jefferies for happenings in external nature, Maeterlinck for those in the human soul. Both have an almost childlike faith regarding the future power of the psyche over nature and other souls. Thanks to the one-sidedness of genius, both have looked deeply into the great problem but neither has given a universally valid solution of it. Jefferies' one-sidedness led to feverish eccentricity and if he had lived longer it would have ended in sterility. An earlier German thinker, Goethe, had emphasized that the full-blooded man develops his understanding of existence in relation to the feeling of existence but it seems to me that neither Maeterlinck nor Jefferies had an eye for the growth of the whole personality, the growth whose laws the Renaissance, Goethe, and the great men of his\* time had revealed, and for which even today certain outstanding personalities form the typical expression. Try to understand yourself and things - in these words of Goethe lies the corrective of that one-sided development of the soul of which Amiel is just as typical an example as Maeterlinck or Jefferies. A person who regards all-round development as his highest duty and his highest happiness uses every means to achieve it, those of culture as well as those of nature, relationships with people as well as art, literature and science. Unless he directs his will specifically towards the growth of the soul, the soul of such a well-rounded man inevitably grows larger in proportion as his whole personality grows to harmonious fullness.

A young Austrian poet, Hugo von Hofmannsthal - himself one of those who eloquently proclaimed the new kingdom of the soul - defined this culture of personality as a living awareness of the value and importance of the smallest things. Feeling an equally holy reverence for the everyday as for the divine, 'such people', he wrote 'enjoy their relationships like scenery, their ways like gardens, their destinies like a play ... they have a way of behaving which enables them to smile at the seriousness of the world; they have a fresh view of art which for them only has meaning in connection with life, and of life itself as of the material of art; at the same time they love life and study it ... in contrast to the earlier Romantics they have the deepest conviction that life itself is imbued with a poetry that is rich, dark and varied; simply in being there is material enough for art; it is not the exceptional relationships but natural life that is the highest life. These people regard existence as they would their gardening, and they pursue this art with the simplicity of a child. For the fully developed person becomes childlike, in feeling as in action . . . only the honest artist and the child see life as it is: they feel its values fully and see it whole. They give things their right names, and words their real content.

The soul of the child and the artist's soul possess this subtle naivety in the face of existence; the same thoughtful, pleasant way of approaching what is strange, the same charming arrogance, the same confidence, the same regal manner of committing oneself yet preserving oneself, the same wonderful incorruptibility.'

This summary of the thoughts of the young Austrian poet about the noble man shows that they tended in the same direction as those of Maeterlinck and Jefferies but that Hofmannsthal, like those great advocates of human culture Goethe and Nietzsche, had a more all-encompassing and a generally deeper understanding of the growth of the soul. That this is so, however, does not diminish the importance of a view of a great problem which becomes more intense because of its one-sidedness. As representative of this one-sidedness, the world view of the English writer is, like that of the Belgian Maeterlinck, of greatest interest. They are two cups which are different from each other but both full to the brim with the deepest longing for the present: to understand and enlarge, to free and refine, the life of the soul.

\* The writer is referring here to Nietzsche's concept of the 'superman'; Jefferies never uses such an expression.

*The Society is grateful to Mr H. R. Matthews for providing the text of Ellen Key's Introduction, and Mr H. M. Treitel for making the translation.*

# Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Andrew Rossabi

The spiritual experiences described in *The Story of My Heart* did not arise *ex nihilo*. Jefferies stated in the autobiography that he was not more than 18 when 'an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe, and indefinable aspirations filled me.' However, as Edward Thomas observed, Jefferies' mysticism did not much influence his early writings and there is little evidence of it in the plain matter-of-fact country books, *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its successors, which made his reputation. Nevertheless Jefferies' moments of heightened consciousness on the downs and in the fields, woods and lanes around Coate found their way fitfully into those books (for example, in the closing paragraphs of *The Amateur Poacher*) and were more generally reflected in the delicate inner radiance of their style.

But the most direct expression of Jefferies' mystical consciousness prior to *The Story of My Heart*, the first sounding of the themes of nature and eternity, is to be found in his fiction - most obviously in the children's books *Bevis* and *Wood Magic*, but also in the earlier trio of novels written for William Tinsley and published wholly or partly at the author's expense. Of these *Restless Human Hearts* offers perhaps the richest seam for the reader seeking evidence of Jefferies' early nature mysticism. The novel has also considerable biographical interest and sheds valuable light on Jefferies' personality as a young man. The following passage from Volume II Chapter 14 (pp223-234) presents a self-portrait of the author marked by unusual honesty and self-awareness and highlights the difficulties such an introverted character inevitably encountered in marriage. For Neville read Jefferies, for Noel the battered Nimrod and explorer read his brother Harry, and for Georgiana (in this passage at least) read Jessie. The extract describes Neville's discontents following his marriage to Georgie, with whom he has entered on an experimental trial marriage of three years. The couple honeymoon on the Continent. Neville, missing his old solitude, begins to retreat more and more into himself. He stays in bed till noon, lying awake dreaming. Now read on...

Postscript: *Restless Human Hearts* was published in 1875, the year following Jefferies' own marriage which lasted until his premature death from TB in 1887. There is no evidence that the marriage was other than happy and fulfilling, suggesting that mutual give-and-take enabled the problems set by Jefferies' tendency towards isolation and withdrawal to be overcome, just as Neville and Georgie settle their differences in the novel.

His true reason was his love of dreaming - of solitary day-dreams. He did not sleep after nine, though his eyes were closed. A vast multitude of images were passing through his mind. By long practice he had arrived at that state when his mental vision could see those 'images of Epicurus, composed of infinitely small atoms, which are constantly gliding about us like phantoms'. It was then that he really lived. This sleep was really a waking existence. It was bad, very bad no doubt, for his mind; it destroyed all sense of reality, so much so that he could hardly understand the sense of what he had written once the pen was laid aside. While he was writing he knew because of the idea in his own mind; let that idea once filter into words, and, although he could recall the idea, he could not gather any sense or meaning from the black scrawl. His existence had in fact become itself an abstract idea, and he could not bear to be awakened from it. If he locked his desk, or any other place which he wished to be particularly secure, he never felt certain that he really had locked it. He would unlock it again to convince himself, then relock it, lift it up to see if the two parts held together, and even then return to it to see that he had left no paper or document out on the table. He seemed to have lost all feeling of matter - matter did not exist; it was all abstract ideas. From these he could not bear to be awakened and brought back to the material world. It jarred upon him; he frowned and sulked till silence and solitude brought back his invisible world to him again.

From nine till noon every morning was his favourite time for this dreaming. He felt then that he was by himself, totally alone. His room was not in darkness by any means; he had the curtains open, so that he could see out into the fields or garden. All that he wanted was a field or garden across which no person walked while he looked out on it. That garden he peopled with beings - whether men and women, or other creatures of his own imagination - each intent on his own ends and purposes, and forming endless combinations. All the while he was perfectly conscious that these images were shadows only, creatures of his own brain; but he revelled in them just as much, and was as interested in their fate, though he wove their course of destiny himself. He could enjoy nothing with others, let it be sea, or sun, or forest, beauty of any kind. If he stood before a picture, and slowly reconstructed it in his own mind, till he saw, not the rude daub (for the very best of pictures *are* rude daubs), not the paint or even the colour, but the artist's idea; till he saw the picture the artist had tried to paint - a voice, a word, the presence of another person instantly destroyed the vision, and the canvas became flat and dead, 'painty', white and black, red and blue. If he stood before a bust of the great Julius till the lines in that wondrous face deepened into a divine anxiety, and the mouth was drawn back with a more than mortal suspense; till the blank eyeballs filled with a liquid orb, piercing into the very heart, seeing through all disguise; till the star on his forehead, the cold marble star, lit itself up and glittered and

shone; till this Human Fate came into life - then the sound of a footstep, the lightest laugh, and the whole was gone, and nothing remained but the dusty inanimate blank marble. He reposed upon the grass under the shadow of a tree, till the warmth of the sun filled his veins with a drowsy, slumberous, yet intense *vitality*, while the leaves danced in slow and intricate measure between him and the sky, and the clouds sailed onwards to their havens far away below the horizon. The grass grew alive around him with countless numbers of tiny living things, barely visible to the eye, yet each with its organs, its senses and sensations, its hopes and fears and griefs, its life, and its hour of bitter death to come. He lost all sense of his own *separate* existence; his soul became merged in the life of the tree, of the grass, of the thousands of insects, finally in the life of the broad earth underneath, till he felt himself as it were a leaf upon the great cedar of existence. Then he lost all sense of joy or pain, of hope or fear, of ambition, of hatred and jealousy, even of love. He was merged in the great soul that binds all things together. It was the Nirvana - the extinction of existence, and yet the entrance into true existence. Time, thought, feeling, sense, were gone, all lost; nothing remained but the mere grand fact, the exquisite delight, the infinite joy of existence only. Then a word, a noise, the sound of his name awoke him. The sunlight lost its glamour, the dancing leaves moved no more in regular rhythm, but helplessly and purposelessly, the clouds became vapour only, the azure only the result of extreme distance and tenuity; matter jarred on him again. He was unreasonably peevish at these interruptions. So it was that in those journeys he had taken about the world he had invariably started with Noel, and as invariably parted from him the moment they arrived at the verge of the unknown, where he lay down and dreamt, and the other sprang forward and stripped the desert of its mirage, the forest of its illusion, and the ocean of its infinity. So he had shunned society, dwelling much by himself, reading much, conversing little. Why then had he taken Georgiana to be with him always and ever? Though he was so fond of the abstract, yet Neville's body, his organs, and his senses were not dead. The life in him loved her as other men love; the abstract idealism of the man clouded her round about with an atmosphere of hazy splendour. His mind really admired her. He was solitary; he could find none who understood him, who appreciated him, even who could tolerate him; certainly none whom *he* could tolerate. He clung to her as nearest his own being, as of his own order. He invested her with all his dreams; he built about her a palace of his own ideas. Why should he anticipate her habits more than the millions of men who have married before him?

She was indeed and in truth much that he imagined her to be. She was not a lay figure dressed to suit his taste. She was indeed such a statue as his soul could put life into. The beauty and glory with which he invested her were really and genuinely her due in great measure. He did not marry her to discover afterwards that she was a mistake.

But their habits! Now Georgie was fond of society; not of noise and excitement, but she was sociable in the best sense. She liked to exchange her ideas, to receive new ones, to discuss others. She could not enjoy the finest picture, the noblest sculpture, without some one to speak to, some one to join in her admiration, or at least to dispute it. The abstract did not exist to her as it did to Neville. Her mind was active, but it was busy with material things, with living beings; not with the dead, and with the abstract *x* of the imagination. She had a deep fellow-feeling with her friends and with human nature at large - a fellow-feeling in which Neville was almost entirely wanting. He had much more communion with an inanimate tree, with a tiny insect, with the senseless and soulless sun, than with any man or woman. He was not cruel, nor in any way inhumane, but he did not seem to realise that other creatures had feelings. His indifference to suffering had shocked her many times. Georgie was peculiarly *human*, if that word may be used in such a sense. She felt far more than the generality of her sex, who surround themselves too often with dress and affectation till misery and death itself lose their real significance and become mere words alone. To her misery was real, poverty a mighty evil, death a reality, pain a visible and tangible thing. How tenderly she had devoted herself to rouse poor unhappy Heloise; how many, many times had the poor had occasion to bless her ministrations!

Neville rather shrank from the poor; not that he disdained them, or that he had any affected notions of 'porcelainity', but because they disturbed him; their rags, their groans, their very *smell* banished the halo which he wished to have always round him. He gladly gave them money, but the direst necessity could not draw him personally to their side. His was the most idealised, etherealised, abstract selfishness that could be imagined; but selfishness it was nevertheless, and of a character that nothing could ever modify, fixed for the whole term of life.

Georgiana never enjoyed anything alone; even the assistance she gave to the poor and wretched gave her no pleasure unless she had a companion; not that she wished her good deeds blazoned afar, but because it was her nature to be ever sociable. She had been weak and womanish enough, with all her mind and penetration, to fondly delude herself into the belief that when she married Neville she should always have an appreciative companion. She believed that she could bring him to find a pleasure in accompanying her in her missions of relief and kindness. She had the fullest faith that he would be to her an hourly companion. She looked forward to hanging on his arm in those noble cathedrals of the Continent, and listening to the conceptions of his mind - a mind which she revered and almost worshipped - as a disciple might listen to a master, till her soul glowed with *his* inspiration. She looked forward to standing by his side on the glacier and at the edge of the fearful precipice, feeling with him the dread and yet at the same moment the pleasure of the immense and measureless height. With him she should

read and study, the same subject and the same book, his hand in hers, their eyes upon the same page. The very soul of this loving and noble woman clung to him. In a month, in two months, in the beginning of the third month, how different from what she had so eagerly longed for! How gladly would she have accommodated her habits to his - foregone her early meal, her early healthy walk, her joy in the sunshine and the fresh air of the morning! Willingly she would have granted to him hours of lonely study, just as she wished for herself a few minutes at least daily of solitary prayer. But this was not enough. The man grew utterly irritable, discontented, restless. The woman grew thoughtful, unhappy; still tender and loving, but doubting her own power to content him. It was nothing but his long and ineradicable habit of dwelling with himself. He did not love her the less, he would not have parted with her for the world; but he sighed for his old existence, his ancient silence and solitude, his halo of imagination, his communion with the soul of the world. He could not reconstruct the ideal of the painter standing before a picture with Georgie on his arm; he could not enter into the conception of the artist in stone with her beside him in the gloom of the cathedral; the statue remained dead and cold while he felt her touch. The inspiration died in his mind; he felt *matter* always. Then he grew irritable. The more he grew irritable, she - wishing to please him, and divining the cause - left him to himself. With long hours of solitude came back part of the old dreams and imaginings. The old life reasserted itself, and he clung to it more and more. In the beginning of the third month they had ceased to occupy the same room. Georgie rose for her seven-o'clock stroll, but depressed and unhappy. Neville slept till noon; but even through his abstract ideas there ran a thin streak of pain. He was irritated with her for disturbing him, and yet at the same time angry with himself for not appreciating her more than he did. But wisely and lovingly they said nothing of this to each other. They blamed the Continent and its ways. It was in this mood they returned to England very early in June.

# Book Reviews

WESSEX - A Literary Pilgrimage by Peter Tolhurst. Forward by Ronald Blythe.  
Black Dog Books, 1999.264pp. £19.95.

We tend to think of our author as unique and it is salutary to be reminded that Jefferies was just one in a long line of writers to be inspired by the landscape of southern England, that part of it which once formed the ancient kingdom of Wessex and which includes Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire, as well as portions of outlying counties like Somerset. Peter Tolhurst's book is a compendium of writers who have been inspired by the Wessex landscape. Its chief focus is Thomas Hardy, as befits the writer who created Wessex as a literary region. Hardy is closely followed by the three Powys brothers, while territorially Dorset claims the lion's share of the attention.

Jefferies thus occupies a relatively small space, although he furnishes the book's epigraph and Tolhurst makes clear his influence on later writers. The pages on Jefferies did not show much sympathy for the author and were marred by a host of minor factual errors and dubious assertions. For example, the epigraph to Chapter 1 comes from *Wood Magic*, not *Bevis* as stated. Coate Farmhouse was bought by Jefferies' great-grandfather, not grandfather. It was the grandfather, not father, who gave up his job with a Fleet St printer in 1816. *The Life of the Fields* can hardly be called Jefferies' 'finest achievement'. *Restless Human Hearts* was written before Jefferies' marriage, not after. The famous episode of Edward Thomas crumbling a pinch of earth between finger and thumb and saying 'Literally, for this' in answer to the question 'What are you fighting for?' after he had enlisted, took place in the company of Eleanor Farjeon, not Helen. Such examples could be multiplied.

Indeed my initial response to Tolhurst's book was distinctly hostile. But there were compensations. In the first place Tolhurst wrote well, in a terse and sinewy prose. He was particularly good at evoking landscape and had a talent for *le mot juste*. I liked the caption 'Portland basking offshore from Ringstead Bay' and the image of John Fowles writing *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 'like some doomed Conrad character' in a Devonshire barn. The quotations are copious and well-chosen. I liked that from E.M. Forster's novel *The Longest Journey* (which should be read as a corrective to Jefferies' brand of romantic individualism) about the fibres of England uniting in Wiltshire, Henry James' meditation upon Stonehenge, Virginia Woolf's aspersions against the feudal spirit of Wilton, Sylvia Townsend Warner's roof 'which sloped like the tail feathers of a sitting dove', and Bill Bryson's evocation of the Dorset hills which 'rolled and billowed like a shaken-out blanket settling onto a bed' (*Notes from a Small Island*). The book is nothing if not informative: I was unaware of William Golding's connection with Marlborough

where he attended the grammar school and grew up in a timber-framed house on The Green. The synopsis of his early novel *The Pyramid*, a savage expose of the snobbery and rigid class structure of Marlborough, made me want to read the book. Tolhurst usefully relates work to place - thus we learn that Figsbury Ring north-east of Salisbury inspired *The Longest Journey*, the village of Martin on Salisbury Plain was the prototype of Winterbourne Bishop in W.H. Hudson's *A Shepherd's Life*, Blackmore Vale was the Vale of the Little Dairies in *Tess*, and so on. Literary pilgrims can have a field day, while armchair travellers can daydream over the many excellent photographs, some in colour. Those of the Dorset coast are particularly impressive, my favourite being the spray-lashed Dancing Ledge near Tilly Whim caves. There is a serviceable map, three pages of bibliography and an index.

The range of writers is wide and includes perhaps unfamiliar names like the admirable Sylvia Townsend Warner, best-known for her bewitching novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926); Mary Butts (1890-1937) who allied occult mysticism and a belief in an aristocratic social order with a deep concern for environmental issues; and John Meade Falkner, author of *Moonfleet* (1898), a tale of smuggling on the Dorset coast which Tolhurst calls 'one of the most thrilling children's stories ever written' and which was filmed in 1954 by the veteran director Fritz Lang, subject of a recent retrospective at the NFT. It was good to see attention given to modern novelists like Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd and the crime-writer P.D James. Cyril Connolly in his essay 'Deductions from Detectives' (1931) observed that detective stories were the last repository of our passion for the countryside. Tolhurst includes a welcome tribute to Kenneth Allsop, the TV presenter and environmentalist.

But the book's core is Hardy, the Powys brothers and Dorset. There are readable discussions of *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *The Well-Beloved*. I liked the image of Henchard as 'a man drowning who manages to drag himself up onto the bank each time only to be pushed back down again'. John Cowper Powys is represented by *Wolf Solent*, *Maiden Castle* and *Weymouth Sands*, considered by many critics to be among the best English novels of the century, and the eccentric T.F. Powys by his masterpiece *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927). The tubercular Llewelyn was the closest to Jefferies in spirit. Tolhurst quotes the testimony of his American wife Alyse Gregory, 'He was from beginning to end in a perpetual enchantment over the visible world' - words applicable to Jefferies himself. In *Earth Memories* (1934) and *Dorset Essays* (1935) Llewelyn celebrated the magnificent stretch of coast between St Aldhelm's Head and Portland Bill. This section evokes chalk cliffs with names like Bat's Head and Blind Cow, remote coastguard cottages, cliff foxes, centaur, wild lavender, sea mists, slates flying through the air like sycamore leaves, and American belles with names like Alyse and Gamel. Llewelyn cultivated a bardic appearance with beard, cloak and staff (young woman poets particularly at risk). In his essay 'The Pond' he described the sound of a hare drinking, 'sensitive and fresh as soft rain upon a leaf.

Peter Tolhurst's book contains many excellent photographs and is well worth reading for its treatment of authors other than Jefferies. It achieves its object of making one want to read (or reread) the books and to visit the places under discussion.

PS. A serendipitous misprint on p200 coins a new and apposite collective noun - 'a serious of Powysian meditations' (apropos *Weymouth Sands*).

*Andrew Rossabi*