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A BLACK POET'S VISION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH LANCE JEFFERS

By DORIS L. LARYEA

One of the most powerful and important poets in America today is Lance Jeffers. Reading his poetry is like witnessing the eruption of an illimitable empire whose lava burns the flesh from the bones. His symbols, metaphors, and message are powerful, intrepid, real. He has mastered the tools of language and created an idiosyncratic system of metaphors reminiscent of John Donne and the English metaphysical poets. Jeffers reaches below the surface of the consciousness and behind the appearances of things, finds the raw material stacked away in his mine, draws out its ore and presents it with his own original language. He is as comfortable using blank verse as he is with free verse, and he writes not only sonnets and lyrics, but long narrative poems in which he experiments with different structures, including the stream of consciousness.

Like Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright before him, Jeffers is concerned with varied tendencies in American society that cripple and shackle man and prevent him from realizing his potential size. He says in "Blackfolk and Some of the Black Music of the Present" that the "largeness of my soul begs to be unshackled,/ the girth of my uncouraged beauty is eager,/ the delta of my blackness lies in wait—/ the birthcanal of that darkskinned mother/ who will birth my future purity."

Jeffers' poetry illustrates his concern about America the whole because this is the way he has been socialized. He sees great possibilities for America. It will not forever be the land of the insensitive, the callous, and the blind. Man is presently disunited because he is without passion, love. Compassion and vision, he believes, will one day be a part of the American soul when man realizes his power to achieve them. Since Jeffers knows the collective power of the black hand—as W. E. B.

DuBois knew and Richard Wright and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King—he hopes all black folk will recognize it and use this mighty hand to help pull America out of the mire of its immorality and insensitivity into love, compassion, and a deeper concern for humanity.

Reared in Nebraska and San Francisco, Jeffers wrote his first prize-winning poem in 1938 when he was nineteen years old and a student at Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, California. Although his first collection of poems, *My Blackness Is the Beauty of This Land* did not appear until 1970, many of his poems had been published in journals, magazines, anthologies, and elsewhere. Other works of his include *When I Know the Power of My Black Hand* (1974), *O Africa Where I Baked My Bread* (1977) and *Grandsire* (1979). This last collection essentially is a poetic autobiography. Its title poem is a long narrative account of the experiences and victories of Dr. George Flippin, Jeffers' grandfather, as a physician in the plains of Nebraska. With this collection, Jeffers begins a new phase of his literary development, especially the writing of long narrative poems. Since its publication, he has written additional story-poems. One is entitled *The Blues and Rachmaninoff*, which is about the experiences of a black female psychiatrist.

Aside from poetry, Jeffers has published essays and has written a novel entitled *Witherspoon*. Its plot centers on a subservient minister and the complexity of his mind and life about fifteen years ago in the deep South in a mythical city halfway between Birmingham, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia. He is struggling to grow. He has deep problems. As a minister. As a man. And prodding him is the militant element of society with whom he comes in contact. It is basically a novel about man's struggle for psychological growth and fulfillment.

The following interview took place in 1980.

LARYEA: Who are your favorite writers?

JEFFERS: Lau Shaw is one of them, a Chinese who wrote *Rickshaw Boy*—I must have read that book thirty or thirty-five years ago, and the intensity was so great that it burned the flesh from the bones. The experience of the Chinese—imagine, pulling another human being in a rickshaw! Imagine what *that* would do in terms of creating depth, power of emotion, percep-

tion. Richard Wright is another favorite—he had the same kind of intensity—and I profoundly respect him for depth and power of his rage. Sholokhov, the Soviet novelist, is another of my favorites: again the intensity of the born poet who writes poetically and misses nothing, who sees deeply into human beings and human affairs, who sees the complexities and the subtleties in human beings. Nexø, the Danish writer, is another of my favorites. I admire James Joyce's "The Dead," a magnificently woven story with a splendid theme, a story that interweaves Irish nationalism and personal growth. And I admire his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I deeply admire the black American short story writer Cyrus Colter and John A. Williams. I love John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for his profound understanding of the poor and of human direction, and I think that Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee" is one of the greatest story-poems ever written. I admire John Killens' work and Arthenia Milliean's and Jerry Ward's poetry and Pinkie Lane's and Kalamu ya Salaam's. I admire Nathaniel Hawthorne for his feminism and his understanding of American backwardness. I admire Claude McKay's delicate compassion and the superb racial feeling of the angry West Indian; and Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown for their warm and perfect perception of poor black folk. And I admire the work of Ernest Gaines and Ishmael Reed. And I think that Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a towering achievement: he understands us, he understands whites, he understands America, and he understates all this, often with an ethnic humor that is an achievement in itself. And I love Mari Evans' poetry for the knife of its hurt and anger and the purity of her heart and the purity of her language. She is a great poet. I admire the brilliance of Owen Dodson's language. And I admire the unpublished epic poem by David Dorsey: "Hannibal." It is a masterpiece.

LARYEA: In "Poetry Runs Blood from the Mouth," the speaker says the poet "works on the hearth's black floor/ and symbols the iron's bloody red./ He sees his bone through the faint flush of his flesh,/ and poetry runs crimson from his mouth./ He burns and his flesh is never consumed,/ sings and

his song is silent thought,/ the shudder of leaves that never fall." How would you define your theory of poetry?

JEFFERS: My theory of poetry has to do with intensity, with fire, with the volcano within that lights up truth. The poet's purpose is to find the volcano within, the volcano that will illuminate the human way, the way the human race is to take, and the personal way, the way that I the individual am to take or that you the individual are to take. In other words, the poet finds that most intense and burning fire-light within, and in this fire-light is human wisdom and the human future. Poetry is that absolute concentration of fire, of emotion—that is to be found deep within one's unconscious—but it is a concentration that lights up human truth and makes it plain. The slaves had this fire within their spirituals—they saw the moral devastation of the master; they saw the freedom that they were to rip from the master's heart; and they saw the potentialities of humankind. Absolute wisdom. Secondly, my theory of poetry has to do with perception—seeing deeply into society, into others, and into oneself—and seeing honestly. Seeing the face that shows anxiety or corruption or purity, and seeing one's own selfishness, one's own predation, one's own strength. The poet perceives; he misses nothing. He perceives the personal, the subtle nuances of character and personality; he perceives the political, the sociological, and he fuses his perceptions so that his perceptions become more useful. The poet doesn't make worlds, but he perceives worlds as few others perceive them, perceives them in an act of creation, in successive acts of creation. (There are, however, many poets who don't write poetry.)

The poet's creation has to do with finding the original within himself and creating original and idiosyncratic language. If one can dig down deeply enough into one's volcano, he or she can find the original perception and the original language. He must not adopt the built-in cowardice of society that makes conformists of men and women and thus destroys the poet and the genius in them. The poet must be fearless in reaching down into the volcano of his own intensity, the volcano of his original perception and language, and he must be fearless in putting his thoughts to paper.

LARYEA: How does this theory relate to the function of black poetry in America?

JEFFERS: I think that this theory relates to the function of black people in this country, and that function is to give leadership. It's not difficult to see that this country has been in the deepest moral trouble and continues to be. It's not difficult to see that the American people are morally and intellectually blind and continue to be. High on technology and low on vision, and sensitivity, and compassion. The black man in this country has the gift of oppression—the gift of vision and sensitivity and compassion. The black poet should be able to lend this vision to America and light the way—and to lend this vision to himself and light his own way, as Gwendolyn Brooks did in "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee." But certainly the function of black poetry is to comprehend and analyze the American situation and the black poet's own situation and to do so with passion and wisdom and honesty.

LARYEA: There is direction in your work for both the black artist and the black race. In "To Poets Black and White" the speaker advises him who has left "the gutter line," who is frightened "by the lamp of anguish," who has forgot "the crease of the ghetto in his lungs," whose "grief has scorned to bless and cast down on a damask/chair" to "Dip your hand inside your ribcage, touch the empty air: / snatch eyes from your death's head, see the dead eyes stare!" What exactly should be the aim of the black poet? Should he, for example, direct his message toward a black audience as many black poets do? Or should he seek a wider, more diversified audience?

JEFFERS: I think that the black poet should adopt aims that are consonant with his own deepest intuition and that he should direct his message wherever his intuition tells him to direct it. Poetry is intuition—poetry is not the crowd; poetry is one's own intuition. One's own personal volcano. One's own personal vision. The poet must move in conjunction with his own personal voice. To tell a poet which way he should go could take the genius out of his work.

But I want to add a big "However," which springs from the brow of any black writer who in his writing sedulously avoids

his blackness, his anger. Every black person in this country has been abused—and this abuse is one source of his or her blackness, a source, indeed, of his godliness. And if he avoids himself, he avoids his godliness, and he is no poet. In my view, a writer should be as broad as the world. But a black writer's breadth includes his blackness, his black rage, and these are his foundation and give him his greatness. If he amputates his black rage, or any other important element of his soul, he cannot be a good writer. Utter self-confrontation is the key to good writing.

LARYEA: What about your critics? Have they given you much constructive assistance or changed your aim as a poet?

JEFFERS: Yes. They haven't changed my aims as a poet, but they have been of infinite value to me. At one point, David Dorsey's comments did indeed help to straighten out my aims. Constructive assistance? First of all, my wife, Trellie, who has always believed in me as a writer, and who is a most astute and observant and profound critic. And Clyde Taylor, who over 20 years has given me the strongest kind of support and the most perceptive criticism, and David Dorsey, whose depth, whose warmth, and unwavering support and belief in my poetry and perceptive criticism have been so fundamental to me, and Jerry Ward, who believes in me as a writer and whose warmth and honest criticism have been invaluable. And Owen Dodson, whose criticism has been important to me. And others, whose belief in my work has been crucial, people like Eugenia Collier, and Teddy Hudson, both distinguished critics, and Mari Evans, and Margaret Danner, and Margaret Walker, and Pinkie Lane, and Percy Johnston, the founder of the Howard Poets, and Herbert Woodward Martin, and Quincy Troupe, and Mwatabe Okantah, and Ahmos zu-Bolton, Kurt Lamkin, and Bernard Peterson, and Gene Redmond. And Arthur Davis has always been supportive and warm to my work. I sit in all these people's arms. Their love has made me live. And Eliseo Diego, the great Cuban poet, was so generous as to translate two of my poems into Spanish and publish them in *Union, the Journal of Cuban Writers and Artists*. The two poems were "Trellie" and "When I Know the Power of My Black Hand." His hospitality when I went to Cuba with *The Black Scholar*

group was the kind of perfect warmth I received from poor black folk in San Francisco.

LARYEA: As a black professor, a black scholar, a black poet, what do you think should be the function of the black scholar today?

JEFFERS: The function of the black scholar should be to help his students understand the redwood height of their potentialities and to help them move decisively toward realizing them. Some unconsciously consider their intellectual potentialities limited; they have been trained to perceive themselves in this way. Others unconsciously consider themselves moral dwarfs. Thus they consider it entirely acceptable to have an unfeeling attitude toward others' defeats and catastrophes and the lower status of others. America is essentially a nation chained in a gravely defective perception of itself, and the black scholar can do much to unchain his students, can do much to show them who they really are, who they really can become.

LARYEA: Several of your poems in *O Africa Where I Baked My Bread* are about San Francisco and the people and experiences you knew there. In fact, the Africa where you baked your bread was San Francisco. Would you comment on how the San Francisco years influenced you as a writer, and on any other nonliterary influence?

JEFFERS: I think that the three major influences on my life were my grandfather, Dr. George A. Flippin, the poor black folk of San Francisco, and my wife Trellie. The character Grandsire was my grandfather, and I saw in him my first giant. He was very tender to me, and jovial. He was the perfect father. And he was a man who walked the plains of Nebraska like a fearless god. He gave me my first conception of what a man should be, what a human being should be. Whether I've captured this in the poem "Grandsire," I don't know. But I attempted to. It was he who through his example gave me the idea, which is basic to my work, that man is a potential god, a potential Christ, a potential redwood, and that humanity has godly potentialities.

Going to San Francisco—and to the one-room kitchenette of a janitor who served white people—was an agonizing experience. The black movement of the sixties was good for black

people and therefore good for black poets, but I think that that deep and angry blackness has always been in my flesh. I think that that deep and angry humanity has been a part of me ever since I moved to San Francisco in 1929—moved from being a wealthy physician's son to being the son of a janitor and being called "hambone" by the rich white boys who lived across the street. That experience made me a poet. The poor black folk of San Francisco took me in and gave me their warm acceptance. My stepfather deserves a special salute—he who worked twelve years, twelve to fourteen hours a day, in order to support a family—he was a giant.

I've talked about my wife Trellie in numerous poems—her incredible richness of personality, her strength, her courage, her beauty. She came from a large and varied tribe of poor farm black folk in Georgia—and the richness of this tribe is reflected in her personality. She is African genius incarnate. She has the grandeur of a great black lady of the nineteenth century.

LARYEA: Readers of your work are impressively struck by your rich and original language. Your metaphors are pure, perfect, sharp. When did you achieve such a magnificent style?

JEFFERS: I achieved my style in the forties, my own way of expressing myself through an idiosyncratic language mesh. And I think the first sign of this was in a poem I wrote in 1945 or 1946, and again in "How High the Moon," a poem I wrote in 1946 about the trumpet improvisation—they called it "riff" then—of Joe Guy, Billie Holiday's husband, on the melody "How High the Moon" at the first jazz at the Philharmonic concert. Joe was a kind of cadaverous-looking cat, and you wouldn't think that he could get off like that, but get off he did—and there was something cynical about his playing, but it was first-rate.

LARYEA: Obviously the blues, jazz, and the spirituals have influenced your style, form, and structure in a very special way.

JEFFERS: Music has played a powerful role in my poetry. In San Francisco, in Reverend Magruder's little impoverished A.M.C. church on the corner of Geary and Webster in the heart of the ghetto, I heard and was moved by spirituals. And when I was fifteen—I had previously been trained to play

European music, and I say this *not* critically—I heard Teddy Wilson on record, and sat at the piano, a phonograph by my side, and attempted to imitate his playing. And later, when I went to Tuskegee Institute High School, I heard a greater variety of spirituals sung even more artistically, and they became an even deeper part of me. I remember the great unknown blues singer—there must have been 10,000 great unknown blues singers; Trelle's father was one—Saunders King, singing in Jack's Tavern in San Francisco on Sutter near Webster, in the late thirties: "C'mere pretty baby put your fine mellow body on my knee"—his supreme delicacy and power. And the profoundly bosomy music of Count Basie and the innumerable great tenor saxophonists of that time—all of this became a part of me and a part of my poetry. The intensity, the grief, the anger, the manhood of the tenor saxophone are a part of my poetry. Perhaps above all, Hershel Evans, who died a young man in the late thirties, and Lester Young—Hershel Evans, the great-souled tenor man, and Lester Young, the exquisite and delicate poet of the saxophone.

LARYEA: In 1976 you along with a few other writers were invited by Bob Chrisman and the editorial staff of *The Black Scholar* to visit Cuba as a cultural ambassador. How did your experiences in Cuba affect you as a black man, as a writer?

JEFFERS: The Cuban experience was one of the most moving experiences I've ever had. It's the experience I had in Europe in 1944 and 1945 intensified—the experience of being able to forget about race. Except that in Cuba the emphasis on smashing ideas of race was intentional. Writing *The Flesh of the Young Men Is Burning*—which was about my Cuban experience—I cried continually, because in Cuba I was treated nonracially. There was none of this business of continually being reminded of your caste, which happens constantly in North Carolina and every part of America. In Cuba you were a human being every second of every hour. "Foreigner ever, nigger never." It is a beautiful country psychologically.

LARYEA: In many of your early poems you focus on race, but a number of the sections of *Grandsire* are nonracial. Do you see progression in your work?

JEFFERS: Yes. I used to focus mainly on race, but I have

attempted to focus not only on race, but also on the diversity of the human experience in black people. Every black person is the human race and the breadth and depth and diversity of the human experience. Therefore, I think that it is incomplete to concentrate simply on the racial experience. This was necessary at one time because the pressure on us as a people was so great. The racial experience is the human experience; the black person who is spat upon or burned alive—he is the human experience. But I think that in him, in me, there is diversity. There is a richness in each one of us that makes the racial experience of each black person only a part of his total self, his total soul, his total experience. I could not possibly move away from the racial experience—I don't want to do that because that is the primary source of my passion. But that's not all. Colter's first story in *Beach Umbrella*, about a young lady who falls in love with her uncle, is really one of the finest stories ever written. This is where I'm moving: not away from race, but to a broader conception of race, of the human experience in every black person.

LARYEA: There are a few poems which I would like to ask you about. If you can, comment on their genesis. The first is "When I Know the Power of My Black Hand."

JEFFERS: I wrote this poem at Shaw University, in the midst of black students and an almost totally black environment. The idea in the poem is Malcolm's idea—not of a return to Africa, but of realizing a black nation here in the United States. There is the possibility of a black nation coming to fruition on this soil; Malcolm saw that. He probably also foresaw that perhaps most black people would refuse such a direction. I think, however, many black people will prefer ruling themselves instead of submitting to someone else's rule for another three or four hundred years. Ultimately we are not different from the Africans; like them—indeed, like the Americans of 1776—we will one day cherish our independence. However compliant and docile many of us may pretend to be, none of us relishes the idea of Macduffie's being beaten to death by police in Miami and his murderers' being twice exonerated.

LARYEA: What about "The Seas, the Airs, the Rivers, and the Flesh"?

JEFFERS: This poem is about people who are taking the leadership in terms of the environment, the environmentalists. It's about those "who struggle for an earth/where the elephant and the whale are my brethren." The environmentalists are among our most positive leaders today, people like Ralph Nader, for instance.

LARYEA: What about "How Many Orgastic Cries Are Unwitting Lies"? How does the sexual imagery function within the poem?

JEFFERS: This poem addresses the question of sex-as-escape-from-oneself as against sexual purity. Sex is sometimes, for some, a mask that disguises despair or self-hatred or the absence of direction. This poem is arguing that when all is well internally, sexual purity is the only road one can take.

LARYEA: "Song of a Continent" and "The Structure of the Sun Declines"?

JEFFERS: Both of these poems are about America. "Song of a Continent" is saying that black folk are the parents of America (that is, the "I" in the poem, the "my") and that whites and blacks will eventually reconcile. "The Structure of the Sun Declines" is saying the same thing that "My Blackness Is the Beauty of This Land" is saying: that blacks, as a group, are ethically superior. But it goes further and says that whites wish subconsciously to be like blacks and that blacks are saying, "Come on in, the water's fine."

LARYEA: In "Blackfolk and Some of the Black Music of the Present," the last poem in *Grandsire*, you address the question of black growth through the medium of black music. Would you comment on this?

JEFFERS: Some of our contemporary music is powerful and mature—for example, Dexter Gordon, Aretha Franklin, Esther Phillips. This music is a radiant womb of our future, just as Coltrane was a womb of our future. Some of our other music is ethically and esthetically empty, and any music that is ethically empty is destructive and worthless: music like "Shake Your Rump." Such music has no self-esteem and cares nothing about black people or about people generally. Our music is a measure of ourselves, a measure of our direction. A reflection of our direction. Today's music is often lacking in vision, sensi-

tivity, compassion, and direction. One day black people will slough off the unfortunate music they are listening to today—more precisely, the spirit behind this music is what they will slough off—and then we will create a new grandeur in music as large as the spirituals, the blues, the jazz. This music will emanate from the grandeur we will feel when we once get rolling again, when we begin once again to develop our self-esteem. This day is coming. I would like to suggest that we, black folk, seek a new vision of ourselves, a new grandeur; that we find and further incorporate the self-esteem that we began to create in the 1960s.

LARYEA: What prediction do you have concerning the direction in which black writing is headed in the 1980s?

JEFFERS: I can't predict the direction of black writing during the eighties. I can observe—that the pressure upon blacks is intense not to call a spade a spade. Nevertheless, I think that black writing will further develop in the direction in which much of it has already developed: toward the condemnation of oppression and the celebration of the transcendence of oppression. Toward the creation of a literature that, like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *Bloodline*, will analyze life and its subtleties and teach us how we should be, teach us to move resolutely toward the creation of the life we want. I recently watched the film of "The Sky Is Gray" (Gaines' story) and I found it to be most instructive and a most esthetically satisfying piece of literature. I hope that that is where we are going—further down the road toward that which is painfully honest, that which analyzes the subtleties, that which teaches us to be large human beings, and that which says, "Seize freedom!"

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