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# DARK MOUNTAIN'S UNCIVILISED WRITING AND ROBINSON JEFFERS

Shedding Light on the Dark Mountain through the  
Poetry of Robinson Jeffers

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## Abstract

**Title:** Dark Mountain's Uncivilised Writing and Robinson Jeffers: Shedding Light on the Dark Mountain through the Poetry of Robinson Jeffers

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**Abstract:** The Dark Mountain Project is a community of writers that seeks to create literature that reflects a poetic vision similar to the inhumanist perspective expressed in Robinson Jeffers's poetry. The movement's manifesto lists eight principles of Uncivilisation as a departure point for a style of writing they name Uncivilised writing. In this essay, I use three of these principles as a framework for reading Jeffers's poetry in order to elucidate aspects of the movement's manifesto, as well as the concept of Uncivilised writing as a novel form of nature writing largely influenced by Jeffers's inhumanist poetics.

**Keywords:** Uncivilised writing, The Dark Mountain Project, Robinson Jeffers, Ecocriticism, Inhumanism

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## Introduction

In 2009, Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine's pamphlet "Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto" marked the founding of the Dark Mountain Project. Identifying itself primarily as a literary and artistic movement, Dark Mountain rejects the anthropocentric narratives it sees as inherent to the idea of civilisation and the enterprise of modern industrial society. Moreover, it identifies such narratives as the root cause of humanity's increasingly detrimental relationship with the non-human world. The manifesto states, however, that it is not interested in engaging in political writing or discussing the moral necessity of environmental action in the face of the current climate crisis. For this, according to Dark Mountain, would not attend to the underlying cause of our behaviour and, in fact, only feeds further into the "civilising project" (Kingsnorth and Hine 14; 16). Dark Mountain believes, rather,

that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths. (Kingsnorth and Hine 20)

The method proposed to challenge these "myths" is a literary form called Uncivilised writing; to illustrate such writing Dark Mountain upholds Robinson Jeffers as a point of reference, as the poet who "deliberately punctured humanity's sense of self-importance" and "was writing uncivilised verse seventy years before [this] manifesto was thought of" (Kingsnorth and Hine 15)—the movement's name is, in fact, derived from one of Jeffers's poems. In the present essay, then, I intend to examine the nature of Uncivilised writing as a writing practice, or genre, that is grounded in the eco-philosophy outlined in the Dark Mountain manifesto and how the movement's key principles are illustrated by the poetry of Robinson Jeffers.

Born in the United States in 1887 and living out the greater deal of his life on the coast of California, Jeffers is mainly known for his personal philosophy of inhumanism and poetry in which the affairs of mankind are seen as peripheral when viewed through the eyes of the mountains, trees, oceans, and wild animals he often personifies in his poems. Bruce Murphy,

commenting on the 2001 publication of *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, notes that during the 1920s and 30s, Jeffers rose to popularity and was considered an important American poet by contemporary critics. By the 1940s, however, Jeffers's popularity and readership began to decline drastically after criticising Roosevelt, the growing military power and policies of the United States, and the countries involvement in the Second World War, after which he “was more or less expelled from the canon of American literature for his political views (Murphy 2003).” Further adding to Jeffers's ill-reputation was his stark criticism of the increasingly modernised and urban lifestyle of his native country and the trampled nature he saw in the wake of these developments. Consequently, Jeffers's poetry found little recognition amongst a population that negatively viewed his work as pessimistic, politically impartial, and unpatriotic.

Closely following Jeffers's death in 1962, the concept of environmentalism and ecological awareness began to emerge and seep into public consciousness, most notably with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* which is generally considered to be the beginning of mainstream environmentalism (Garrard 2012). A decade later, in 1973, Arne Naess published an article outlining the philosophical framework of Deep Ecology in the form of eight principles. Naess's philosophy of “biospherical egalitarianism” shares most, if not all, of its affinities with Jeffers's inhumanism (Marszalski 2008; Katai 2017) and, moreover, overlaps with several of Dark Mountain's core principles (MacQueen 2015). Most importantly perhaps, all three of these philosophies stress an ecocentric mode of being and view the way that our current world culture perceives and relates to the natural world—as beings separated out and above the rest of the environment—is detrimental both to ourselves and to the ecosphere as a whole.

They (Dark Mountain and Deep Ecology) differ, however, in that Deep Ecology primarily functions as a theoretical framework for scientific discourse regarding ecology while Dark Mountain is a social community approaching the issue through art and literature, on the level of cultural narratives. As such, Dark Mountain identifies the current ecological crisis as a result of a particular set of stories, the inherited anthropocentric narratives that have underpinned Euro-American society for centuries and which now to a large extent have become the global narrative. The manifesto states:

we were led to this point by the stories we have told ourselves – above all, by the story of civilisation...[and] what makes this story so dangerous is that, for the most part, we have forgotten that it is a story. It has been told so many times by those who see themselves as rationalists, even scientists; heirs to the Enlightenment’s legacy – a legacy which includes the denial of the role of stories in making the world.

(Kingsnorth and Hine 12)

Uncivilised writing intends to challenge the stories which, from this perspective, have grown too large and embedded so deep in our culture as to be taken for granted as the only way of envisioning a functional society.

Situating Robinson Jeffers as a cornerstone and point of departure for their literature, Uncivilised writing and the Dark Mountain Project form an interesting counter-culture movement that is worth studying in a time when stories and myths have become relegated to the sidelines as mere superstition, and, according to Dark Mountain, dangerously neglected. For we are no less guided by stories about how the world works today as our ancestors were a thousand years ago, although our priests, mystics, and religious beliefs have been replaced by scientists and scientific theories. However, a theory of reality, whether religious, scientific or mythopoetic in nature, is never more than a symbol of reality much like the straight lines on a map are not found in the actual world. This is not to say, though, that a map is not useful for navigating treacherous territory, but to emphasise that no map is infallible; and Dark Mountain seems to suggest that the map—or story—that currently dictates our behaviour is becoming untenable to live by.

In *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* Donna Haraway (1990) contends that “scientific practice and scientific theories produce and are embedded in particular kinds of stories. Any scientific statement about the world depends intimately upon language, upon metaphor(4).” Acknowledging that stories and metaphors about the world, including scientific theories, impinge upon and colour our interpretation of it may make us more perceptive of the embedded assumptions in our culture that are merely “borrowing the guise of science and reason”(Kingsnorth and Hine 11). It may also make us more open to imagining new and more appropriate ways of relating to the world and the

natural environment. This, so far as I understand, is what Dark Mountain intends with Uncivilised writing.

In this essay, however, my aim is not so ambitious as to take on the vast question implied by this rather more philosophical line of questioning. The present paper will instead focus on a close reading of Jeffers's poetry in relation to the principles of Uncivilisation stated in the Dark Mountain manifesto. The principles outline the movement's fundamental philosophy which guides its writing, and for my purposes they will serve as a theoretical framework for reading Jeffers in order to clearly show how the manifesto's principles take shape in literary form. For, as Henrik Edström (2012) remarks in his essay examining the manifesto, there have been no studies that look at the movement's literary references to writers and poets such as Wordsworth, Emerson, Conrad, or Jeffers. Since Jeffers is the most pronounced example of Uncivilised writing, and its precursor, he forms the natural choice for a closer look at how his poems voice the movement's principles.

The following chapters, then, will give a reading of Jeffers's poems in light of the principles listed at the end of the Dark Mountain manifesto. The principles number a total of eight, though, for the purpose of my analysis I have chosen the three which I find are the most relevant for an analysis of Jeffers's poems. Each principle is given a separate subsection in order to give a clear overview of how Jeffers's inhumanist poetics express each selected principle. In the appendix section of this essay I have also included all eight principles of Uncivilisation as they appear in the Dark Mountain manifesto.

## Stepping out of the Human Bubble

The inhumanist perspective of Jeffers's inhumanism may seem for many readers inapproachable and rather facile in its detached and impartial outlook on the affairs and sufferings of mankind. Robert Kingsnorth, co-founder of the Dark Mountain Project, while aligning Uncivilised writing with Jeffers's work, notes in his book *Sole Business* that the aim of Uncivilised writing is to "write from an ecocentric perspective, but do so while retaining that vital ability to see on a human-scale," which he admits Jeffers may have lost touch with at times (Kingsnorth in MacQueen 65). In the conclusion of his thesis "Reality and Nature in Robinson Jeffers," Joshua Bartee (2017) even goes so far as to state that "there is no room for inhumanism in this world. It is too extreme for any of us"(176). As a didactic philosophy for life and human society at large, it is perhaps true that inhumanism may be too extreme and impractical for most of us. However, as William Nolte (1966) states in his essay on Jeffers's poetry and inhumanist philosophy, "if Jeffers found little in man's confusion to warrant praise, he did increase our powers of perception"(271). For no matter what one thinks of Jeffers's personal philosophy, his poetry, being largely defined by its firmly ecocentric position, no doubt strikes a chord with many readers of today as stories of climate change and environmental upheaval have become a regular theme of both news reports and popular fiction. Guided to a great extent by Jeffers's widening perspective, which takes in "the whole of nature rather than simply people"(Kingsnorth in MacQueen 64), Dark Mountain outlines the principle which states that "humans are not the point and purpose of the planet. Our art will begin with the attempt to step outside the human bubble"(Kingsnorth and Hine 19).

The ecocentric position underpinning both Jeffers's and Dark Mountain's philosophy and the attempt to step out of the "human bubble" is certainly what most significantly aligns them. As an example of this, Jeffers expresses a central tenet of his Inhumanist philosophy in "Carmel Point": "We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; / We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we were made from." This particular passage is also quoted in the Dark Mountain manifesto (15) and is meant to illustrate the attempt of Uncivilised writing to "step outside the human bubble" in order to see things from a position less coloured by the social structures of civilised culture and thinking. A passage from "The Eye," written by Jeffers in 1948, provides another example of how Jeffers articulated this non-human perspective:



but here the Pacific—  
Our ships, planes, wars are perfectly irrelevant.  
the bloody migrations, greed of power, clash of  
faiths—  
Is a speck of dust on the great scale-pan.  
Here from this mountain shore, headland beyond stormy headland  
plunging like dolphins through the blue sea-smoke  
Into pale sea—look west at the hill of water: it is half the  
planet:  
this dome, this half-globe, this bulging  
Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia,  
Australia and white Antarctica: those are the eyelids that never  
close;  
this is the staring unsleeping  
Eye of the earth; and what it watches is not our wars.

The narrating voice reveals itself to be looking out over the Pacific Ocean, where “ships, planes, and wars are perfectly irrelevant” and humanity’s endless conflicts seem like minuscule events when seen through the vast “Eyeball of water” that is the Pacific. Moreover, the ocean is ascribed a sort of dormant and patient awareness of things through personification as the “staring unsleeping / Eye of the earth” whose indifference towards “our wars” is only because they seem “a speck of dust” when considered within a historical context that encompasses the beginning of life on Earth itself. In other words, the poem’s narrative voice takes the identity of a silent and observing Earth that is indifferent to the fate of mankind, shifting the reader’s attention away from the particular confusions of man to a more expansive world view where the conflicts of any particular species are put into relative perspective.

“Shine, Perishing Republic,” written in 1925, further expresses how Jeffers steps out of “the human bubble” of ideology and narratives of his time, as he criticises an America that is settling

in the mold of its vulgarity, heavily thickening

to empire

And protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out, and the mass hardens,

I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make earth.

Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and decadence; and home to the mother.

The metaphor compares his country's development with the cyclical process of decomposition and growth, enabling the reader to see the activities of mankind as integrated within the greater process that makes up the natural world, as much part of an ecological system as a bird nesting in a tree or a bustling anthill.

Though the poem initially critiques the development of his native country, Jeffers soon falls back on a mode of perception that seems to dissolve his troubled mind as he "sadly smiling remember[s]" to take the entirety of the total-field image into consideration, that our "vulgarity" too is part of the ecology of the planet. Neither condoning nor condemning the current state of things, Jeffers takes the reader beyond a polarised view of moral rights and wrongs, as the poem later states, "you making haste on decay: not blameworthy; life is good, be it stubbornly long or suddenly / A mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains: shine, perishing republic." The short-lived falling meteor that is the perishing republic becomes in this imagery, both a symbol of immanent destruction and of grim natural beauty. From the inhumanist view it is, despite its destructive nature, part of the same universal source as the seemingly more permanent and stable presence of an awe-inspiring mountain. Yet toward the end, the poem nonetheless expresses the necessity to keep a "distance from the thickening center" of corruption and ends with the imperative to "be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever servant, insufferable master."

Jeffers's emphasis on the whole in lieu of its parts becomes more explicitly stated in the later poem "The Answer," where he uses the concept "organic wholeness" to describe this

point of view which correlates to and expresses the ecocentric aspect that underlies the Dark Mountain principle that “humans are not the point and purpose of the planet”:

A severed hand

Is an ugly thing and man dissevered from the earth and stars  
and his history . . . for contemplation or in fact . . .

Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,  
the greatest beauty is

Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty  
of the universe. Love that, not man

Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions

The “severed hand” displaced from its original body of “the earth and stars / and [its] history” is, in this sense, a metaphor expressing the inhumanist position that the affliction of modern man is his introverted and self-centred attention. Similarly echoed in the words of Dark Mountain, Uncivilised writing is a “reengaging with the non-human world” and “comes not from the self-absorbed and self-congratulatory metropolitan centres...but from somewhere on its wilder fringes”(Kingsnorth and Hine 19; 13). The separation of man from the whole, either in intellectual contemplation or as a fact of felt experience, is for Jeffers fundamentally an illusion that forms the basis of “man’s pitiful confusions”. The antidote to this illusory separation, then, is to consider the “Organic wholeness...of life and things” and to “Love that, not man / Apart from that,” much like Uncivilised writing is an attempt to write from a position untethered from anthropocentric narratives. The poem, and much of Jeffers’s work, is quite accurately summarised by William Nolte’s comment, stating that “for any man of vision—i.e., the man who views history from outside—events become parts of a gigantic fabric rather than the personal clothing one wears next his skin (1966).” Nolte’s comment would, likewise, seem a fitting description for any writer of uncivilised literature.

In *A Study in Inhumanism*, M. C. Monjian (1958) writes that one of Jeffers’s main devices for illustrating “man turning in upon himself through an overweening self-love”(32) is the symbolic use of incest in his longer narrative poems. “The Answer,” as one of Jeffers’s short poems, perhaps does not project the incestuous imagery Monjian mentions, though, it

reflects Jeffers's view that the ideals of humanism, a philosophical position which came to dominate much of Western civilisation from the Renaissance onwards, set mankind's attention solely inwards upon its own creations and achievements (Carpenter 1981). To Jeffers, the achievements of the human species are always second best when considered as something distinctly separate from the "organic wholeness" of nature.

It is also in this sense we should understand the concept of inhumanism, as Frederic Carpenter (1981) succinctly explains: inhumanism "praises Renaissance humanism for its artistic excellence, and for opposition to scholastic theology. But it condemns all humanism for its exclusive concern with man"(25). Jeffers treated this introversion of the species as incestuous, at least symbolically in his poems, and he saw the need for mankind to become contrastingly extroverted in his relation to nature, thus, deriving the term "inhumanism" in response to an anthropocentric humanism. The term itself was first introduced by Jeffers in the preface to *The Double Axe*, a collection of poems published in 1948. It is important to note that Jeffers's inhumanism does not share any affinities with what one conventionally might associate with the term inhuman, in the sense of cruel behaviour towards fellow human beings. On the contrary, inhumanism is Jeffers's solution to the general unhappiness and suffering caused by humanity's self-centredness, providing an escape "from the totalitarianism of self and humanity into a worship of the order and beauty of nature"(Monjian 27). Monjian identifies a number of poetical and philosophical influences on Jeffers's conception of inhumanism: "the Byronic man, rebellious against humanity...the cosmic musings and prophecies of Shelley's search for perfection...[and] Wordsworth's pantheism"(2); and from philosophy, "the stern discipline of stoicism, Nietzsche's sense of mission, the atomic naturalism of Lucretius, [and] the cyclical theories of Spengler"(2). Inhumanism is, in this sense, a synthesis of these influences into a single philosophical attitude that opposes specifically the anthropocentrism of humanist values, though not humanity as such, and permeates Jeffers's poetry with a view that integrates mankind and nature in a single image, as one ecology.

## Writing with Dirt under Our Fingernails

Jeffers spent most of his life living on the coast of California in the small town Carmel-by-the-Sea. He and his wife Una moved there in 1914 when the population consisted of roughly five hundred people; at the time it was known as something of an artist's colony and still a relatively rural area. Jeffers had their house built there with granite rocks from the nearby coastline and did much of the labour himself for several years, alternating between writing in the mornings and working on the house or pulling up rocks from the shore in the afternoons. James Karman writes in his biography of Jeffers, that for the poet and many others who settled here, Carmel-by-the-Sea was an ideal "place for people who wished to live simply, close to nature, and in touch with the elemental forces of life"(43). Shrabanee Katai further writes on the impact Jeffers's move to the coast of California had on his world view:

Jeffers' growing environmental awareness made him question the flat ideas and ideologies of human civilization about the natural and the wild. Before arriving at Carmel he was sure of being a poet but only after walking with the waves in the lap of nature he understood his area of concern. (257)

Jeffers was, in light of this, by no means an exception to Dark Mountain's seventh principle: "We will not lose ourselves in the elaboration of theories or ideologies. Our words will be elemental. We write with dirt under our finger-nails"(Kingsnorth and Hine 19). The principle suggests a certain conscious distance to the intellectual mind by keeping in touch with the practical, direct experience of physical reality to facilitate a degree of sanity and clear-sightedness; presumably, a mind that is constantly absorbed in symbols and deeply abstract thinking easily gets entangled in them unless there are moments of respite, involving for instance such grounding labour as Jeffers's stonework. For uncivilised writers are "always willing to get their hands dirty; aware, in fact, that dirt is essential; that keyboards should be tapped by those with soil under their fingernails and wilderness in their heads"(Kingsnorth and Hine 17). The manifesto also makes it clear that the principle is a response to what they believe to be the "city-dwelling" mentality of contemporary writers who "seem unable to find new stories to lead us through the times ahead"(Kingsnorth and Hine 16). "Dirt under our

fingernails” connotes writing that is done in a more rural setting, where one is less distracted by the bustling activity of urban life and can observe things from a less entangled position.

The principle’s rejection of ideology is perhaps the most tangible concept to inspect more closely in relation to Jeffers, who in several poems criticises the way that ideology, for all its good intents, ultimately enslaves people’s minds. This was a vein which William Nolte (1966) also picked up in Jeffers’s poetry, writing that “as early as 1928, Jeffers was exhorting man to deny the saviors who demanded his worship to satisfy their passion for power”(262). The “elemental” aspect of his poetry, which more often than not use some form of nature simile or imagery to convey his inhumanist view, grounds his poems in an immediate sense of connection to nature.

In “Faith,” for example, he observes how “man needs lies” to come together whereas “Ants or wise bees, or a gang of wolves, / Work together by instinct” and need no other incentive than simple survival. But “Man his admired and more complex mind,” Jeffers continues, “Needs lies to bind the body of his people together.” Generally speaking, the concept of ideology denotes an intellectual basis which serves to unite a people under ideas of nation, state, or community in order to, as the poem further reads, “make peace in the state and maintain power”: Interpreted this way, the poem is a fairly clear polemic against motivating people through ideology. For the “faithful” believers in these lies “flourish, / They conquer nature and their enemies... / Then proud and secure they will go awhoring / with that impractical luxury the love of truth.” The “love of truth” in this context is used quite ironically and means something more akin to a righteous belief in the hegemonic ideas *assumed* to be true within a particular society: It is a luxury because these beliefs are never truly questioned or scrutinised, since they are upheld and secured behind a veneer of majority consensus and popular belief. Translated into Dark Mountain’s language, this would perhaps correlate to what the manifesto calls “the stories we have told ourselves — above all...the story of civilisation (Kingsnorth and Hine 11).”

“Faith,” in this sense, aims a sharp critique at one of the cornerstones and driving forces of any civilisation, namely, ideology and how it conditions individuals to a particular worldview. The poem is not evidently directed towards any particular nation, culture, or even a particular ideology, but seems rather an observation of the inevitable state of affairs in human relationships from an inhumanist perspective. The hegemonic stories and social

structures that make up the ideological milieu of a culture are produced by those in power, but are also reproduced by its “faithful” adherents. However, much like the crests and troughs of waves on the ocean, the poet recognises this same faith, or ideological adherence, to eventually recede “like a morning mist burnt by the sun: / thus the great wave of civilisation / Lose its forming soul, falls apart and founders.”

That civilisations “lose its forming soul [and] falls apart” is a sentiment shared by the Dark Mountain community—forming indeed one of the manifesto’s essential claims—as it sees the fact “that civilisations fall, sooner or later, is as much a law of history as gravity is a law of physics”(Kingsnorth and Hine 2). This fall or transition into a very different way of living is immanent. The myth of progress, and on a greater scale that of civilisation, is one of the grand stories that keeps the majority of the worlds population from recognising an inevitable collapse while sustaining the story that everything will indefinitely keep moving upwards and that growth will continue, despite evidence of human impact taking a substantial toll on the planet. In “Rearmament,” Jeffers gives his inhumanist take on the matter: “the beauty / of modern / Man is not in the persons but in the / Disastrous rhythm, the heavy mobile masses, the dance of the / Dream-led masses down the dark mountain.” These lines reveal how Jeffers viewed a people bound together by ideology as something akin to a force of nature that sweeps forth, beautiful when seen from afar as one great undivided manifestation of nature, and yet regrettable and tragic in light of the wars and suffering caused at the individual level. In the end, though, “it is beautiful as a river flowing or a slowly gathering / Glacier on a high mountain rock-face, / Bound to plow down a forest.”

The forces of ideology at play in the hands of governments or world leaders, of turning individuals into masses likened to an avalanche about to sweep over the landscape, becomes a naturally occurring event that seems inevitable. The simile invites the reader to consider the event that is humanity as being of the same category as any other natural phenomenon. Similarly, Nolte observes “that the mass of men are led by lies to self-destruction may be pitiful but nonetheless a matter of eternal recurrence—and therefore necessary to accept as one accepts or anyway expects violent changes in weather”(263).

In a short poem titled “The Soul’s Desert” published in 1939, Jeffers foretells the coming of war and urges readers to remain impartial and not be deluded by politicians and governments into taking any side in the coming conflict:

They are warming up the old horrors; and all that they say is echoes of echoes.  
Beware of taking sides; only watch.  
These are not criminals, nor hucksters and little journalists, but the governments  
Of the great nations; men favorably  
Representative of massed humanity. Observe them. Wrath and laughter  
Are quite irrelevant. Clearly it is time  
To become disillusioned, each person to enter his own soul's desert  
And look for God--having seen man.

Toward the end, the reader is admonished to turn away from the ideologies of “massed humanity” altogether and instead look for God through introspection. In his thesis, Joshua Barteo (2017) notes that God, reality, nature, beauty, and truth are essentially synonymous and interchangeable in Jeffers’s poetic language. With Barteo’s interpretation in mind, Jeffers’s search for God is revealed to be a deeper search for truth and meaning beyond the veneer of social and political language games, religious dogma, and Scripture. In the end, it all seems to come down to language, with its inherently divisive character, as being a barrier to a more direct experience of the world. As the ending lines of “Faith” read, Jeffers believes “that truth is more beautiful / Than all the lies, and God than all the false Gods... / could we change at last and choose truth,” with truth implied to lie beyond the scope of verbal articulation. Though there is an air of ambiguous mysticism in this statement, to look inwards for truth and God, it comes down to a rather grounded practice of not investing one’s happiness in any kind of belief, as Jeffers puts it in “The Answer” (“not be duped by dreams of universal justice or happiness”). The straightforwardness of sensory experience and the phenomenal world, particularly that derived from observing nature, is the empirical ground from which he makes such statements. The natural order and beauty Jeffers observes in the wildlife and fauna takes precedence over the elaborate theories and ideas that emerge out of cities that are conceptually and, more importantly, experientially severed from any connection with nature. Because of this disjunction from the most elemental knowledge that humanity too is “born of the rock and the air, not of a woman”(“Signpost”), people turn to belief which at its best “acts as a crutch for the weak to lean on; at its worst, it offers an outlet for fanatical cruelty”(Nolte 267).



In “Thebaid” Jeffers observes that people in times of social and political anxiety look to new political ideologies or the comfortable template of religious dogma and Scripture for reassurance and guidance:

How many turn back toward dreams and magic, how many  
children  
Run home to Mother Church, Father State,  
To find in their arms the delicious warmth and folding of souls.  
The age weakens and settles home toward old ways.  
An age of renascent faith: Christ said, Marx wrote, Hitler says,  
And though it seems absurd we believe.  
Sad children, yes. It is lonely to be adult, you need a father.  
With a little practice you'll believe anything.

The common theme running through these poems is an exhortation for people to not be blinded by belief in man-made symbols, either religious, political, or philosophical; the experience of nature itself is the measure of reality and it is already right in front of us and yet remains a mystery to us. The self-incurred ignorance of latching onto a belief is something that Jeffers considers corrupts human nature, that “poor doll humanity” which, despite its confusions, he did consider to “[have] a place under heaven” (“Signpost”). Jeffers was acutely aware that, while belief in a common cause or idea can bring a people together to accomplish great things, it may as easily turn into a mass-psychosis which the poet, who lived to see two world wars unfold, witnessed to a significant degree. It is perhaps easier to see, then, why Jeffers so obstinately urges his reader to remain skeptical to anything that would reduce humanity, nature, or indeed reality to a mere abstraction or ideology, considering where it had taken humanity up until the first half of the twentieth century.

In this sense, Jeffers’s inhumanism could be interpreted as anti-intellectual—for he also critiques the scientific community, which I bring up in the following chapter. However, Jeffers’s seeming rejection of intellectualism may, in fact, stem from the same principle ostentatiously adhered to by the intellectuals he criticise, namely, objectivity. With Jeffers’s ontology in mind, though, objectivity means being detached and in the unknown with regards to the ultimate reality of things, for the universe remains, after all is said and done, an impenetrable mystery (Zaller 319) which, in his view, many fail to recognise since they turn

to unfounded religions or abstract philosophies to solve their problems. The failure to retain a degree of detachment and objectivity, of intellectual integrity and individuation, eventually trickles down through the ranks of society and results in Jeffers's "Dream-led masses" that "with a little practice...[will] believe anything." This would be where Dark Mountain very much picks up on Jeffers's inhumanism, for they too believe that reality essentially is a mystery (Kingsnorth and Hine 11), and this, then, would form one reason for why they wish to abstain from elaborate theories and ideologies that too easily become confounded and misleading.

## Weaving Reality through Stories

Since the Enlightenment period and the rise of scientific inquiry and objectivity as the new authority on truth, religion and religious scripture generally lost its influence over increasingly secularised societies across the world. Religious stories in the West are seen as mythological stories, at best meant as guidance towards a morally virtuous life through metaphor and analogy but no longer a source of truth in any objective sense. Put more plainly, religion deals with the interior, subjective aspects of the individual, whereas science broadly speaking deals with the facts of reality. It is the way most people have come to understand the role of religion and science over the past few centuries and perhaps it is the way we should understand the role of religious stories in a progressive modern society. However, Dark Mountain claims that stories in a more general sense, religious or otherwise, play an equally important role as science for navigating the world. With increasing secularisation, religion was dismissed as a “bag of myths and mysteries”(Kingsnorth and Hine 12), and the role of didactic stories increasingly seen as little more than an imaginary escape, far from reality and the world of facts:

The dream visions of the Middle Ages became the nonsense stories of Victorian childhood. In the age of the novel, stories were no longer the way to approach the deep truths of the world, so much as a way to pass time on a train journey. (Kingsnorth and Hine 12).

Figuratively speaking, according to Dark Mountain, the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater, the voices of poets and storytellers no longer heard as the role of storytelling and “the old tales by which generations had made sense of life’s subtleties and strangenesses were bowdlerised and packed off to the nursery”(Kingsnorth and Hine 12). In response to the disenchanted view of stories in the postmodern age, the manifesto’s fourth principle reads: “We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality”(Kingsnorth and Hine 19).

Jeffers himself outlined what he believed to be the role of the poet: “He would be seeking to express the spirit of his time (as well as all times), but it is not necessary, because an epoch is confused, that its poet should share its confusions”(Hunt 724). The ideal poet, Jeffers further states, must also retain a degree of detachment in order to see the spirit of his time, and other times, clearly. In Dark Mountain’s language, Jeffers’s ideal poet could be

considered fairly synonymous with their ideal storyteller, for it contends that we are today “bombarded with narrative material...through television, film, novels and video games”(Kingsnorth and Hine 11) to such an extent that stories have become a frivolous source of entertainment no longer taken seriously, and as they see it there are far too few taking up the challenge of expressing the spirit of our time through poetry or stories that are “natural and direct,”(Jeffers in Hunt 724) as Jeffers would put it.

In “Triad,” Jeffers expresses the ideal poet as someone “who wishes not to play games with words,” something Dark Mountain evidently contends there is no shortage of today. Jeffers further states that “[the poet’s] affair being to awake the dangerous images,” in other words, to call into question and reveal the unconscious layers of society which coincides with what Dark Mountain would suggest, today, is the taboo of the myth of civilisation. Jeffers continues the poem by invoking the symbol of the hawks, as the poet who awakes dangerous images “call[s] the hawks; they all feed the future, they serve God / Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity.” The hawk in Jeffers’s poems generally symbolises the enduring strength of nature, and for Jeffers “call[ing] the hawks” is a way to express nature’s sublime and everlasting quality. Since, “great poetry is pointed at the future”(Jeffers in Hunt 724) the poet who calls on the hawks “feed[s] the future” by concerning himself with topics that are more permanent in nature and transcend any given time-period. Jeffers’s inhumanist poet is, in other words, less concerned with the fleeting apparitions of this particular age, “the neon lights and tooth-paste advertising of...urban civilisation, and the momentary popular imbecilities”(Jeffers in Hunt 724). Such things are apt to change, and undeniably more rapidly today than ever before. Our poet would instead “intend to be understood a thousand years from now”(Jeffers in Hunt 724) so he should strive to say something clearly and without obscurity, but also direct his attention to subjects of a more lasting nature. For the latter part, Jeffers found nothing more suitable than nature for his subject.

That stories in some sense are constitutive of reality is something Donna Haraway touches upon, as mentioned in the introduction of this essay. According to Haraway, social communities are constructed upon models of reality that, mediated through language, take on the form of a narrative structure based in the perspective of a given time and cultural context. She suggests that in all parts of society, how one perceives and interprets the world is largely a consequence of the stories that underpin the given social community (Haraway 1990). Similarly, E. O. Wilson observes in “The Drive for Discovery” that advances in science originate, much like art, in the creative mind’s utilisation of analogies to both understand and

communicate ideas. In this sense, art and science alike provide “analogies that map the gateways to unexplored terrain (Wilson 454),” and this of course inevitably takes the shape of a form of narrative in language. By this, we may better understand Dark Mountain’s claim that the fabric of reality is to a large extent interwoven with our stories *about* reality. Jeppe Graugaard, in his ethnographic study of the Dark Mountain community, explains more to the point Jeffers’s connection to Dark Mountain’s claim that stories structure the way reality is perceived. Jeffers’s inhumanism, he writes,

is a clear starting point for exploring the yet unknown territory of uncivilisation...it is connected with the view that stories are constitutive of reality – the task of uncivilising is to co-create Jeffers’ ‘inhuman’ realities. This is critical for understanding the claims of the manifesto: its authors do not inhabit a totalising view of reality but one where ‘reality remains mysterious, as incapable of being approached directly as a hunter’s quarry (128).’

In “The Great Wound,” Jeffers touches upon what he recognises to be, as Robert Zaller articulates, “the credulity of the scientists for whom to reproduce an effect of nature was to comprehend it”(Zaller 319):

The mathematicians and physics men  
Have their mythology; they work alongside the truth,  
Never touching it; their equations are false  
But the things *work*. Or, when gross error appears,  
They invent new ones; they drop the theory of waves  
In universal ether and imagine curved space.

The poem aligns Jeffers with Dark Mountain’s position in the sense that language, or in this case the scientist’s equations, never comes to the truth even though the explanatory power of language may produce very precise theories that can predict outcomes and outline relationships in the physical universe. For language is nevertheless, for Jeffers, never more than a semantic blanket, a “mythology”, which is laid over the universe and it “[can] only indicate [the truth’s] proximity without penetrating its mystery (Zaller 319).”

The poem is curiously reminiscent of the philosopher Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms, which suggests that truth is not a realistic point of destination. Instead, the scientist works within a theoretical paradigm that holds sufficient explanatory power until enough anomalies occur, in which case a new paradigm must be developed that can facilitate the old framework of understanding but also expand to explain anomalies within the old one (Bird 2018). An absolute truth, however, is never reached according to Kuhn. In a similar manner, Jeffers states, "when gross error appears / They invent new [equations]," but always "work alongside the truth."

Further in the poem, Jeffers suggests that "The poet also / Has his mythology," but he plays a rather different language game dictated by imagery and symbolism, where a symbol or image can denominate an experience or an idea but can also take into consideration the more subtle aspects of human experience. For "He tells you the moon arose / Out of the pacific basin. He tells you that Troy was / burnt for a vagrant / Beautiful woman." The poet thus interprets and communicates through images and symbols in an attempt at representing truth, much like the scientist, but derives his language from the irrational raw material of sensory experience and emotion. Yet Jeffers recognises that truth, whether represented in the imagery of poetry or the calculated theories of science, "remain[s] forever on the other side of an impenetrable veil"(Zaller 319). For the truth of a poem "is unlikely: it might be true", but Jeffers believes the same applies for the mythology of science.

If science and poetry essentially work alongside the truth but never embody it, then of course "church and state / Depend on more peculiarly impossible myths." For instance, Jeffers says, consider the myth "that all men are born free and equal," a foundational idea of the modern state which has only really been with us for a fraction of human history. We need not look far back in history to find widespread and extreme inequality, where the dominant myth was that of strict social hierarchies with the bottom of the pyramid consisting of slaves. In fact, it seems an ideal we even struggle to uphold in the twenty-first century. Jeffers is pointing out that in an organised society, there inevitably arises inequality, and, arguably, this is no different today, though we have gotten rid of the label "slave," as large parts of populations in the world are forced to work minimum wage jobs while a few reap the rewards at the top. In essence, civilisation inevitably equals a degree of inequality in Jeffers's view; that "all men are born free and equal" is simply a rephrasing that conceals the same old order of things that has always been in place within systems of social organisation. One might

argue, however, that social mobility is increasingly available today as it would not have been in, for instance, feudal Europe, though for many it may still pose a steep uphill struggle.

This poem alone is perhaps where Jeffers states his belief most explicitly with regards to Dark Mountain's fourth principle that all the institutions of human society could be seen as essentially mythological structures, or social narratives, which derive their reality from the communal living of civilised society. It is also clear that Jeffers considers language as inevitably severed from any real connection to truth in an absolute sense. On this point, though, it should be stated that Dark Mountain does not raise a protest to remove all structures of the civilised world simply because they believe that absolute truth cannot be arrived at through language. Rather, the movement is, at least partially, an attempt at raising awareness around the fact that social communities and human interaction implies storytelling; and that the stories we tell, about ourselves and the world, easily run underneath the level of conscious awareness and as such become potentially dangerous if left running unchecked. For both Jeffers and Dark Mountain, the role of the poet is "to awake dangerous images ("Triad")" and reveal the "uncomfortable truths...which we're not keen on hearing (Kingsnorth and Hine 14)."

## Conclusion

The Dark Mountain Project is, as Kingsnorth and Hine themselves mention, greatly influenced by Robinson Jeffers's poetry and inhumanist outlook. In some sense one might consider this collective of uncivilised writers a form of continuation of Jeffers's inhumanist poetics. The movement is, nonetheless, less inclined towards Jeffers's extreme form of inhumanism, for even Robert Kingsnorth, co-author of the movement's manifesto, concedes that the poet's philosophical stance is at times a little bit too detached from the human side of things. While Jeffers turned his back entirely on humanity, seeing the social institution of civilisation as something that ultimately corrupts human nature, Dark Mountain's attitude seems more towards a reconciliation of human civilisation and the natural environment. For, the idea of Uncivilisation and Uncivilised writing is not to suggest that we deconstruct everything humanity has built over the past millennia and move back into the wild, but to look more closely at how we may, as societies and individuals, bring the concepts of nature and human civilisation into question in the grand narratives of our time on a more profound level. Jeffers devoted much of his poetry towards this aim. Though he intellectually may have grasped that mankind too is a part of the "organic wholeness," his poetry also reveals him at times to be unable to reconcile his understanding with the atrocities civilisation increasingly wrought upon the world. Even though the poet's personal views may at times have been misanthropic and pessimistic about modern man—perhaps to a degree too much for many to digest—his poetry, nonetheless, invites its reader to consider the labels "nature" and "humanity" in a remarkably transcendent way while retaining a sense of objective clarity and grounded sanity.

Jeffers's inhumanism, while perhaps not flawless, offers a way of seeing the world that is both thought provoking and, I believe, highly relevant. His poetry questions aspects of the modern lifestyle, the division between civilised society and nature, and what it means indeed to be human on a ball of rock, water, and hot lava somewhere on the outskirts of the Milky Way. Almost every poem by Jeffers urges one to consider the vastness of things and the relative insignificance that our individual lives and civilisations pose in contrast; as he criticises a nation's social and political developments it becomes a small and minor point in history as he juxtaposes an image of the Pacific overlooking it, unperturbed and ever-watchful. There is, in other words, a vastness outside the cities and urban communities of the



modern age that is difficult to comprehend when it is seldom experienced firsthand, and Jeffers brings this closer to the reader in a powerful way.

Potentially, such a perspective could significantly affect how one views the world and perhaps facilitate a change in behaviour and attitude, which I believe Dark Mountain first and foremost intends with Uncivilised writing. For, the Dark Mountain community believes that the arts in general, and poetry and stories in particular, play a critical role in facilitating a collective change in ecological and environmental awareness. By exploring alternative narratives and reconsidering existing ones, Dark Mountain hopes to begin the process of navigating humanity towards an ecocentric social narrative. Jeffers's inhumanism thus forms a clear departure point for this, though it is surely not the final word on the matter. Whether the movement's uncivilised art will prove to have any greater impact on the future, however, remains to be seen. If anything, the movement's initiative may serve to shed some much deserved light on Robinson Jeffers's poetry, which has been curiously neglected over the past century. We may currently stand more readily receptive to reconsider the words of Jeffers as the present century, from an ecological point of view, is looking ever more uncertain.

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# Appendix

## The Eight Principles of Uncivilisation

1. We live in a time of social, economic and ecological unravelling. All around us are signs that our whole way of living is already passing into history. We will face this reality honestly and learn how to live with it.
2. We reject the faith which holds that the converging crises of our times can be reduced to a set of 'problems' in need of technological or political 'solutions'.
3. We believe that the roots of these crises lie in the stories we have been telling ourselves. We intend to challenge the stories which underpin our civilisation: the myth of progress, the myth of human centrality, and the myth of our separation from 'nature'. These myths are more dangerous for the fact that we have forgotten they are myths.
4. We will reassert the role of story-telling as more than mere entertainment. It is through stories that we weave reality.
5. Humans are not the point and purpose of the planet. Our art will begin with the attempt to step outside the human bubble. By careful attention, we will reengage with the non-human world.
6. We will celebrate writing and art which is grounded in a sense of place and of time. Our literature has been dominated for too long by those who inhabit the cosmopolitan citadels.
7. We will not lose ourselves in the elaboration of theories or ideologies. Our words will be elemental. We write with dirt under our finger-nails.
8. The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us.

