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Richard Jefferies, by Gabriel Seal

IN the country south of Swindon the chalk ridgeways of England converge like the spokes of a broken wheel upon their hub; and it was at Coate, within easy distance of the Marlborough Downs with their beech clumps and high lonely pastures, that Richard Jefferies was born in 1848. Here he remained till he was twenty-seven, storing his mind with country impressions till they became the very fibres of his being, a great reservoir of memories on which, years later, he drew for his novels and essays about Wiltshire life. His father had a forty-acre farm and a few cows but spent most of his time working among his fruit-trees and vegetables in 'the raggedest coat ever seen on a respectable back'. Though he was neither educated nor very business-like, he had a disinterested passion for plants, and trees which in time he communicated to his son.

The boy rarely helped on the farm and the villagers were critical: there was not a single one friendly to him, Jefferies says. He preferred the woods and hedgerows to the cowshed and went off, gun under arm, on solitary forays, watching the birds and wild animals, like the boy Whitman before him, 'cautiously peering, absorbing, translating'. The trees alone were a luxury to him. 'Many expeditions', he writes, 'were made without a gun or any implement of destruction simply to enjoy the trees or thickets'. It was in the woods just beyond Coate Water that, Jefferies met the keeper Haylock whom he describes in 'The Gamekeeper at Home', and in whom he saw an ideal of manhood later to be contrasted with the emasculated urban type. 'Freedom and constant contact with nature had made him every inch a man', Jefferies writes. 'In him, in this nineteenth century of civilised effeminacy, might be seen some relic of what men were in the old feudal days when they dwelt practically in the woods.'

Again it is the Wordsworth doctrine of the influence of nature on man. Again it is Whitman's Indian, 'the most wonderful proof of what nature can produce'. But Jefferies carries the thought a stage farther: what is true of man must be true of woman also. Therefore his ideal woman was one 'perfected by a natural life', whose superb health, as he argues in the essay 'Golden Brown', comes 'from the air and sunlight, and still more from some alchemy unknown to the physician or the physiologist, some faculty exercised by the body, happily enclosed with special power of extracting the utmost richness and benefit from the rudest elements'. Cicely in *Round about a Great Estate*, Amaryllis in *Amaryllis at the Fair* and, above all, Felise in *The Dewy Morn* are all versions of the girl who carries the sunshine in her gold-brown skin and the winds in her freedom-loving spirit. Wordsworth, a generation before, had touched lightly on the theme in his poem, 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', but it was left to Jefferies to draw the full-length portrait: 'Such a woman as Earth meant to live upon her surface'.

In his late teens Jefferies started to have those mystic relations with nature which he describes in such detail in *The Story of My Heart*. He used to get up very early to watch the sun rise behind the hills. Sunrise made him happy, he says; it raised him up, exalted him above the ugly and commonplace things of everyday life. Whom does it not? But Jefferies goes farther. 'I looked at the hills, at the dewy grass, and then up through the elm branches to the sky ... In a moment all that was behind me, the house, the people, the sounds, seemed to disappear and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation.' Such moments of exaltation, sustained evidently by the mystic's technique of deep breathing, persisted until the end of his life when, from his Sussex home, he loved to find refreshment by gazing long upon the sunlit sea.

How much of all this should be attributed to the eccentricity and self-deception of a solitary, how much to the influence of Wordsworth's poetry and other pantheistic writings, it is difficult to say. It would be easier to accept the validity of Jefferies's claims if a tradition of such mystic thought had not already been established. On the other hand it is too facile to dismiss as pathological whatever falls outside the range of normal experience. It is not to the robust nature, the socially balanced, the professionally successful and preoccupied that we must look for an enlargement of the boundaries of human consciousness.

In 1874 Jefferies married a local farmer's daughter, an unsophisticated girl who shared with him a country upbringing and served him devotedly till his death thirteen years later. He took lodgings first in Swindon, where he was already employed in journalism; but soon, attracted by the hope of better pay, he migrated to London and for a while succumbed absolutely to its spell. As the months passed, however, the novelty and glamour wore off. A note of bitterness crept into his writings. He found journalism 'uncongenial and useless' and office hours a waste of golden time while the rich sunlight streams on hill and plain'. After a year or two London had ceased to be the paradise he had imagined it and had become 'this great Babylon of misery'. Weary in spirit and even faint for want of proper food, he turned to the pictures in the National Gallery and cheered himself with these; or to the Greek sculpture galleries in the British Museum. They opened little windows of natural beauty to him.

Yet at rare moments even London gave inspiration. As Wordsworth had been moved by the morning city steeped in sunshine, so Jefferies on London Bridge became suddenly aware of the immense forces of nature at work while the river hummed by the city. 'The bright morning sun of summer', he writes, 'heated the eastern parapet of London Bridge; I stayed in the recess to acknowledge it. The smooth water was a broad sheen of light, the built-up river flowed calm and silent by a thousand doors, rippling only when the stream chafed against a chain . . . I felt the pressure of the immense powers of the universe: I felt out into the depths of the ether'.

For some years longer Jefferies accepted the compromise which so many country-loving Londoners have chosen: a job in the city and a home as far out as an hour's journey will allow. He rented a house for his wife and two children in Surbiton, which in those days adjoined fields and woods; and soon he was at work turning the natural history of Surbiton into literature. Little articles on crows and nightingales, on footpaths and woodlands began to appear over his name in the London *Standard*; and these were later collected and republished as *Nature near London*.

It was all something of a *tour de force,* however, a determination to find nature still where the houses were going up fast and the trees coming down; and in time he 'came to understand what was at first a dim sense of something wanting': the absolute calm of the real countryside. London was too close, and in spite of the compensation of bird and tree life a restlessness came over him, 'a moral drought as if I had been absent for many years from the sources of life and hope'. Then, 'to get to the sea at some quiet spot was my one thought', and in this mood he took the first train to the south coast. When he finally reached the sea he hurried down to the water and stood where the foam washed to his feet. 'The great earth bearing the richness of the harvest, and its hills golden with corn, was at my back — its strength and firmness under me. The great sun shone above, the wide sea was before me, the wind came sweet and strong from the waves. The life of the earth and the sea, the glow of the sun filled me; I touched the surge with my hand, I lifted my face to the sun, I opened my lips to the wind. 1 prayed aloud in the roar of the waves.'

The great open expanse of water, the boundless horizon.- 'apt emblem of Eternity', to borrow a phrase from Thoreau — gave that sense of release which, after the confinement of London life, Jefferies's spirit demanded; and the experience seems to have decided him to live by the sea, for we next hear of him with his family at Brighton. His removal there coincided with the onset of an illness from which, in the few years remaining to him, he was never free. An ulcer formed in his body, and in his thirty-fourth year he underwent four unsuccessful operations. Nor was this all. Two years later, in 1884, his small son Oliver Lancelot died from meningitis.

These protracted sufferings affected not only his body and mind but his whole outlook. They sharpened his sense of values, his day-to-day appreciation of the last fleeting years of life: they made him more sensitive to the sufferings of others, above all to those of the exploited country labourer. Before his illness Jefferies's work had been, on controversial issues, safely conservative: he seldom strayed from the path of patient observation of wild life. When he did so, it was in support of the established order, as in *The Gamekeeper at Home*, where he defended the landed gentry against the inroads of poachers, or in those three letters he wrote to *The Times* in 1872 championing the aristocracy against the claims of discontented labourers. The rural labourers, he argued, were better housed and clothed than ever before, and it was 'sheer cant' to say they had no chance of rising.

But the grind of London life, the struggle to make a living, the indifference of editors and publishers to his best and sincerest work, the long months of illness and Oliver Lancelot's death made him more acrimonious and outspoken. When he submitted his next novel, *The Dewy Morn*, it was with a request to the publisher that it should not be given to a Tory reader, for the manuscript attacked land capitalism and the taxation of struggling tenant farmers.

More was to come. In *Field and Hedgerow* he joins cause with the long-suffering country labourer, as Cobbett had done before him. He recalls indignantly the time when reaping was paid by the acre, and men who had been underpaid throughout the year 'tore at the wheat as if they were seized with a frenzy'. 'Many a low mound in the churchyard', he fumes, 'was the sooner raised over the nameless dead because of the terrible strain in the few weeks of harvesting'. One by one he indicts the traditional practices of rural England, unmasking their true character: the workhouse as a 'blot on our civilization', the tithe barn as the symbol of 'centuries of cold-blooded oppression' and— most terrible of all — the man-trap, reminiscent of the days when 'the granaries were full, the people half starved', when men had to be prevented by steel traps, like rats, from taking the corn which was only their due. Even the Church, which in his Swindon days he had accepted as a central piece in the rural pattern, attending with his future wife the services at Chisledon, he now regarded as merely an encumbrance on the hard-working village community. With a pen dipped in gall he attacked the superstition of villagers who gave time and money to maintaining churches and chapels and ministers while at the same time there was no good water in the village, no cottage hospital, no educational institute and no library.

Twice again Jefferies moved house, but each time he remained in Sussex and near the sea. His last home, at Goring, was in fact five minutes from the shore. Here, except for the company of his wife and children, he spent a friendless year, desperately poor. His published books had brought him little recognition and less money, and confinement to the house with the sea so close to him made him, like Whitman at Camden, 'an open-air man winged'. Separated from the woods and downs he loved, from 'the sources of life and hope', he turned for inspiration to his books: to his own nature notebooks, twenty-two in all, where were preserved the sketches and jottings of a thousand country walks, and to 'British Birds', 'British Butterflies' and 'British Grasses'—reference books which he had thumbed till they were known and familiar to him like old clothes.

The death of Jefferies in 1887, at the age of thirty-eight, seems especially tragic because with his sensitive mind and great powers of imagination he was able to understand life far more than most men. He loved life passionately: He enjoyed all forms of physical exercise, simple manual tasks like sawing and splitting logs no less

than walking and rowing and swimming. Though his body tired quickly, his eager spirit longed for more. In his youth he was out of doors all day and often half the night, but still he wanted 'more sunshine, more air — the hours were too short'. And the more he was confined indoors, the more insistent became this note in his writing. 'To be! To live!' he exclaims in one of his last novels, 'To have an intense enjoyment in every inspiration of breath: in every beat of the pulse; in every movement of the limbs; in every sense!' It was the wishful thinking of a sick man, the longing for that abundant health which made the simplest physical experience an intense pleasure.

Jefferies might have denied that he was a pantheist and would probably have rejected out of hand the *cliché* 'nature- worshipper'. But in the overall view his work belongs to the school of thought initiated by Spinoza and interpreted first in this country by Wordsworth. He was, so to speak, a prose Wordsworth, though the parallel should not be carried too far. Jefferies's attitude to nature was more realistic than the poet's: Wordsworth dwelt only on the mild, beneficent influences, whereas Jefferies saw the cruelty as well. Above all, he insisted on the indifference of nature to man. Man starves; he dies from thirst, from heat; he drowns, he falls from cliffs, he is eaten by wild animals, he is consumed with disease. Instance by instance Jefferies piles up the indictment. 'All nature, all the universe that we can see, is absolutely indifferent to us, and except to us human life is of no more value than grass.' These are unwelcome truths, pills bitter to palates nurtured on the sentimental spring-song-and-blossom view of nature, a view more credible in the favoured English countryside than elsewhere, and one to which— it must be admitted— Wordsworth's lyrics contributed their share. Jefferies redressed the balance by offering the reverse side of the picture, the complement long overdue.

If Jefferies was a pantheist by faith — and a pantheist, note, who accepted the amorality of nature — he was an aesthete by aim and temperament. Life had for him one object: the pursuit of the beautiful. 'The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live. These are the only hours that are not wasted: these hours that absorb the soul and fill it with beauty. This is real life, and all else is illusion or mere endurance.' And beauty to Jefferies was primarily the beauty of nature. Because he hoped society would accept and order its ways by this guiding principle, he hated all interferences with it. He was the sworn opponent of hard work, for instance, refusing to accept the necessity of it. Farm work, which he termed 'this ceaseless labour — repeating the furrow, reiterating the blow, the same furrow, the same stroke', pleased him no better than factory routine. The idea that work was man's highest aim was, he said, 'the superstition of an age infatuated with money'. Like William Morris he wanted to see nature woven into man's existence, and looked forward to a generation — it is the Utopia of *News from Nowhere* unmistakably — when nine-tenths of the people's time would be leisure time, 'so that they may enjoy their days and the earth and the beauty of this beautiful world; that they may rest by the sea and dream; that they may dance and sing, and eat and drink'.

Household drudgery was another interference with the true life aim. Jefferies, like Thoreau, hated to see men and women enslaved to property and furnishings. 'The surroundings, the clothes, the dwelling, the social status, the circumstances are to me utterly indifferent', he writes in *The Story of My Heart*, and there follows a scathing denunciation of unworthy aims, a peeling away, skin by skin, of the false and superfluous till we reach at last the essentials. 'It is enough to lie on the sward in the shadow of green boughs, to listen to the songs of summer, to drink in the sunlight, the air, the flowers, the sky, the beauty of all. Or upon the hill-tops to watch the white clouds rising over the curved hill-lines, their shadows descending the slope. Or on the beach to listen to the sweet sigh as the smooth sea runs up and recedes. It is lying beside the immortals, indrawing the life of the ocean, the earth and the sun.'