‘THE ROOTS OF A RADICAL’ BY JOHN.A.T.ROBINSON
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The late John A.T.Robinson, one time Dean of Trinity College,Cambridge,will no doubt be best remembered as author of the controversial work,’HONEST TO GOD’. The following essay extracted from John Robinson’s later book, ‘THE ROOTS OF A RADICAL’(pp. 149-155) provides an interesting personal view of Richard Jefferies by the writer.

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5. RICHARD JEFFERIES

Who was Richard Jefferies? Despite nearly a hundred entries in the Cambridge University Library catalogues of works by, or about him, he remains a stranger to most. He was born, the son of a Wiltshire farmer in 1848 - yet far removed from the political upheavals rocked Europe that fateful year. He grew up a dreamy solitary genius, with few if any real friends, a lover the woods, nicknamed Loony Dick or Moony Dick. He became a reporter on the local paper, tried his hand at juvenile novels about London society of which he knew nothing, then one day wrote a letter to *The Times* about the agricultural labourer in Wiltshire. It was a long, long letter of several thousand words which nowadays would never get published at all. But it was a masterly letter, later followed by two others, which made his name among a small but knowledgeable public. He had articles and essays accepted by London magazines on farming and the English countryside, which were subsequently collected in books with titles like *Wild Life in a Southern County* and *The Amateur Poacher.* He had a great gift of evocation, and in introducing the latter book Henry Williamson was later to go so far as to call him ‘irregularly the greatest writer in English literature since Shakespeare’. He married a farmer’s daughter, and in order to be nearer his publishers went to live near London, at Surbiton. But intestinal tuberculosis, ill-diagnosed and badly treated, forced him to retire to the healthier air first of Brighton and then of Goring, where he died in 1887 after seven years of chronic pain at the age of 38. But during those years his thirsting soul drove him to write and then, when he couldn’t, to dictate a great deal more than his frail body could stand - including an autobiography on which he told his publisher that he had been meditating for seventeen years, *The Story of my Heart.* Of this book it could be said, as Walt Whitman said of one of his own, ‘This is no book. Who touches this, touches a man.’ And it is from it that most of my quotations will be taken.

But first we should never forget that Jefferies was primarily a naturalist, with a quite extraordinarily developed sense of sight. ‘He saw things’, it has been said, ‘as the sun sees them’, and he had a rare capacity to transfer this sight to paper. But he was also a seer, a visionary, able to see in things and beyond things to a world that for him streamed through them with palpable, almost painful, intensity.

At first sight he appears to be a typical nature-mystic with a strong sense of the immanence of the spiritual in the natural:

> Through every glass-blade in the thousand, thousand grasses; through the million leaves, veined and edge-cut, on bush and tree; through the song-notes and the marked feathers of the birds; through the insects’ hum and the colour of the butterflies; through the soft warm air, the flecks of clouds dissolving- I used them all for prayer.

He has an exquisite, almost excruciating, sense of the presence of what he called 'the Beyond' pressing and pulsing through earth, sky, sea, and above all through the rays of the sun.

Yet there are two things that should be noticed about Jefferies' nature-mysticism. He is no romantic townsman seeking escape in the unspoilt countryside. Some of his most mystical and poignant passages are set in the heart and throb of London itself. Leaning over the parapet of London Bridge, he writes,

> I felt the presence of the immense powers of the universe; I felt out into the depths of the ether. So intensely conscious of the sun, the sky, the limitless space, I felt too in the midst of eternity then, in the midst of the supernatural, among the immortal, and the greatness of the material realized the spirit. By these I saw my soul; by these I knew the supernatural to be more intensely real than the sun. I touched the supernatural, the immortal, there that moment.

And there is a vivid description of the scene outside the Royal Exchange as the seething surge of men, women and traffic converge, jostle and part, agitated by the 'friction of a thousand interests' and 'beaten like seaweed against the solid walls of fact'. What will be the sum and outcome, Jefferies reflects, of all this ceaseless labour and movement, the jingle and jangle of this unresolvable noise, a hundred years from now? We could revisit the scene today, with little to add to his description but the fumes of fossil-fuels equally doomed to exhaustion, and ponder the same question.

For the other thing about Jefferies' nature-mysticism is that it is entirely unsentimental. There is, he recognizes, 'nothing human in nature', nothing that cares a jot for personal values. Indeed it is anti-human. Nor is there any god in nature, nor any evidence that he can see of mind or design or benevolent purpose. In fact, if the cruelty and the 'immense misery of man' were *meant* there would be no hope of improvement. Like the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, he is forced to the conclusion that 'time and chance happen to all'. In this sense he is as sceptical as any nineteenth-century atheist.

But he refuses to leave it there. And two things will not let him rest. The first is his insatiable thirst, in what he called the 'moral drought' of the world in which we are forced to live, for the unrealized potential of human life, physical and spiritual. He has a biting piece of social criticism, describing the suppressed animosity, the concentrated hatred, of the sullen poor, to which the complacent charity of the well-to-do is blissfully insensitive. As an analysis of the coiled springs of communal violence and mindless vandalism of wife-beating and explosives sent through the post, it can still send a shudder down the spine. The way in which the poor, the imbecile and the elderly were treated was for him but part of the terrible contradiction and denial - as was his own racked and wasted frame - of what men might be, if delivered from the chain of want and disease and the treadmill of labour. Bodily perfection and the beauty of the flesh cried out to be matched by the enlargement of soul-life to which the 'open-handed generosity' and 'divine waste' of nature beckoned. Like other Victorian visionaries, and Blake before them, Jefferies burned with a passion for a different future for the human race, even for one in which physical death would be transcended. Yet he put no trust like many of them in science (the naturalist's observation, 'the ever watching eye', for him yielded far more

than contrived experiment) or progress or even evolution, a 'modern superstition', as he called it, which he vigorously denied. He had the strengths and weaknesses of the self-educated man and isolated genius. Yet one has a hunch that his hour may be at hand, to judge by such recent writings as *The Vision of Glory* by John Stewart Collis, described, as he might have been, as 'the poet among the ecologists', or even by the seeming science-fiction of books like *Supernature* and *The Secret Life of Plants.* For the dogmatism and materialism of Victorian science, which he said 'shut out the soul', are yielding as surely as are the confines of Victorian religion and theism against which Jefferies also bruised his battered spirit.

And this brings me to the second thing that would not let him rest.

I have said that he was an atheist. Yet his was no reductionist or cynical atheism. It was a passionate and positive protest. The traditional idea of God as an omnipotent being to whom to address petitions or as a directing intelligence manipulating nature and history - this man-made figure seemed to him (as later to Bonhoeffer) blasphemously inadequate to the reality which the soul touches but cannot hope to grasp. He regarded it as 'an invisible idol'. 'The mind goes on and requires more. . ., something higher than deity.' And he links this with the need to press beyond the 'three ideas' of man's inner consciousness which in the course of civilization have so far been 'wrested from the unknown' - 'the existence of the soul, immortality and deity'. These concepts are but projections by which humanity's intimations of the Beyond are given objective and substantial shape. Jefferies had no desire to go back on them. They are pointers, 'stepping stones' to a 'fourth idea', or rather to an illimitable series of ideas, 'an immense ocean over which the mind can sail, upon which the vessel of thought has not yet been launched'.

> The mind of so many thousand years has worked round and round inside the circle of these three ideas as a boat on an inland lake. Let us haul it over the belt of land, launch it on the ocean, and sail outwards.

The God of nineteenth-century theism was for Jefferies just too small. He *had* to be denied and transcended. 'By the Beyond', he wrote in the notebooks of his last pain-racked years, 'I mean the Idea of the *whole:* that would fill the sky.' It is the same vision as that of the thirteenth-century Umbrian mystic, Angela of Foligno, who influenced Teilhard de Chardin, a visionary of nature not unlike Jefferies, except of course that he gladly embraced both science and evolution. She said this.

> The eyes of my soul were opener and I beheld the plenitude of God, wherein I did comprehend the whole world, both here and beyond the sea, the abyss and the ocean and all things. In all these things I beheld naught save the divine power in a manner assuredly inscrutable, so that through excess of marvelling the soul cried with a loud voice, saying; 'The whole world is full of God.'

Jefferies would not have put it that way Yet without using God-language he wrote.

> I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all this visible universe and indefinable aspirations filled me … There was a

> deeper meaning everywhere... I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the star-hollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me. Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me.

Finally, here are some words of a man who was condemned in his time as an atheist and who, though he spoke with pathos of the voice that ceased on the cross', felt compelled to say, 'I am a pagan' because 'I think the heart and soul above crowns':

> At the mouth of the ancient cave, face to face with the unknown, the cavemen prayed. Prone in heart today I pray, Give me the deepest soul-life. . . . Not tomorrow but today. . . . Now is eternity, now I am in the midst of immortality; now the supernatural crowds around me. Open my mind, give my soul to see, let me live it now on earth.

Whether on his deathbed, as his first biographer said, 'the simple old faith came back to him' and he died a Christian is unproven and indeed improbable. He remains a man of the fields and a freethinker. What he called the 'immensity' of his 'prayer-desire' is not to be cabined or confined.

So let us leave him in his open air, with a passage that catches something of his style as well as his spirit:

> There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in the ante-historic times. The sun of the summer mornings shone on the dome of the sward, and the air came softly up from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly, it ceased, and the bees hummed by to the thyme and the heathbells. I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to the summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky. I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus; I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own. . . .
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> Look at another person while living; the soul is not visible, only the body which it animates. Therefore, merely because after death the soul is not visible is no demonstration that it does not still live. The condition of being unseen is the same condition which occurs while the body is living, so that intrinsically there is nothing exceptionable, or supernatural, in the life of the soul after death. . . . Only by the strongest effort of the mind could I understand the idea of extinction; that was supernatural, requiring a miracle; the immortality of the soul natural, like earth. Listening to the sighing of the grass I felt immortality as I felt the beauty of the summer morning, and I thought beyond immortality, of other conditions, more beautiful than existence, higher than immortality.

Like Julian of Norwich, of whom he would certainly never have heard, Richard Jefferies believed passionately in the utter naturalness of the Beyond. And like the spirit of the man in the tumulus of whom he wrote that 'it was to me really alive, and very close', surely he too, being dead, yet speaks.