'The Life of the Fields'- A talk given to The Richard Jefferies Society on February 4th, 1985. Author: Robert Albright M.A.(Oxon).

I would like to begin this paper by looking at two prose passages:

> To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.
>
> The lost leaves measure our years; they are gone as the days are gone, and the bare branches silently speak of a new year, slowly advancing to its buds, its foliage and fruit, Deciduous trees associate with human life as this yew never can. Clothed in its yellowish-green needles, its tarnished green, it knows no hope or sorrow; it is indifferent to winter, and does not look forward to summer. With their annual loss of leaves, and renewal, oak and elm and ash and beech seem to stand by us and to share our thoughts. There is no wind at the edge of the wood, and the few flakes of snow that fall from the overcast sky flutter as they drop, now one side higher and then the other, as the leaves did in the still hours of autumn. The delicacy of the outer boughs of the great trees visible against the dark background ofi cloud is as beautiful in its own way as the massed foliage of summer. Each slender bough is drawn out to a line; line follows line as shade grows under the pencil, but each of these lines is separate. Great boles of beech, heavy timber at the foot, thus end at their summits in the lightest and most elegant pencilling. Where the birches are tall, sometimes the number and closeness of these bare sprays causes a thickening almost as if there were leaves there. The leaves, in fact, when they come, conceal the finish of the trees; they give colour, but they hide the beautiful structure under them. Each tree at a distance is recognizable by its particular lines; the ash, for instance, grows with its own marked curve.'

The first passage is an extract from Chapter One of *Under The Greenwood Tree*, a novel written by Thomas Hardy when Richard Jefferies was twenty-four years old in 1872. The second passage comes from Richard Jefferies' essay, 'January in the Sussex Woods', as collected with twenty-two other essays in *The Life Of The Fields*. Does it not strike you that in both descriptions there is evidenced a common empathy with Nature which goes beyond acuteness of observation? 'Deciduous trees associate with human life.'

Both Jefferies and Hardy described the effect on the countryside and on country people of contemporary social and economic changes in the last quarter of the 19th Century; both in many ways welcomed change in so far as it coincided with improvement, and yet both were also aware of a concomitant loss of spirituality, and even humanity. As I hope to explain later, Jefferies sought to reconcile Nature and Humanity in a profound way; Hardy was to retreat into retrospection and melancholy, setting most of his novels in an era long past.

Jefferies' underlying optimism is boldly announced in 'The Pageant Of Summer':

> There is so much for us yet to come, so much to be gathered and enjoyed. Not for you or me, now, but for our race, who will ultimately use this magical secret for their happiness. Earth holds secrets enough to give them the life of the fabled Immortals. My

> heart is fixed firm and stable in the belief that ultimately the sunshine and the summer, the flowers and the azure sky shall become, as it were, interwoven into Man's existence.

And again, from 'Meadow Thoughts':

> No physical reason exists why every human being should not have sufficient, at least, of necessities. For any human being to starve, or even to be in trouble about the procuring of simple food, appears, indeed, a strange and unaccountable thing...and contrary to sense, if you do but consider a moment the enormous profusion the earth throws at our feet.

It is scarcely necessary to point out the prophetic truth in these words.

I feel that it is a mistake to regard Richard Jefferies as primarily a writer about nature. He is sometimes a writer about humanity, often about natural history, but at his best he writes about the interplay between humanity and nature, between animate and inanimate things. Consider *Amaryllis at the Fair*:

> Just where his head touched it, the wainscot had been worn away by the daily pressure, leaving a round spot. The wood was there exposed a round spot, an inch or two in diameter, being completely bare of varnish. So many nods- the attrition of thirty years and more of nodding- had gradually ground away the coat with which the painter had originally covered the wood. It even looked a little hollow-a little depressed — as if his head had scooped out a shallow crater; but this was probably an illusion, the eye being deceived by the difference in colour between the wood and the varnish around it.

May I ask you to recall this passage later when we look at visual perception and the philosophy of change in Jefferies' writings. Later, also, we will be looking at writers in another generation who may have influenced Jefferies; but before we move on let us take a final glance at Jefferies' contemporary, Thomas Hardy, and compare a last passage from *Under The Greenwood Tree* with the last reading from *Amaryllis at the Fair*:

> The window was set with thickly-leaded diamond glazing, formed, especially in the lower panes, of knotty glass of various shades of green. Nothing was better known to Fancy than the extravagant manner in which these circular knots or eyes distorted everything seen through them from the outside-lifting hats from heads, shoulders from bodies; scattering the spokes of cart-wheels, and bending the straight fir-trees into semicircles. The ceiling was carried by a beam traversing its midst, from the side of which projected a large nail, used solely and constantly as a peg for Geoffrey's hat; the nail was arched by a rainbow- shaped stain, imprinted by the rim of the said hat when it was hung there dripping wet.

It is not only the interplay between man and nature which concerns Jefferies, but their interdependence; and ultimately the absorption of the human being's independent ego into the life forces around him. In 'Notes On Landscape Painting' he writes:

> The shadow, the flowers, and the sunlight, and that which moves among them becomes of them. The solitary reaper alone in the great field goes round and round, alone with the sunlight, and the blue sky, and the distant hills; and he and his reaper are as much of the cornfield as the long- forgotten sickle or the reaping-hook.

That which moves among them becomes of them.' Jefferies perceives that the human soul is absorbed by nature, a process known to Buddhist philosophy as 'anatta'. This

> perception is essential to Jefferies as a man, as a writer and as a philosopher. Jefferies as a young man was an avid reader of the Classics and probably of Aristotle who, in the words of Samuel Coleridge, 'affirmed that all our knowledge had begun in experience, had begun through the senses, and that from the senses only could we take our notions of reality.

In the seventeenth century Spinoza had developed this doctrine to explain that the individual is engulfed in a universal oneness, 'Made one with Nature', as Shelley expressed it. This was to lead to the philosophical debate in the first quarter of the nineteenth century between the proponents of Spinoza's claim that 'All is One and One is All', supported by William Wordsworth amongst others, ~ and the disciples of Descartes' statement 'I think, therefore I am.[1] Jefferies makes scant comment in his writings as to how his thinking was influenced by these debates, or even by the literature of the Romantic Movement.

In these circumstances I think that it is fair to speculate by deduction from Jefferies' essays. I would tentatively submit that Jefferies consciously rejected the Descartian subjective interpretation of the Universe, as subsequently expounded by Jean-Paul Sartre: 'There cannot be any truth but this one: I think, therefore I am, which is the absolute truth of consciousness attaining itself.' I do not believe that Jefferies could ever have held the papamount importance of the individual in such high regard. A man who could write 'That which moves among them becomes of them' would never subscribe to such a view. If it had not been for the chronic ill health which dogged him throughout his adult life until his premature death at the age of thirty-nine, it would have been extraordinary for a writer of Jefferies[1] lively opinions and intellectual involvement in the social and economic issues of his day not to have-.enjoyed the literary society of his generation. After all, he moved to the outskirts of London in order to be nearer his publishers, and yet we have no evidence of him debating artistic, literary or social matters with his contemporaries. I am not aware of any reference in his writings to William Morris or John Ruskin. With the latter, in particular, I would have expected Jefferies to have had an empathy. Both rejected the lack of humanity of the Utilitarians' doctrines, and Ruskin was the primary champion of J.M.W. Turner who we know was much admired by Jefferies. For Ruskin and Jefferies art was an expression of the human spirit and of man's pleasure in the forms and laws of nature.

I hope that Jefferies' philosophy can be illustrated by the following passage from 'The Pageant of Summer';

> Steeped in flower and pollen to the music of bees and birds, the stream of the atmosphere became a living thing. It was life to breathe it$_f$ for the air itself was life. The strength of the earth went up through the leaves into the wind. Fed thus on the air of the Immortals, the heart opened to the width and depth of the summer -to the broad horizon afar, down to the minutest creature in the grass, up to the highest swallow. Winter shows us Matter in its dead form, like the Primary rocks, like granite and basalt-clear but cold and frozen crystal. Summer shows us Matter changing into life, sap rising from the earth through a million tubes, the alchemic power of light entering the solid oak; and see! it bursts forth in countless leaves* Living things leap in the grass, living things drift

[1] See Coleridge's poem 'In our life alone does nature live ... /I may not hope from outward forms to win/the passion and the life, whose fountains are within.'

> upon the air, living things are coming forth to breath in every hawthorn bush. No longer does the immense weight of Matter-the dead, the crystallized-press ponderously on the thinking mind. The whole office of Matter is to feed life.

There are several things in this piece which are indicative of Jefferies' ethos, being so described by Longman's dictionary as 'the universal element that informs a literary work as distinct from the subjective details of its making, from the Greek ethos, character.' The word 'Matter', used three times, is 'the universal element.' It permeates Jefferies' thinking and affects his character more profoundly than any subjective vision of the Creation: 'the air itself was life', 'Matter changing into life[1], 'the immense weight of Matter…on the thinking mind.' These phrases are reflections of Jefferies' inner and solitary contemplations.

Having accepted 'Matter' as the 'universal element', it was but a small step for Jefferies to understand that a perception of the beauty inherent in 'Matter' or 'air' or 'life' is an essential nourishment for the human spirit's profounder sensibilities. Let us look at the final lines of 'The Pageant of Summer';

> The exceeding beauty of the earth, in her splendour of life, yields a new thought with every petal. The hours when the mind is absorbed by beauty are the only hours when we really live, so that the longer we can stay among these things so much the more is snatched from inevitable Time. Let the shadow advance upon the dial-I can watch it with equanimity while it is there to be watched. It is only when the shadow is <u>not</u> there, when the clouds of winter cover it, that the dial is terrible. The invisible shadow goes on and steals from us. But now, while I can see the shadow *of* the tree and watch it slowly gliding along the surface of the grass, it is nine. 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. Does this reverie of flowers and waterfall and song form an ideal, a human ideal, in the mind? It does..'

Here we have the real Jefferies, his mind and soul exposed to posterity. For him, as for Spinoza or Wordsworth, human life is finite and should be lived intensely by the study of beautiful things so as to prevent 'the invisible shadow' stealing from us. In this way life is 'snatched from inevitable Time'. 'Hours that absorb the soul and fill it with beauty' are 'real life' and other activities of a more mundane nature are mechanical) merely an organism becoming 'a stream of the atmosphere 'the food of the Immortals.'

This inner vision of Jefferies was cultivated by solitary walks; in Coleridge's words, 'I must be alone if either my heart or imagination are to be enriched.' Jefferies received stimulation from the landscape, and he would exactly record impressions of scenery and natural objects as they greeted his eye. He was training himself in the course of working out this technique, not only to see with exactitude(something which few people, in fact, ever learn to do) but to put what he saw-shapes, lights, textures-into words. He asked himself questions which in turn obsessed Turner and the Impressionists: How do morning and evening light differ? How do we perceive direct, diffused and reflected light? To quote from the essay 'Venice in the East End': 'Open your eyes and see those things which are around us at this hour.' An example can be taken from 'Meadow Thoughts';

> The delicacy and beauty of thought and feeling is so extreme that it cannot be inked in; it is like the green and blue of field and sky, of veronica flower and grass blade, which in

> their own existence throw light and beauty on each other, but in artificial colours repel. Take the table indoors again, and the book; the thoughts and imaginings of others are vain, and of your own too deep to be written..Colour and form and light are as magic to me. It is a trance.

For Jefferies, living in High Victorian England, there was no desire to imitate the opium induced trances of Coleridge and De Quincey. And yet for him to claim that 'the thoughts of others are vain' diminishes the man and the writer. Perhaps ill health alone does not explain his social isolation. In order to illustrate Jefferies' perception of light, colour and form, we should read 'Sea, Sky And Downs':

> Three or four miles away a vessel at anchor occasionally sways, and at each movement flashes a bright gleam from her wet side like a mirror...Reflected in the plate-glass windows of the street the sea occupies the shop front, covering over the golden bracelets and jewellery with a moving picture of the silvery waves.. .misty vapours begin to thicken in the atmosphere where they had not been suspected. As the sun sinks, the wet sands are washed with a brownish yellow, the colour of ripe wheat if it could be supposed liquid... But sometimes the sunset takes other order than this...there is the most delicate shading of pearly greys and nameless silver tints, such tints as might be imagined were the clouds like feathers, the art of which is to let the under hue shine through the upper layer of the plumage...these pearl-greys and silvers, and delicate interweaving of tints are really as wonderful, being graduated and laid on with a touch no camel's hair can approach... During changeable weather the sky between the clouds occasionally takes a pale yellow hue, like that of the tinted paper used for drawing. This colour is opaque, and evidently depends upon the presence of thin vapour...The effect of mist on the sea in the dark winter days is to increase distances, so that a ship at four or five miles appears hull down, and her shadowy sails move in vapour almost as thick as the canvas...A haze lies about the Downs and softens their smooth outline...Presently the wind drifts the earth-cloud along, and there by a dark copse are three or four horsemen eagerly seeking a way through the plantation. They are two miles distant, but as plainly risible as if you could touch them. By-and-by one finds a path, and in single file the troop rides into the wood. On the other side there is a long stretch of open ploughed field, and about the middle of it little white dots close together, sweeping along as if the wind drove them. Horsemen are galloping on the turf at the edge of the arable, which is doubtless heavy going. The troop that has worked through the wood labours hard to overtake; the vapour follows again, and horsemen and hounds are lost in the abyss.

The second philosophical attachment I would like to seek in *The Life Of The Fields* is the theory of 'Anicca', or the doctrine of constant change. This states that all matter is constantly changing or decaying,(and considerably predates Einstein). By entrusting the spirit to it, the mind can attain a state of calm and awareness. Let us look at the opening words of 'Notes On Landscape Painting':

> The earth has a way of absorbing things that are placed upon it, of drawing from them their stiff individuality of newness, and throwing over them something of her own antiquity. As the furrow smoothes and brightens the share, as the mist eats away the sharpness of the iron angles, the machines sent forth to conquer the soil are conquered by it, become a part of it, and as natural as the old, old scythe and reaping-hook. Thus already the new agriculture has grown hoar.

It should be remembered that the year of Jefferies' birth, 1848, was notable for violent political upheaval across Europe. Jefferies believed firmly in social progress and political emancipation, and yet his approach was

essentially sane and balanced by a refusal to accept that all change was necessarily for the better. In referring to farmsteads in *The Life Of The Fields*, whilst commenting that 'somehow the gentle touch of time has been effaced' he says that 'you must consider that it is more healthy, sweeter, and better for those that live in it.' He then strikes a chord with those of us who abhor insensitive modernisation of old houses:

> On old houses where tiles were once, to put slates is an offence, nothing less. Every one who passes exclaims against it. Tiles tone down and become at home...Upon the whole, with the exception of the slates-the hateful slates-the farmsteads are improved, for they have lost a great deal that was uncouth and even repulsive, which was slurred over in old pictures or omitted, but which was there. The new cottages are ugly with all their ornamentation; their false gables, impossible porches, absurd windows, are distinctly repellent. They are an improvement in a sanitary sense, and we are all glad of that, but we cannot like the buildings. They are of no style or time; only one thing about them is certain-they are not English.'

Here we see a man with who combines a desire for social progress with artistic and architectural conservatism. It may be no coincidence that 1848 also witnessed the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in reaction to existing conventions in art and literature. Two years later the brotherhood launched a periodical to propagate its views: 'The Germ, Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art.' Jefferies must have been aware of this movement, but it did not motivate him into becoming a reactionary, or even into a writer who yearned for a rural idyll irretrievably lost. To continue with 'Notes on Landscape Painting':

> That there are many, very many things concerning agriculture and country life whose disappearance is to be regretted I have often pointed out, and having done so, I feel that I can with the more strength affirm that in its natural beauty the country is as lovely now as ever.

Jefferies then proceeds to savage the Victorian cult of nostalgia:

> So many pictures and so many illustrations seem to proceed upon the assumption that steam-plough and reaping-machine do not exist, that the landscape contains nothing but what it did a hundred years ago. These sketches are often beautiful, but they lack the force of truth and reality...our sympathy is not with them, "but with the things of our own time.

And yet there remains a conflict between Jefferies' moral commitment and his philosophical sympathy:

> the impression grew up that modern agriculture has polished away all the distinctive characteristics of the country. But it has not done so any more than it has removed the hills...innovations so soon become old in the fields.

And again, in what the present decade would call an ecological veil:

> The meadow-farmers have dealt mercifully with the hedges, because they know that for shade in heat and shelter in storm the cattle resort to them. The hedges...are yet there, and long may they remain. Without hedges England would not be England. Hedges,

> thick and high, and full of flowers, birds, and living creatures, of shade and flecks of sunshine dancing up and down the bark of the trees.

An examination of this statement reveals a pragmatic recognition that farmers have left hedges to protect cattle and a conservationist hope that hedges will be allowed to survive for their own intrinsic beauty and the benefits stemming from the interrelationships of the organisms involved, both with each other and with the environment as a whole. Conservation and conservatism stem etymologically from the same root.

Jefferies was intellectually and emotionally a radical, but spiritually a conservative, thus he is able to reconcile his wish for improvements in the housing and working conditions of the farm and factory labourer with a reluctance to endorse many of the changes of Victorian England. Ultimately it is his acceptance of the crushing inevitability of change, 'Anicca,' in the affairs of both the human and the natural world which brings him a form of resignation and contentment.

Jefferies' mild radicalism leads him into direct confrontation with the Victorian bourgeoisie. The *Pall Mall Gazette* may appear an unlikely forum to expound the virtues of the farm labourer at the expense of the middle classes, but here is the evidence as reproduced in the essay 'Country Literature';

> Nothing is so contrary to fact as the common opinion that the agricultural labourer and his family are stupid and unintelligent. In truth, there are none who so appreciate information; and they are quite capable of understanding anything that may be sent to them in print...But the shopkeeper-most likely a grocer or storekeeper of some kind-knows nothing of books, and will tell you, if you ask him, that he never sells any or has any orders... He does not think people read: he is occupied with moist sugar.

Apart from the deliciously malignant irony, partly attributable to Jefferies' running battle with 'respectable folk' ever since as a boy wandering in the fields he was condemned as a layabout, there is a slightly Messianic zeal. Perhaps, also, there is a touch of admiration of knowledge for its own sake rather than a preoccupation with using knowledge to work through concepts. Prom what we know about Jefferies, his eclectic reading tastes, his disinclination for profounder scholastic enquiry, his preference for rhetoric at the expense of dialectic, it is probably justifiable to draw the conclusion that this streak of pedantry goes someway to explaining his apparent lack of interest in the artistic movements of his day. Jefferies placed great store in self-acquired learning, as might be expected from his background;

> It is the peculiarity of knowledge that those who really thirst for it always get it. Books certainly came down in some way or other to Stratford-on-Avon, and the great mind that was growing there somehow found a means of reading them.

It is this lack of direct contact with the great minds of his own era which places Jefferies outside the mainstream of nineteenth century literature, and partially accounts for his lack of recognition and respectability amongst twentieth century scholars of Victorian England. And yet it is conceivable that his was a great and visionary mind which will only be recognized as

such by closer scholastic examination of his writings. His perception of the fragility of existence was certainly incompatible with a generation which admired individuals whose heroic exploits in unexplored lands seemed almost to transcend human frailties. It was never fashionable in the Occident to remind readers of the wisdom of the Orient, that human life is fleeting and, in the perspective of the universe, expendable.

An insight into Jefferies' working methods and psychology is provided in 'Country Literature'. As so often in his writings, the commentary is directed at 'the villager' who, in fact, acts as an alter ego for the author:

> The villager could not even write down what he would like to read, not yet having reached the stage when the mind turns inwards to analyse itself. If you unexpectedly put a boy with a taste for reading in a large library and leave him to himself, he is at a loss which way to turn or what to take from the shelves. He proceeds by experiment, looking at cover after cover, half pulling out one, turning over a few leaves of another, peeping into this, and so on, till something seizes his imagination, when he will sit down on the steps at once...What the villager would like can only be gathered from a variety of little indications which hint at the unconscious wishes of his mind.'

In the same way that Jefferies brilliantly projected himself into the mind of the small boys in 'Bevis' and 'Wood Magic', so is he able here to encapsulate the first literary experiences of 'a boy[1] or a villager. Intentionally, or otherwise, it also reveals Jefferies' writing methods. We know, in particular from his notebooks, that when 'at a loss which way to turn' for inspiration he 'proceeds by experiment...till something seizes his imagination'. This process unfortunately sometimes leads into some of his more uninspired and pedagogic writing. In this context pedagogic is appropriately defined as deriving from the Greek 'paidos'(child) and 'agein' (to lead). Jefferies is at his fluent best when his mind 'turns inwards to analyse itself whereby he leads us, children or otherwise, into the realms of 'the unconscious wishes of (the) mind'.

Jefferies appears to have been deeply interested in the nature of consciousness, especially in its relationship to imagination. The Romantic Movement in literature at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries felt that Classicism tended to deny expression to man's profound inner forces, and looked to direct contact with nature for inspiration. To the Romantics imagination was as real as physical objects, or as a later writer has put it 'All consciousness is consciousness of something.'(Jean-Paul Sartre). Jefferies possessed the ability to shut off his conscious stream of thought from his immediate surroundings:

> At my back, within the gallery, there is many a canvas painted under Italian skies, in glowing Spain, in bright Southern .France. There are scenes lit with the light that gleams on orange grove and myrtle; there are faces tinted with the golden hue that floats in southern air. But yet, if any one impartial will stand here outside, under the portico, and forgetting that it is prosaic London, will look at the summer enclosed within the square, and acknowledge it for itself as it is, he must admit that the view-light and colour, tone and shade-is equal to the painted canvas, is full, as it were, to the brim of interest, suggestion and delight. Before the painted canvas you stand with prepared mind you have come to see Italy, you are educated to find colour, and the poetry of tone. Therefore you see it, if it is there.'(Sunlight in a London Square).

This state of mind is echoed in Sartre's 1943 book *Being and Nothingness*. 'Consciousness can only exist as involved in the being which surrounds it on all sides and which paralyses it with its phantom presence.' For Jefferies 'the being which surrounds (him)on all sides', the natural world, is the source material for his flashes of insight. In this way he might be described as the first Post Romantic writer. If this is true, it does not stem from a conscious artistic association by Jefferies. He defied categorisation. Nevertheless, I believe that he does stand in not just a historical, but in a literary position between the zenith of the English Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century and the European Existentialist Movement of the twentieth century.lt should be noted, however, that the leading precursor of existentialism, the Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard, was born in 1813 and died in 1855,seven years , into Jefferies lifetime. You may wish to consider how Jefferies would have responded to this passage from 'Being and Nothingness':

> The pen and the pipe, the clothing, the desk, the house-are myself. The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have. It is I myself which I touch on this cup, on this trinket. This mountain which I climb is myself to the extent that I conquer it; and when I am at its summit, which I have 'gained' at the cost of this effort, when I gain this magnificent view of the valley and the surrounding peaks, then I <u>am</u> the view; the panorama is myself dilated to the horizon, for it exists only through me, only for me.

Perhaps a passage from "The Pageant of Summer'may give a clue to his response:

> I seem as if I could feel all the glowing life the sunshine gives and the south wind calls to being. The endless grass, the endless leaves, the Immense strength of the oak expanding, the unalloyed Joy of finch and blackbird; from all of them I receive a little. Each gives me something of the pure joy they gather for themselves.

'From all of them I receive a little.' Jefferies, like Sartre is equating possession with being. This applies equally to the abstract, 'the unalloyed joy of finch and blackbird' and 'this magnificent view of the valley,' as it does to 'the pen', 'the pipe' and 'the desk'. It is unfortunate that on this, as on other occasions, Jefferies misses the opportunity to think through his material to a yet profounder insight. Consider the essay 'Pigeons at The British Museum':

> Stayed and checked by the dome and book-built walls, the beams lose their elasticity, and the ripple ceases in the motionless pool. The eyes, responding, forget to turn quickly, and only partially see. Deeper thought and inspiration quit the heart, for they can only exist where the light vibrates and communicates its tone to the soul. If any imagine they will find thought in many books, certainly they will be disappointed.

Then, for a moment the anti-intellectualism subsides, only to return in a wonderfully poetic piece of writing:

> There is rest in gazing at the sky a sense that wisdom does exist and may be found, a hope returns that was taken away among the books...(The pigeons) have not laboured in

> mental searching as we have; they have not wasted their time looking among empty straw for the grain that is not there. They have been in the sunlight. Since the days of ancient Greece the doves have remained in the sunshine we who have laboured have found nothing. In the sunshine, by the shady verge of woods, by the sweet waters where the wild dove sips, there alone will thought be found.

Now it is perfectly valid for Jefferies to claim that there is wisdom to be found in the processes of nature, and in the interrelationship of man and nature. But in the very act of so saying, Jefferies is subconsciously acknowledging his debt to the great thinkers and writers of previous generations whose ideas permeate the literature which Jefferies studied. His references to 'ancient Greece' in the passage above and to Euclid in the next passage indicate that he really acknowledges this; and yet from 'The Plainest City in Europe' you will see that the prejudice against formal training of the mind and senses persists:

> Reduced to the simplest elements the street architecture of Paris consists of two parallel lines, which to the eye appear to gradually converge. In sunshine and shade the sides of the street approach in an unvarying ratio; a cloud goes over, and the lines do not soften; brilliant light succeeds, and is merely light - no effect accompanies it. The architecture conquers, and is always architecture; it resists the sun, the air, the rain, being without expression. The geometry of the street can never be forgotten. Moving along it you have merely advanced so far along a perspective, between the two line which tutors rule to teach drawing...This is what has been done to Paris. It is made straight; it is idealized after Euclid.

Another reference from the same essay shows that Jefferies' study of art was not restricted to the principles of Classical architecture or the paintings of the Italian Renaissance:

> Weary of the gigantic monotony of the gigantic houses, exactly alike, your eye shall not catch a glimpse of some distant cloud rising like a snowy mountain(as Japanese artists show the top of Fusiyama).

I think we can conclude on this theme by saying that Jefferies probably felt that he could draw out an inner response from his surroundings, particularly from the natural world, but unlike the existentialists he did not believe that his personality could in any significant way be superimposed on his surroundings. It would be marvellous to discover a lost manuscript of his which described his domestic environment and his response to it as this description from 'Being and Nothingness':

> The object possessed is inserted by me into the total form of my environment; its existence is determined by my situation and by its integration into this situation. My lamp is not only that electric bulb, that shade, that wrought-iron stand; it is a certain power of lighting this desk, these books, this table; it is a certain luminous nuance of my work at night, connected with my habits of reading or writing late; it is animated, coloured, defined by the use which I make of it; it is that use and exists only through it. If isolated from my desk, from my work, and placed in a lot of objects on the floor of a salesroom, my lamp is radically extinguished; it is no longer my lamp, instead merely a member of the class of lamps. It has returned to its original matter.

In the essay 'A Roman Brook' there is a description which echoes a predeliction found elsewhere in Jefferies' writings: a feeling that certain places can only best be appreciated by the author himself:

> The brook has forgotten me, but I have not forgotten the brook. Many faces have been mirrored since in the flowing water, many feet have waded in the sandy shallow. I wonder if anyone else can see it in a picture before the eyes as I can, bright, and vivid as trees suddenly shown at night by a great flash of lightning. All the leaves and branches and birds at roost are visible during the flash. It is barely a second; it seems much longer. Memory, like the lightning, reveals the picture in the mind.'

He then goes on:

> The branches were in bloom every where...They did not grow for human admiration: that was not their purpose; that is our affair only-we bring the thought to the tree. On a short branch low down the trunk there hung the weather-beaten and broken handle of an earthenware vessel: the old man said it was a jug, one of the old folks' jugs-he often dug them up...These fragments were the remains of Anglo-Roman pottery...The old man, seeing my interest in the fragments of pottery, wished to show me something of a different kind lately discovered. He led me to a spot where the brook was deep, and had somewhat undermined the edge. A horse trying to drink there had pushed a quantity of earth into the stream, and exposed a human skeleton lying within a few inches of the water...By the side of the living water, the water that all things rejoiced in, near to its gentle sound and the sparkle of sunshine on it, had lain this sorrowful thing.'

Jefferies acknowledges that the brook has forgotten him, that the growth of natural things follows on and is dependent on the decay of natural things; and yet he recoils at the revelation of human mortality. This reminds me of a story in Kafka where a merchant comes to plead his case at the castle where a terrifying guard bars the entrance.The merchant does not dare to go further. He waits and dies still waiting.At the hour of his death he asks the guard: 'How does it happen that I was the only one waiting?' And the guard replies: 'This gate was made only for you.'

Well if each man makes for himself his own gate, Jefferies was no exception to the rule. And yet,in the words of Alexander, speaking of Ajax in Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida': 'He is melancholy without cause'.

It is an acknowledgment of the human spirit to perceive one's attributes as well as one's failings. Jefferies' singular power of description stemmed from his visual awareness; this facility is recognized in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew, Chapter 6,Verse 22: ' The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.'

To witness, nay to celebrate the passage of time upon things human and natural is no cause for melancholia. Let us look at two other parts of 'Troilus and Cressida'. Both verses are spoken by Ulysses, an appropriate echo of the timeless Homer:

> For time is like a fashionable host,
> That slightly shakes his parting guest by the hand,
> And with his arms outstretch'd, as he would fly,
> Grasps in the comer: welcome ever smiles,
> And farewell goes out sighing. O! let not virtue seek
> Remuneration for the thing it was;
> For beauty, wit,

High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,
Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time.
One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,
That all with one consent praise new-born gawds,
Though they are made and moulded of things past,
And give to dust that is a little gilt
More laud than gilt o'er-dusted.'
And finally, in the decisive Ulyssian mould:
'The end crowns all,
And that old common arbitrator, Time,
Will one day end it.'

In reflecting on contemporary social upheaval, what he called 'the dynamite disposition', Jefferies was not so much horrified by the economic as by the moral disturbance resulting:

> This hay, or wheat, or barley, not only represents money; it represents the work of an entire year, the sunshine of a whole summer it is the outcome of man's thought and patient labour...It is a blow at his moral existence as well as at his pecuniary interests. Hardened indeed must be that heart that could lock at the old familiar scene, blackened, fire-spilt, trodden, and blotted, without an inward desolation. Boxes and barrels of merchandise in warehouses can be replaced, but money does not replace the growth of nature.

There follows in this essay 'The Field-Play' a passage which so closely records our own times that the parallels need not be drawn explicitly:

> There is none but that bitter, bitter feeling which I venture to call the dynamite disposition, and which is found in every part of the civilized world; in Germany, Italy, France, and our own mildly ruled England. A brooding, morose, concentrated hatred of those who possess any kind of substance or comfort; landlord, farmer, every one. An unsparing vendetta, a merciless shark-like thirst of destructive vengeance; a monomania of battering, smashing, crushing, such as seizes the Lancashire weaver, who kicks his woman's brains out without any special reason for dislike, mingled with and made more terrible by this unchangeable hostility to property and those who own it. No creed, no high moral hopes of the rights of man and social regeneration, no true 'sans culottism' even, nothing at all but set teeth and inflated nostrils; blow up,burn,smash,annihilate! A disposition or character which is not imaginary but a fact as proved abundantly by the placing of rails and iron chains on lines to upset trains, by the dynamite explosions at Government offices, railway stations, and even at newspaper offices, the sending of letters filled with explosives...Science is always putting fresh power into the hands of this class. If anyone thinks that there is no danger in England because there are no deep-seated causes of discontent, such as foreign rule, oppressive enactments, or conscription I can assure him that he is woefully mistaken. This class needs no cause at all; prosperity cannot allay its hatred, and adversity does not weaken it...How are you going to arrest people who blow themselves into atoms in order to shatter the frame of a Czar?

Jefferies is right to diagnose the terrorist as suffering from 'monomania', for such a person has irretrievably lost the discriminative power to place his particular obsession in a social or historical perspective. Despite the terrorist's avowals of personal sacrifice being insignificant in the historical context of his creed, in fact his actions deny society the right to fix his mania within the confines of a time. For the terrorist the only important time is 'now', and thus he must be confounded; for either he will be overcome by the equally insistent and immediate force of society's reaction

to his misdeeds, or he will find that his cause, in victory, lays claim to historical determinism, making his individual contribution of violent acts an irrelevance of the time and place.

The rule of law and the relative importance of the individual's deeds in the context of time are expressed by Shakespeare in 'Troilus and Cressida' and in 'The Rape of Lucrece':

> There is a law in each well order'd nation
> To curb those raging appetites that are
> Most disobedient and refractory.'
> 'Time's glory is to calm contending Icings,
> To unmask falsehood and bring truth to light,
> To stamp the seal of time In aged things,
> To wake the morn and sentinel the night,
> To wrong the wronger till he render right,
> To ruinate proud buildings with thy hours,
> And smear with dust their glittering golden tower;
> 'To fill with worm-holes stately monuments,
> To feed oblivion with decay of things,
> To blot old books and alter their contents,
> To pluck the quills from ancient ravens' wings,
> To dry the old oak's sap and cherish springs,
> To spoil antiquities of hammer'd steel,
> And turn the giddy round of Fortune's wheel;
> 'To show the beldam daughters of her daughter,
> To make the child a man, the man a child,
> To slay the tiger that doth live by slaughter,
> To tame the unicorn and lion wild,
> To mock the subtle, in themselves beguil'd,
> To cheer the ploughman with increaseful crops,
> And waste huge stones with little water drops.

It was well for Coleridge to call this man 'myriad-minded.' On the evidence of *The Life of the Fields*, would he have applied the same epithet to Richard Jefferies? I believe that I have cited some material to demonstrate that this is the case, and that further critical appraisal might yet 'turn the giddy round of Fortune's wheel', that of his literary reputation. The essays in the book show, perhaps, that he would be viewed generally in a brighter light if he had been able, either by self discipline or, better, by inner conviction to mock less 'the subtle, in themselves beguil'd'. His finest moral and, in my opinion, literary attribute was to perceive that Nature's course is 'To dry the old oak's sap and cherish springs.' It only seems that he needed the philosophical reassurance that material things are not the less material though the poet has recognized their inborn decay. The strength of philosophical reflection is less 'To feed oblivion with decay of things' than, as in 'Much Ado About Nothing', 'to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief'.

Jefferies in no fashion suffered from a crisis of his own identity; he did, however, look for a fixedness of identity in things material which does not exist and for which there should be no desire to seek. Let me leave the final words to the author, from his story 'The Legend of a Gateway':

A great beech tree with a white mark some way up the trunk stood in the mound by a gate which opened into a lane. Strangers coming down the lane in the dusk often hesitated before they approached this beech. The white mark looked like a ghostly figure emerging from the dark hedge and the shadow of the tree. The trunk itself was of the same hue at that hour as the bushes, so that the whiteness seemed to stand out unsupported. So perfect was the illusion that even those who knew the spot well, walking or riding past and not thinking about it, started as it suddenly came into . sight. Ploughboys used to throw flints at it, AS IF THE SOUND OF THE STONE STRIKING THE TREE ASSURED THEM THAT IT WAS REALLY MATERIAL.