RICHARD JEFFERIES AND THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

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In the last ten years of his life, from 1877 to 1887, Richard Jefferies published nearly twenty books and a host of uncollected essays. It is the purpose of this paper to maintain that what he wrote in those years constitutes a major body of Victorian literature and that his work is of particular importance to the social historian of Victorian Britain.

These are high claims, and contrast strangely with the popular idea of Jefferies as the man who wrote one good book for boys and a lot of bad books about birds. Where this view is inadequate is in its disregard of the comprehensiveness of Jefferies' understanding of the English countryside. His quite extraordinary breadth of vision is most strikingly observed when we try to place his work in the various traditions of country writing, to relate him, for example, to Gilbert White or to Cobbett or to Mary Russell Mitford or to Whyte-Melville or to Wordsworth and the other Romantic poets. This attempt constitutes the first part of my paper: in general the point I try to make is that he was a master of virtually every way of writing about the country that was available to him in his own time. I show also that he anticipates many of the ways that have been developed since his death.

In conclusion, I shall try to illustrate the originality of Jefferies' work, with particular reference to the fundamental criticism of Victorian society which he undertakes in *The Story of My Heart.* I suggest that his insight into the natural world and his passionate but precisely directed indignation at the unnatural life of modem industrial man recall a similar combination of the visionary and the revolutionary in William Blake.

I

The facts of Jefferies' life are few and easily told. He was born in 1848 at Coate, near Swindon in Wiltshire. His father was a small dairy farmer, poor and progressively poorer, at odds with his wife and critical of his son. Like many of the greatest writers of the century, Jefferies had little formal education. He read a lot and walked a lot. In 1865 he began working for a local newspaper, and continued as a journalist in the West Country until 1877. By this time he had married, published a few novels, which were not successful in any way, and acquired some reputation as a writer on country matters. He moved to Surbiton, near London, and wrote for London magazines until his death. He was not strong, and after a serious illness in 1882 lived in continual pain. He and his family moved to various places in the Home Counties to benefit his health. He died of consumption in 1887 and is buried in Broadwater Cemetery at Worthing in Sussex.[1]

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[1] The best account of Jefferies' life is *Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields* by Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous (London, 1965). Jefferies' most important works are as follows:

(a) NOVELS. *The Scarlet Shawl* (1874); *Restless Human Hearts* (1875); *World's End* (1877); *Greene Ferne Farm* (1880); *Wood Magic: A Fable* (1881); *Bevis: The Story of a Boy* (1882); *The Dewy Mom* (1884); *After London: Or, Wild England* (1885); *Amaryllis at the Fair [AATFJ* (1887).

(b) OTHER WRITINGS. *The Gamekeeper at Home; Or Sketches of Natural History and Rural Life [GAH]* (1878); *Wild Life in a Southern County* [WLIASC]; *The Amateur Poacher* [AP] (1879); *Hodge and His Masters [HAHM], Round About a Great Estate* [RAAGE] (1880); *Nature Near London [NNL], The Story of my Heart: My Autobiography [SOMH]* (1883); Red *Deer, The Life of the Fields [LOTF]* (1884); *The Open Air IOA]* (1885). Posthumous collections of essays include: *Field and Hedgerow: Being the Last Essays [FAH]* (1889); *The Toilers of the Field [TOTF]* (1892); *The Hills and the Vale* (1909); *The Old House at Coate* [*OHAC*] (1948). *The Nature Diaries and Notebooks* (1948) are edited by Samuel J. Looker. The abbreviated titles used in this article are shown in square brackets. The best full-length books on Jefferies are Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* (London, 1909), and W. J. Keith's critical study *Richard Jefferies* (Toronto, 1965). Both books have extremely useful bibliographies.

These biographical details are well known, and would hardly be worth repeating were it not that they reflect so exactly the general pattern of life about which Jefferies was writing. As an Englishman, born to a country heritage, but forced by the need to make a living to go to the town and, once there, to strive in a variety of ways to recapture what he had lost by leaving the countryside, Jefferies mirrored in his own life the situation of millions of other Englishmen who had been forced into urban life by the Industrial Revolution. We have in his writings an invaluable presentation of what the countryside and the loss of the countryside meant to the Victorian town-dweller, that is, to the majority of the population of Victorian England. In addition, Jefferies showed a singularly clear understanding of what part the countryside ought to play in the full life of modern man.

It is plain then that Jefferies was more than a mere naturalist, in the sense that natural observation was never to him an end in itself. It is also true that as he grew older he was cut off by circumstances from all but a small part of English country life. Nevertheless, the basis and fountain-head of all his best writing about the country is field observation in the tradition of the great English amateur naturalists. This is a tradition which can be traced at least as far back as the Restoration, but which flourished particularly in the eighteenth century. We need look no further than the correspondence of Thomas Gray to see how meticulously the Augustan man of letters was prepared to record simple natural details. In this tradition the greatest name is Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* was published in 1789. When Jefferies' country books first appeared they were immediately compared with White's major work, and the comparison is not unjust. Jefferies is less concerned than White with the great cycles of natural life, such as migration, so that he is not so conscientious in noticing *when* things happen, nor is he especially interested in noting the differences of date between one season and another. His attention is mainly given to the presentation of a particular place at a given moment of time. His essays often in fact begin with such a description — vivid, selective, and with the peculiar gift of the great nature-writers of making the scene three-dimensional. He chooses his detail with such subtlety that at his characteristic best there is no sense at all that he is sitting down to compose a picture. He is rendering a scene in depth and filling it with air, with warmth, with sunlight, using the bare accurate detail to create a living, stirring atmosphere. His is an art based, like White's, on observation, but with this difference, that with White what is strongest is the sense of accurately recorded fact, that is, a *past* thing; with Jefferies it is the sense of an accurately apprehended impression, that is, a *present* experience, process rather than product.

But there are other differences. Towards the end of his life Jefferies wrote a Preface to White's *Selborne,* in which the following celebrated passage occurs:

> If the great observer had put down what he saw of the people of his day just as he has put down his notes of animals and birds, there would have been a book composed of extraordinary interest. Walking about among the cottagers, he saw and heard all their curious ways, and must have been familiar with their superstitions. . . . He knew the farmers and the squires; he had access everywhere and he had the quickest of eyes. It must ever be regretted that he did not leave a natural history of the people of his day. We should then have had a picture of England just before the beginning of our present era, and a wonderful difference it would have shown.[2]

Much of Jefferies' work is devoted to precisely this land of observation of country people, to simple detailed portraits of their everyday lives. Here he brings together two traditions — that of the character-sketch of the typical rustic, like those of Miss Mitford in *Our Village (*1824-32) or *Belford Regis* (1835), and that of the duller but more solidly-based historical or memorial work — a serious antiquarian attempt to record country habits, speech, manners, and traditions before they pass away, the sort of work that is associated with William and Mary Botham Howitt.

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[2] See also Jefferies' rough draft for *The Heart of England,* which eventually became *Hodge and His Masters* (Looker and Porteous, Appendix I, p. 236).

An example of Jefferies' method may be taken from his first important publication, a letter he wrote to *The Times* in 1872 on the condition of the Wiltshire farm labourer, which was reprinted in *The Toilers of the Field:*

> As a man, he is usually strongly built, broad-shouldered, and massive in frame, but his appearance is spoilt by the clumsiness of his walk and the want of grace in his movements. Though quite as large in muscle, it is very doubtful if he possesses the strength of the seamen who may be seen lounging about the ports. There is a want of firmness, a certain disjointed style, about his limbs, and the muscles themselves have not the hardness and tension of the sailor's. The labourer's muscle is that of the cart-horse, his motions lumbering and slow. His style of walk is caused by following the plough in early childhood, when the weak limbs find it a hard labour to pull the heavy nailed boots from the thick clay soil. Ever afterwards he walks as if it were an exertion to lift his legs.

Some of Jefferies' best work is of this kind; when he is writing about people rather than about plants and animals, his work has a particular relevance and interest today. Now it may be objected that what he writes in this way loses some part of its value to us because it is not placed on a firm statistical or antiquarian basis of established fact, that while rustic character-sketches are all very well they depend on an admixture of the imagination and thus cannot be of service to the historian. This seems to me to rest on too narrow a view of what the historian is doing. If the *end* of the historian's task, the *object* which unifies all his separate activities, is the creative activity of envisaging what he was like in his chosen period, then works of imaginative literature are uniquely capable of helping him to do this. We can go to Blue Books and White Papers to find out the average wages of a working countryman, but we need to go to someone like Jefferies to discover what it was really like to *be* a man working for and living on those wages.

Part of the fascination of trying to describe Jefferies' approach to writing about country matters is the protean variety of his work. We naturally consider him as an imaginative writer, but it is at once necessary to qualify this and insist that he is quite unlike most other imaginative writers about the countryside. In *Hodge and His Masters,* for example, he writes seriously and acutely about the condition of agriculture in general, with especial attention to the crucial years at the end of the 1870s. The book is, I am assured by those well placed to judge, an invaluable work for the economist and social historian. In many of Jefferies' other works, especially *The Toilers of the Field,* we feel a similar practical quality, an interest in the economics of farming, an automatic calculation of profit and loss, of the viability of a certain way of using land. This places him firmly in another vigorous tradition of English country writing, that of Cobbett. To point to a connection between the burly, forthright, aggressive Radical and the languid, introspective Jefferies may appear simply an act of academic wilfulness, but there are deep underlying similarities. They were both conscious of the countryside as the site of an enormous industry, as one of the places where bitter hard work is turned into wealth, and this gives their writing on the country an unremitting grip on fact. They were both conscious that a great change in the national life had affected their chosen industry and each in his own way was profoundly disturbed by the change. Cobbett's intemperate denunciations of the Wen are one reaction; Jefferies' continual attempts to reconcile economic necessities and human needs are another, and a subtler, response.

Cobbett was, of course, not an imaginative writer, but a journalist, taking pride in the accuracy of his work. Jefferies made similar claims for his own fidelity to his subject. In the essay called 'One of the New Voters' *(OA)* he has some interesting observations to make on his practice. 'This, remember, is not a fancy sketch of rural poetry; this is the reaper's real existence,' he writes. And again, 'I am simply describing the realities of rural life behind the scenes.'[3] The essay ends: 'Behind these beautiful

[3] Similar claims are fairly common in Jefferies; for example, 'This is no fiction, but an uncompromising picture of things as they are' ('John Smith's Shanty,' *TOTF).*

aspects [of the wheatfields] comes the reality of human labour — hours upon hours of heat and strain; there comes the reality of a rude life, and in the end little enough of gain. The wheat is beautiful, but human life is labour.' As he is aware of the financial basis of farming so he is aware of the great burden of the farmworker's labour and the meagreness of his reward. If Jefferies sometimes seems too much of the 'dandy-naturalist' in his dispassionate criticism of country ways, the balance is more than redressed by passages such as these:

> It is known that the old Bank has often paid twenty and twenty-five per cent. To its shareholders. Where does all this money come from? From Hodge, toiling in the field and earning his Livelihood in the sweat of his brow? . . . Somehow or other the money that pays for this courtesy and commercial knowledge, for these magnificent premises and furniture, that pays the shareholders twenty-five per cent., must be drawn from the green meadows, the cornfields, and the hills where the sheep feed.
>
> (HAHM, II, ch. iii, 'The Bank')

> Here was the wheat, the beauty of which I strive in vain to tell you, in the midst of the flowery summer, scourging them with the knot of necessity; that which should give life pulling the life out of them, rendering their existence below that of the cattle, so far as the pleasure of living goes. Without doubt many a low mound in the churchyard — once visible, now level — was the sooner raised over the nameless dead because of that terrible strain in the few weeks of the gold fever. This is human life, real human life — no rest, no calm enjoyment of the scene, no generous gift of food and wine lavishly offered by the gods — the hard fist of necessity for ever battering man to a shapeless and hopeless fall.
>
> ('Walks in the Wheat-fields,' FAH)

> If a man's work that he has done all the days of his life could be collected and piled up around him in visible shape, what a vast mound there would be beside some! If each act or stroke was represented, say by a brick, John Brown would have stood the day before his ending by the side of a monument as high as a pyramid. Then if in front of him could be placed the sum and product of his labour, the profit to himself, he could have held it in his clenched hand like a nut, and no one would have seen it.
>
> ('My Old Village,' FAH)

Jefferies then rightly claims our consideration as an economist and as a realist, but as soon as we try to limit him to those categories difficulties arise; for his method is not that of the economist but that of the artist. I should like to illustrate Jefferies' right to be regarded simultaneously as a realist and as an imaginative writer, at the same time making it clear that what I have to say here applies to all his writing. He is very rarely simply a recorder. He gives us a scene, fully realized, and then charges it with life and emotion by a strategy which is of absorbing interest.

Many of his best essays are built up on the following pattern. First, an opening paragraph describing the appearance of a specific place, depending for its effect on particularity of observation and conveying very strongly the atmosphere and the feeling of the scene. Then, a shift from the immediate experience, perhaps to a consideration of the people whose way of life has shaped, or is shaped by, this sort of country, perhaps to a consideration of the scene in terms of Jefferies' own life. Very often in the concluding paragraphs the argument shifts from general terms into a particular image, while the language is heightened. This is very subtly done: Jefferies doesn't, for example, use more unusual words or more 'poetic' words or simply indulge in fine writing. What he does is, in the language of the cinema, to 'cut' more often and more abruptly and secure his effects by an ironic juxtaposition of images. At the same time he slightly modifies his earlier rigid objectivity, showing by a word or two where his own sympathies *lie* and allowing the reader to infer that his emotions are deeply engaged. The writing becomes tauter, sentences are more tightly braced, the individual words carry a heavier charge, and the essay ends abruptly, leaving a tension between the level discourse of the main body of the piece and the heightened language of the end.

An excellent example of this technique is that remarkable eighth chapter of *Hodge and His Masters* called 'Haymaking. The Juke's Country.' It begins with a straightforward description of the difficulties of a farmer who has gone over to large

scale milk production for the towns. Jefferies points out that the price of cheese varies with the prosperity of the iron trade, and generally builds his narrative on the basis of an economic understanding of a farmer's life. Then, in a way characteristic of his style, he abruptly shifts to an apparently unrelated account of the Duke's country, of the beneficial effects of hunting ('all are agreed that hunting really does improve the breed of horses'), and of the happy relations between the Duke and his people: *'Noblesse oblige* — it would be impossible for that ancient house to stoop to meanness.' The chapter finishes with a spirited account of the local agricultural show. A party headed by a marchioness has come over from the Duke's 'mansion' to present an award to the labourers who have remained longest in the service of one master. A very old farmworker is helped forward.

> The old man is frosted with age, and moves stiffly, like a piece of mechanism rather than a living creature, nor is there any expression — neither smile nor interest — upon his absolutely immobile features. . . . There is a small clear space in the middle of the well-dressed throng. There he stands, and for a moment the hum is hushed.
>
> For sixty years that old man laboured upon one farm; sixty years of ploughing and sowing, sixty harvests. . . . He puts forth his arm; his dry, horny fingers are crooked, and he can neither straighten nor bend them. Not the least sign appears upon his countenance that he is even conscious of what is passing. There is a quick flash of jewelled rings ungloved to the light, and the reward is placed in that claw-like grasp by the white hand of the marchioness.

Everything that has gone before is dominated by this single brilliantly focused image of the white jewelled hand of the noblewoman suddenly brought into contact with the work-crippled hand of the old labourer. What Jefferies has said about the Duke must be modified to take account of what working in 'the Duke's country' has done to this man. This technique is used throughout *Hodge.* A passage of argument in which Jefferies seems to be putting a rather narrow case for the tenant farmer and to be curiously blind to the case for the farm labourer is again and again qualified by a telling final picture, often in the last paragraph, in which instinctive imaginative sympathy for the farm worker balances the earlier prosaic arguments. In exactly the same way the drift of the whole book is controlled by the last chapter, that on the workhouse and the death of Hodge.

> The end came very slowly; he ceased to exist by imperceptible degrees, like an oak-tree. He remained for days in a semi-unconscious state, neither moving nor speaking. It happened at last. In the grey of the winter dawn, as the stars paled and the whitened grass was stiff with hoar frost, and the rime coated every branch of the tall elms, as the milker came from the pen and the young plough-boy whistled down the road to his work, the spirit of the aged man departed.
>
> What amount of production did that old man's life of labour represent? What value must be put upon the service of the son that fought in India; of the son that worked in Australia; of the daughter in New Zealand, whose children will help to build up a new nation? These things surely have their value. Hodge died, and the very grave-digger grumbled as he delved through the earth hard-bound in the iron frost, for it jarred his hand and might break his spade. The low mound will soon be level, and the place of his burial shall not be known.

It is largely through his skilful use of this device that Jefferies is able to unite in a single work a realistic appreciation of the hard facts of a situation and a penetrating human sympathy.

II

This is an unusual combination of gifts, but to it Jefferies adds —an 'even more' remarkable quality, his intuition of the deeper significances of the natural world. To many readers he is known only as the author of *The Story of My Heart,* the book in which he tries to explain the exaltation and the enlargement which he derives from the 'inner subtle meaning' of the natural universe. I shall point out later on that *The Story of My Heart* is a less subjective book than it appears at first reading: at present it will stand as the most celebrated example of Jefferies' mysticism, and the work that gives him his place in one of the greatest traditions of English nature-writing, that which

reaches its culmination in the poetry of Wordsworth. Wordsworth did so much to establish and control the nineteenth-century attitude to Nature that it is, I think, worth making some effort to show how far he affected Jefferies. Deliberately oversimplifying, one may say that Wordsworth, like the seventeenth-century mystics Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne, found in the works of Nature a source of wonder, of admiration and overpowering awe, which makes the reason seem puny and irrelevant. The marvellous thus induces a new faculty of the mind, hid) in turn is able to perceive truths about the universe and man's place in the universe. To Vaughan and Traherne this meant, essentially, understanding man's relation to God. To Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* it meant, briefly, the intuition that man was himself part of the spirit of the universe:

> a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

This mystical sense of the oneness of the creation became for many people a kind of religion, which invested every tract of natural scenery with a dreadful holiness.[4] Jefferies was at one with Wordsworth in that he found that his mystical experiences were most readily induced by contemplation of the hills, the sky and the stars, the sea and the sun. In the first chapter of *The Story of My Heart* he writes,

> Having drunk deeply of the heaven above and felt the most glorious beauty of the day, and remembering the old, old sea, which (as it seemed to me) was but just yonder at the edge, I now became lost, and absorbed in the being or existence of the universe. I felt down deep into the earth under, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole. . . .
>
> Under the shapely rounded elms, by the hawthorn bushes and hazel, everywhere the same deep desire for soul-nature; to have from all green things and from .the-sunlight the inner meaning which was not known to them, that I might be full of light as the woods of the sun's rays.[5]

He begins, that is to say, by accepting the Wordsworthian tradition and celebrating a kind of transcendent knowledge to which the natural world is the key. But he is very far indeed from accepting the consolations of Wordsworth's pantheism. What he sees when he contemplates nature with the fullest resources of his being is the uniqueness of man in a world which is uniformly indifferent to man's fate. For example:

> There is nothing human in nature. The earth, though loved so dearly, would let me perish on the ground, and neither bring forth food nor water. Burning in the sky the great sun, of whose company I have been so fond, would merely burn on and make no motion to assist me. Those who have been in an open boat at sea without water have proved the mercies of the sun, and of the deity who did not give them one drop of rain, dying in misery under the same rays that smile so beautifully on the flowers. ... As for the sea, it offers us salt water which we cannot drink. The trees care nothing for us; the hill I visited so often in days gone by has not missed me. The sun scorches man. and will in his naked state roast him alive. The sea and the fresh water alike make no effort to uphold him if his vessel founders; he casts up his arms in vain, they come to their level over his head, filling the post his body occupied. If he falls from a cliff the air parts; the earth beneath dashes him to pieces. . . .
>
> There is nothing human in the whole round of nature. 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. If

[4] Cf. Aldous Huxley, On *the Margin* (New York, 1923): 'With the disintegration of the solid orthodoxies Wordsworth became for many intelligent liberal-minded families the Bible of that sort of pantheism, that dim faith in the existence of a spiritual world, which filled, somewhat inadequately, the place of the older dogmas. Brought up as children in the Wordsworthian tradition, we were taught to believe that a Sunday walk among the hills was somehow equivalent to churchgoing: the First Lesson was to be read among the clouds, the second in the primroses; the birds and the running waters sang hymns, and the whole blue landscape preached a sermon 'of moral evil and of good'.

[5] Cf. Also the last chapter of *SOMH*, and *OHAC,* ch. vi, particularly p. 60, where the Wordsworthian parallel is especially notable.

> the entire human race perished at this hour, what difference would it make to the earth? What would the earth care? . . .
>
> There being nothing human in nature or the universe, and all things being ultra-human and without design, shape, or purpose, I conclude that no deity has anything to do with nature. There is no god in nature, nor in any matter anywhere, either in the clods on the earth or in the composition of the stars.[6]

I have dwelt at some length on this point because Jefferies often emphasised his realism, and I want it to be quite clear that his claim to paint things as they are must not be taken to mean that, obsessed with superficial detail, he was unable to 'see into the life of things.'

If the comparison with Wordsworth leads us to think of Jefferies' view of nature as essentially poetic we must recognize also that his treatment of the countryside has much in common with that of certain Victorian novelists, who were aware of rural England as a place with its own simple emotions, the more powerful because they *are* simple, and as the scene of inevitable tragedies. Jefferies in some of his vignettes such as 'The Field-Play' *(LOTF),* which recalls Turgenev's *Sketches of a Sportsman* (1855), and in his late novel, *Amaryllis at the Fair,* catches excellently, if fleetingly, this sense of the countryside as a tragic theatre.[7] In *Hodge and His Masters* also he shows how clearly he has realized that rural tragedy is not always a swift and spectacular matter: 'No man drinks the bitter cup of poverty to the dregs like the declining farmer. The descent is so slow; there is time to drain every drop, and to linger over the flavour' (Vol. I, ch. iv). But in exploring the slow tortures of country life Jefferies must yield to George Eliot, and to the great novelist in whose territory he was born. The comparison between Jefferies and Hardy is a fascinating one, and full of the ironies that delighted both of them. Jefferies himself is not without his resemblance to Hardy's heroes, especially, perhaps, Jude. He derived his strength from the country but had to pass his adult life in towns; he worshipped physical perfection but was himself struck down in his youth by two overpowering diseases; he celebrated the prodigality and lavishness of nature but spent most of his life in crushing poverty.[8] His whole career was what his older contemporary would have called a Satire of Circumstance.

Yet even here his variousness is to be observed. There was in the nineteenth century another group of country novelists who, far from seeing rural England as the brooding background to the cruel tricks of destiny, considered it simply as providing the finest recreation in the world. Thus it is that if we look to the novel for our picture of Victorian country life we find many of our most revealing glimpses in the work of minor practitioners such as Surtees and Whyte-Melville, men to whom the country districts of England were clearly designed by a sporting Providence. While Jefferies cannot match their boisterous good humour, nor their concern with the proprieties of the field, some of his most spirited writing is about the exhilaration of country sports. He has a number of vivid passages on hunting and some memorable accounts of the pleasures of fishing, but shooting is clearly his real delight. The happiest picture that we have of Jefferies is of him strolling through the Wiltshire of his youth with a gun, and perhaps a dog. He writes about shooting with an insight, a technical knowledge, an aesthetic appreciation, and a sheer physical enjoyment which put him in a class by himself.

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[6] *SOMH,* ch. iv. Cf. 'Nothing ever shows the least consideration for human creatures' (*AATF*); 'The sea is the sea and will not love you again' *(Notebooks,* p. 289); 'Nature sets no value upon life, neither of mine nor of the larks that sang years ago. The earth is all in all to me, but I am nothing to the earth: it is bitter to know this before you are dead' ('Hours of Spring,' *FAH*). Cf. also *SOMH,* ch. iv, and *OHAC*, ch. vii, 'Absence of Design in Nature.'

[7] Jefferies' novels, especially *The Dewy Mom* and *Amaryllis at the Fair,* show the same strengths as his essays. W. J. Keith gives a good account of them in chs. v and vi of his book. See also Q. D. Leavis, 'Lives and Works of Richard Jefferies,' *Scrutiny,* VI (1938), 435-446; and J.W. Blench, 'The Novels of Richard Jefferies,' *Cambridge Journal,* VII (1954), 361-377.

[8] It seems surprising that such a prolific and indeed popular author as Jefferies should have been poor all his life. No doubt the cost of medical treatment explains this in part, but the chief reason seems to be the extraordinarily low rates at which he was paid for his writing. Nearly one hundred articles for the *Livestock Journal* brought him in less than two hundred guineas; he had £100 in all for *GAH*, £150 for *WLIASC,* £300 for *HAI1M,* £9.7.0 for three pieces in *Pall Mall,* and so on (Looker and Porteous, pp. 105, 115, 117, 128). Jefferies commented, 'An author lives by a miracle as he is not paid enough to get food' *(Diaries and Notebooks,* p. 164).

What is especially attractive about Jefferies' writings of this kind is the breadth of his sympathies. He has, for example, a good word to say for poachers. Even in *The Gamekeeper at Home* he details their activities with precision but without censure. They are there, they act in a certain way, which is natural, and therefore he describes them as they are, relishing their resourcefulness and the way they apply their knowledge of the countryside, as he would relish the ingenuity of a bird in search of food. *The Amateur Poacher* is a finely balanced book: in it Jefferies writes as a poor man who learns about the ways of animals not from a detached scientific curiosity but because he needs to shoot or trap them. Thus he records their habits minutely from two points of view: partly as a sensitive observer, himself keenly aware of the aesthetic significance of the smallest detail, partly as a practical poacher, to whom observation of these same details is useful because it makes it easier to catch birds and animals. One might suppose then that Jefferies accepted uncritically the claim that man has a right to kill or trap any wild creature, but this is not so. The whole intricate movement of *The Amateur Poacher* depends on a delayed revelation of the range of the writer's sympathies. At first he uses the natural cycle of the countryside — not the peaceful pattern of the seasons and the crops, but the older cycle of the predator and the victim. As he views this with a deliberately unsentimental regard, he might at this point be thought callous or insensitive. Yet it appears in time that he knows perfectly well what he is about. The scope of this paper does not allow me to quote the magnificent description at the end of chapter six of the great shoot in the park, an episode which shows Jefferies at his superlative best,[9] but some idea of his approach may be had from the following passages later in the book. In the first he describes a labourer who has a keen enjoyment of ferreting:

> It was always a sight to see Little John's keen delight in 'wristing' their necks. He affected utter unconsciousness of what he was doing, looked you in the face, and spoke about some indifferent subject. But all the while he was feeling the rabbit's muscles stretch before the terrible grasp of his hands, and an expression of complacent satisfaction flirted over his features as the neck gave with a sudden looseness, and in a moment what had been a living straining creature became limp. (ch. xi)

Jefferies offers no word of censure, just the bare, deadly description.

Again at the end of the book he describes an October afternoon on which he stalked a pheasant and came within fifteen yards of it. He aims at the bird's head: 'My finger felt the trigger, and the least increase of pressure would have been fatal; but in the act I hesitated, dropped the barrel, and watched the beautiful bird' (ch. xii). He goes on to generalize this experience and concludes that his love of stalking wild creatures is deeper than the pleasure of killing them.

'Destruction in itself was not the motive; it was an overpowering instinct for woods and fields.' 'Yet,' he adds with characteristic honesty, 'woods and fields lose half their interest without a gun —I like the power to shoot, even though I may not use it.'

Thus, although we must, I think, grant Jefferies his place in the great tradition of English sporting writers, we must also recognize that his interest in sport and his understanding of the manifold impulses that make a man go out shooting are deeper than we normally encounter. His feeling for the animals who are killed by the sportsman seems to me an essentially modern one, humane without being sentimental.[10] Here, as he often does elsewhere, he anticipates later attitudes; indeed it is hardly possible to think of a way of writing about the countryside in the present day of which Jefferies was not already the master nearly a hundred years ago. For example, his essay 'Nature on the Roof' (*OA*) looks forward in a remarkable way to George Ordish's *The Living House (*1960) (cf. also *WLIASC,* especially ch. x). 'George Bourne'

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[9] With the account of the pheasant shooting in *AP* compare *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1892), ch. xli, where Tess discovers the pheasants which the guns have maimed but not killed. Hardy uses our instinctive sympathy for the 'poor darlings' to intensify our feelings for Tess, whereas Jefferies uses our revulsion at the battue to make himself into a more humane *persona* and therefore a more persuasive teacher.

[10] Cf. his account of otter hunting in 'By the Exe' (*LOTF*) and his essay, 'A London Trout' (*NNL*). This essay about a trout which manages to survive in a London stream but is eventually detected and hunted brings Jefferies' own life and fate to mind with almost unbearable force, but he refuses, as always, to exploit the pathos of the situation.

(George Sturt), whose sketches of country life have been much admired, is very close to Jefferies in his approach and choice of subject, and seems to me distinctly inferior in point of intelligence and grasp. Even those books from which many Englishmen first learn about country matters have their forerunners, for there is very little in Arthur Ransome which Jefferies had not already put into *Bevis,* nor had he much to learn from Baden Powell about Woodcraft for Boys.[11]

There are, of course, a few ways of writing about Nature which Jefferies did *not* explore. C. Henry Warren has given an entertaining example of the habit of Victorian nature writers of producing scraps of botanical lore with the express purpose of using them as tiny texts on which to hang heavy moral sermons.[12] This is not Jefferies' way. Again, he is never coy or sentimental in the manner of the whimsical journalist who patronizes natural life, nor is he ever to be found making animals human, either in the eminently sympathetic way of Henry Williamson, as in *Tarka the Otter (*1927) or *The Peregrine's Saga (*1923), or in the far less acceptable way of Sheila Burnford's *The Incredible Journey* (1961). This helps Jefferies to avoid some excesses: it also means that he lies quite out of the world of the fashionable best-seller, such as Joy Adamson's *Born Free (*1960), or Rowena Farre's *Seal Morning* (1962), or Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), in which the central point is the intimate knowledge of a single animal by a human. Although these books soon pall, they represent a distinct *genre* of natural writing, and one which, as I say, Jefferies does not attempt.

Again he does not show his readers the life of the tramp, or that of the gipsies and tinkers, which we find so graphically captured in, say, George Borrow on the one hand or in W. H. Davies on the other. He does describe characters, such as the Moucher in *The Amateur Poacher,* who live precariously out of doors, but he does not seriously explore the idea that the country is or should be a refuge for Outsiders, for those who have torn up their contract with society and cut loose from the routine of paying one's way and having a place in the world. Nature to Jefferies, it is fair to observe, was respectable English nature, and even in England he is much more familiar with the Southern counties than with the rest. He does not, and this is the final point I have to make under this heading, write about the wilder aspects of natural life. The very titles of his books make this clear — *The Gamekeeper at Home, Wild Life in a Southern County, Nature near London, Field and Hedgerow,* and so on. They breathe the spirit of peaceful rural observation which is at the root of his work. He never offers us the mountains, the moors, the wastes of ice, the great deserts or the equally barren seas, nor does he show us the elements at their fiercest. To that extent his picture of Nature is selective and therefore incomplete. But within his range he is the complete master.[13]

III

Of his many gifts, two remain to be described. These I have left until last because they seem to me to be of particular importance, and because they are, I believe, the qualities which determine the place he is to be given in the literature of his country. First, I want to say a word about Jefferies' place in the literature of nostalgia which nowadays takes up so much of the country bookshelf. In its typical form it is reminiscent gossip about a country childhood, given shape and point by a more or less explicit sense of regret for a vanished way of life. It varies in quality from the banal and superficial to the fully realized evocations of North Oxfordshire life that we find in Flora Thompson. Those who

[11] Another example of Jefferies' powers of anticipation is his novel, *After London,* which is partly satirical, looking forward to the methods of *1984.* In non-literary matters his gifts verge on the prophetic. For instance, he states quite positively that flight is possible and that the problems of flight will be overcome (see especially *OH AC,* ch. ix), and that road transport will eventually be more important than rail. His *Notebooks* show his mind envisaging the 'ultimate conflict of U.S. and Asia' (p. 113), and a sort of regular opinion poll (p. 96). His admirers claim also that he anticipated the splitting of the atom and the insights of Jungian psychology. All this makes him sound rather like a Victorian Nostradamus, but it is in fact an indication of how actively and inventively his mind played on the present. Perhaps the most pointed comparison is with Anthony Trollope's one science fiction novel, *The Fixed Period,* set in 1980, in which the most daring flights of the imagination are a steam tricycle and a cricket match with sixteen players on each side.

[12] In his most useful Introduction to *OA* (London, 1948).

[13] Jefferies is well able to withstand any criticism that his scope is unduly limited. Indeed he suffers more by comparison with those writers whose range is even narrower but who achieve within that compass a single faultless book. Sarah Orne Jewett is the obvious example.

write about the country in this engaging way are rightly very popular. It is tempting to claim Jefferies as a member of the club, since he constantly used his memories of his childhood and youth as material for his art, and he was conscious of living in a world of violent and irreversible change. Inevitably there are times when he writes as a memorialist, preserving the traditions of an age fast disappearing, and times when he permits himself an elegiac tone. But the interesting thing about Jefferies is the resoluteness with which he sets his face against the practice of bemoaning the present in order to emphasize one's regret for the past. In a most striking essay called 'Notes on Landscape Painting' (*LOTF*) he rejects the argument that the countryside has become less picturesque since the introduction of modem methods and machinery. His rejoinder is firm: 'Intrinsically there is nothing used in modern agriculture less symmetrical than what was previously employed.' When at the end of the same essay he considers the implications of this for the artist, he is equally forthright, and what he says is relevant not only to the art of the painter but to his own practice in writing:

> 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.
>
> It is, I venture to think, a mistake on the part of some who depict country scenes on canvas that they omit these modem aspects, doubtless under the impression that to admit them would impair the pastoral scene intended to be conveyed. 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. . . . Why omit fifty years from the picture? That is what it usually means — fifty years left out; and somehow we feel as we gaze that these fields and these skies are not of our day. The actual fields, the actual machines, the actual men and women (how differently dressed to the conventional pictorial costumes!) would prepare the mind to see and appreciate the colouring, the design, the beauty — what, for lack of a better expression, may be called the soul of the picture — far more than forgotten, and nowadays even impossible accessories. For our sympathy is not with them, but with the things of our own time.

Jefferies continued to hold this view of painting until the end of his life:

> Turner painted the railway train and made it at once ideal, poetical, and classical. His 'Rain, Steam, and Speed,' which displays a modern subject, is a most wonderful picture. If a man chose his hour rightly, the steam-plough under certain atmospheric conditions would give him as good a subject as a Great Western train. He who has got the sense of beauty in his eye can find it in things as they really are, and needs no stagey time of artificial pastorals to furnish him with a sham nature. Idealise to the full, but idealise the real, else the picture is a sham.[14]
>
> ('Walks in the Wheat-fields,' *FAH)*

Jefferies lived at a time when the whole of Britain was convulsed by immense changes. He had to spend many years of his life on the fringes of London, where town and country were locked in uneasy conflict. He said himself, 'There is little indeed in the more immediate suburbs of London to gratify the sense of the beautiful' (*SOMH,* ch. v). Yet even this unhappy experience did not make him wish to return to the past. For example, one of his essays, entitled 'Outside London,' (*OA*) concludes:

> As the Edwards and Henries breathed it [the air] centuries since, so it can be inhaled now. The sun that shone on the red deer is as bright now as then; the berries are thick on the bushes; there is colour in the leaf. The forest is gone; but the spirit of nature stays, and can be found by those who search for it. Dearly as I love the mediaeval days, I do not wish them back again; I would sooner fight in the foremost ranks of Time. Nor do we need them, for the spirit of nature stays, and will always be here, no matter to how high a pinnacle of thought the human mind may attain; still the sweet air, and the hills, and the sea, and the sun, will always be with us.

[14] For further quotations to the same effect see Looker and Porteous, pp. 144-147. Cf. also, 'You cannot get away from the coarseness, the cornucopia of life. It is made up of cheese and bacon, butter, tea and sugar, candles, salt and pepper, mustard, vinegar and paraffin, knife polish, rice and jam, marmalade, soups, soda, starch and blue, eggs, lard, currants and pickles, meat, fish, potatoes' (*Notebooks,* pp. 207-208).

This quotation leads to the heart of the argument, for the obvious comment on an account such as I have given of the different traditions which Jefferies shared is, 'Yes, this is all very well. But when the average reader thinks of the nineteenth-century response in literature to the English countryside the names that come at once to mind are not those of Cobbett or Surtees or Miss Mitford. They are those of the great English Romantic poets — Wordsworth at his homeliest, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, and Arnold — even Clare and, perhaps, Crabbe. How does Jefferies accept or modify the tradition of writing about Nature which they so wonderfully initiated?' We cannot answer this question fully without considering the whole body of his thought about the problem of the right way of life for modern man.[15]

Certain technical resemblances are obvious enough: like the Romantic poets Jefferies based his art on immediacy and particularity of observation. In the matter of plainness of diction also Jefferies may claim to be working in the spirit of Wordsworth. The reader is occasionally brought up short by an archaism or a slightly mannered turn of phrase, but on the whole Jefferies writes a model of the neutral English style. A comparison with writers of more studied artistry, even with one so accomplished as Max Beerbohm, shows in an instant the enduring simplicity of Jefferies' English.[16] Finally his ability to project his own personality into the conclusion of an essay, directing and controlling our responses to the whole, completes his resemblance to the Romantic poets in matters of technique.

These technical similarities however seem to me far less important and interesting than the way in which Jefferies departs radically from the Romantic tradition when he considers the whole question of the relation of town and country life. It is a commonplace to say that one dominant strand in English Romanticism was the idea of the countryside as a place of refuge from the town. Thus, as a corollary to their enthusiastic worship of Nature, the Romantic poets joined in an almost universal denigration of town life. 'Hell is a city much like London.' wrote Shelley in *Peter Bell the Third.* In *A Letter to Maria Gisborne* he added:

> London, that great sea, whose ebb and flow
> At once is deaf and loud, and on the shore
> Vomits its wrecks and still howls on for more.

The castigation of the City as the symbol of 'this strange disease of modern life' is reflected in the general reluctance of the poets of the nineteenth century to write about their own times or to set their poems in cities. Why the poets should, almost to a man, turn their backs on Victorian Britain while the novelists, again almost to a man, chose to write about the world they and their readers were living in is to my mind the most fascinating literary question of the century, but I have no space to deal with it here.

We cannot go to Jefferies' writings about life in the City and come away with any such simple verdict. Sometimes he seems very close to the Romantic poets: 'The dust of London fills the eyes and blurs the vision; but it penetrates deeper than that. There is a dust that chokes the spirit, and it is this that makes the streets so

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[15] This is perhaps the place to explain that I have throughout this paper treated Jefferies as an entity. Strictly speaking this is not a legitimate procedure, but it is in practice unavoidable, since the bulk of Jefferies' work consists of short essays purporting to give the writer's own opinions on a number of related topics. The most that one can do by way of discrimination is to suggest tentatively that in his early works Jefferies was more closely controlled by observed fact and by conventional economic theory, but that as he grew older he was increasingly concerned with the inner significance of his observations and increasingly influenced by a conviction that orthodox economic doctrine, reasonable though it sounded, must be wrong, and that an economics of superfluity must be possible. But these two phases of thought — the early and the late — cannot be completely separated, and in any case his work spans only a few years: I therefore use 'Jefferies' to stand for a single body of work.

[16] *The Notebooks* (p. 159) give Jefferies' rules for writing, as follows: *'(1)* Simplicity — Directness. (2) What I see, that only. (3) Eye Memory. (4) Extreme delicacy of touch, outline. (5) Extreme delicacy of shade, graduation.' These precepts Jefferies observes fairly closely. The only sign of contrivance in his writing is seen when he displays his gift for aphorism. This is most obvious, as one would expect, in the *Notebooks,* which abound in stoical or cynical observations. Elsewhere, Jefferies seems to me to be indisputably one of the few masters of the English plain style in the nineteenth century. Even Jane Austen and Thackeray seem a little theatrical in comparison with the effortless clarity of Jefferies' prose: his strength is in his ability to achieve a scrupulous exactness of statement without the least taint of self-consciousness.

stony, the desk so wooden; the very rustiness of the iron railings about the offices sets the teeth on edge, the sooty blackened walls (yet without shadow) thrust back the sympathies which are ever trying to cling to the inanimate things around us' ('To Brighton,' *NNL*). Yet in the same essay he shows that he sees the changing relationship of town and country as a process which must be accepted: 'There were towns, of course, seventy years ago, but even the towns were penetrated with what, for want of a better word, may be called country sentiment. Just the reverse is now the case; the most distant hamlet which the wanderer in his autumn ramblings may visit, is now more or less permeated with the feelings and sentiment of the city.' London of course was to Jefferies *the City,* the final achievement of modem man: 'In a provincial city, even in Paris, you still have an *arrière pensée* that there is something beyond, a place where more of man may yet be seen; that you have not yet seen all; some mystery of life remains unexplored. But, in London, you know that you can go no farther: all the voyages of Ulysses could show no more: this is the World.' London is thus the ultimate in urban life. At the same time its vastness makes it seem like one of the great places of the natural world — 'this immense city is really a great country in itself. … I can always dream in London because of its immensity. There is no end on either hand the absence of limit lets the imagination roam. The same thing happens by the sea, or on the hill-top, or at night when the stars guide the mind into space but only mark its beginning. I am made to feel myself by the vastness of the place' (Looker and Porteous, pp. 183, 184).

While Jefferies is prepared to concede that the City is one of the marvels of the world and to accept it as an essential part of the modern scene, he is always concerned to maintain that man has certain vital needs which cannot be satisfied by what he calls 'house-life,' or life spent indoors. His main objection to city life is thus not its ugliness or its loneliness but its incompleteness. To be whole man must turn to nature.[17] And although Jefferies was aware that he was living at a time of fundamental change, he consistently refused, as we have seen, to escape from the present into the past ('I would sooner fight in the foremost ranks of Time'), and never desired to return to simpler times when the city was less dominant and the countryside more important. While he was always convinced that life in the country had its own special qualities which the world could not afford to lose, he did not include among those qualities the opportunity' it gives a man to contract out of urban civilization.[18] He rejects, that is to say, the naive Romantic assumption that a primary value of the country lies in its remoteness. The idea that the man of sensibility, being by definition unable to live in a large community of men, should take refuge in, say, the Lake District, is one that Jefferies never accepts. He refuses to simplify the problem in this way. As a realist he sees that it would be misguided to reject urban civilization entirely and to celebrate country life as a state of idyllic pastoral serenity. Quite simply he knows too much about it to idealize it.

His attitude to town and country is thus much more complex than that of the Romantic poets and requires a multiple approach to mirror it faithfully; hence the amazing number of ways of regarding the countryside which I have catalogued. His own manysidedness instructs us in the kind of comprehensive response that is appropriate.

IV

It is only by experiencing the diversity of his works, each one displaying a different facet of the problem and suggesting a different answer, that we can fully appreciate the remarkable richness of Jefferies' presentation. He resists a simple abstraction of ideas,

[17] Cf. also the last paragraph of Jefferies' Preface to *NNL.* Jefferies intended to write a book about London, but apparently his editors felt that it would not be to the taste of the time. S. J. Looker's collection of Jefferies' essays on London themes, *Richard Jefferies' London,* appeared in 1944. Incidentally, Jefferies' description of sunrise from London Bridge *(SOMH,* ch. v) is one of the few great pieces of Victorian writing about the urban scene. Members of the Victorian Society, and others interested in nineteenth-century architecture, will enjoy Jefferies' comments on the roof supports at London Bridge station ('A Wet Night in London,' *OA*).

[18] It is here that Jefferies' differences from Thoreau are most apparent. He agreed with Thoreau that man had made labour into an intolerable burden, but he does not try to show that man can learn from nature to live as independently of his kind as a nest-building bird. On the contrary he feels that what men have to learn from nature is how to live together more generously and abundantly.

just as a poet does. But to conclude this study it seems necessary to try to indicate, however crudely, his favourite lines of speculation. He begins from fairly obvious premises as follows. The Industrial Revolution and its consequences are irreversible.[19] We can neither alter what has been done nor stop the processes of change which are already in motion. When we look about us we can see the obvious immediate material benefits of industrialization. They have spread to town and country alike. But what we can and must do is ask ourselves the *purpose* of these gigantic changes. What is our goal? His answer is quite firm:

> Machinery is not the end of man: these times are bent almost too much on swift progress from place to place; and it is without doubt useful, but it is not all. (*OHAC*.ch.v).

> Mechanism increases convenience — in no degree does it confer physical or moral perfection. The rudimentary engines employed thousands of years ago in raising buildings were in that respect equal to the complicated machines of the present day. Control of iron and steel has not altered or improved the bodily man. . . . Our bodies are now conveyed all round the world with ease, but obtain no advantage. As they start so they return. (*SOMH,* ch. ii)

His writings on the Industrial Revolution and what came in its train are of a sort that we can now recognize to be completely relevant. Every great movement of the human race brings losses as well as gains, and the most serious losses are those which pass unnoticed at the time and are discovered only when it is too late. We attach therefore special value to the men, whether they are artists or preachers or politicians, who in the middle of the flux of things and the universal rejoicing at the advance of humanity are able to stand fast for a moment and consider what direction the march of Progress is taking. Their task is not to try to avert the world that is entering into being or to secure a personal retreat from it, but to scrutinize it and ask, 'Are you sure that all those gains are *real* gains?' or 'Are we not in danger of *losing* this good thing?' Ultimately they are the men who ask 'What is the *end* of material progress?'

They did not abound in Victorian Britain. Perhaps we should now be living in a better world if there had been more of them: One thinks at once of Mill, of Arnold, of Ruskin, of Morris,[20] and then it is no longer easy to produce other names. I suggest that Jefferies, with a different approach, has the same concern and the same clarity of perception.

Initially what he asks is this: 'Assuming that we cannot just put the clock back and *abolish* town life and a national economy based on town life (and indeed would not wish to do so), how can we ensure that modern urban man does not entirely forego the peculiar benefits which rural living has to offer?'

Part of Jefferies' answer is fairly straightforward, and is to be found in all his writings — his fear that we should lose 'the ancient simplicity and plainness of country life.' His presentation of the positive values of country life in contrast to the new ways of the town is, as I have said, especially cogent and complete. But it is when he goes beyond this rather obvious concern that his ideas take on an exceptional interest. I mentioned earlier that his deepest mystical insights assured him that Nature was ultimately indifferent to Man. This conclusion moves Jefferies to an intense humanism, pessimistic in that it does not suppose any grand design to which the whole creation moves, optimistic in that Jefferies affirms that man's destiny is in his own power if he can learn to shape it:

> After the sensuous enjoyment always came the thought, the desire: that I might be like this; that I might have the inner meaning of the sun, the light, the earth, the trees and grass, translated into some growth of excellence in myself, both of body and of mind; greater perfection of physique, greater perfection of mind and soul; that I might be higher in myself. (*SOMH,* ch. v)

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[19] Cf. *Notebook* (May-June 1887), 'You cannot go back to Nature. How could the millions of London return to the fields?' (p. 279) 'Why pity the millions of London — why wish to interfere? They are a great deal happier than they could be in the fields' (p. 282).

[20] Morris, we are told, praised *After London* highly (Looker and Porteous, p. 149).

> The bitter truth that human life is no more to the universe than that of the unnoticed hill-snail in the grass should make us think more and more highly of ourselves as human — as men — living things that think. We must look to ourselves to help ourselves. We must think ourselves into an earthly immortality. By day and by night, by years and by centuries, still striving, studying, searching to find that which shall enable us to live a fuller life upon the earth — to have a wider grasp upon its violets and loveliness, a deeper draught of the sweet-briar wind. Because my heart beats feebly today, my trickling pulse scarcely notating the passing of the time, so much the more do I hope that those to come in future years may see wider and enjoy fuller than I have done; and so much the more gladly would I do all that I could to enlarge the life that shall be then. ('Hours of Spring,' *FAH*)

Man must ultimately learn from Nature to organize his own life on a natural pattern. Now the fundamental pattern of Nature is abundance, whereas the pattern of modern industrial life is grudging and niggardly, and is moreover tied to the need for perpetual labour:

> If you left it [your work] a minute it would all be gone; it does not mount up and make a store, so that all of you could sit by it and be happy. Directly you leave off you are hungry, and thirsty, and miserable like the beggars that tramp along the dusty road here. All the thousand years of labour since this field was first ploughed have not stored up anything for you. ('Saint Guido,' *OA*)

> But it [life] is more sternly real than the very stones, for all these men and women that pass through are driven on by the push of accumulated circumstances; they cannot stay, they must go, their necks are in the slave's ring, they are beaten like seaweed against the solid walls of fact. . . . Where will be these millions of today in a hundred years? But, further than that let us ask, Where then will be the sum and outcome of their labour? If they wither away like summer grass, will not at least a result be left which those of a hundred years hence may be the better for? No, not one jot! There will not be any sum or outcome or result of this ceaseless labour and movement; it vanishes in the moment that it is done, and in a hundred years nothing will be there, for nothing is there now. There will be no more sum or result than accumulates from the motion of a revolving cowl on a housetop. Nor do they receive any more sunshine during their lives, for they are unconscious of the sun. *(SOMH,* ch. vi)

Nature is on the other hand prodigal:

> There is no *enough* in nature. It is one vast prodigality. It is a feast. There is no economy: it is all one immense extravagance. It is all giving, giving, giving: no saving, no penury; a golden shower of good things is for ever descending. I love beyond all things to contemplate this indescribable lavishness — I would it could be introduced into our human life. I know, none better, having gone through the personal experience myself, that it is at the present moment impossible to practise it: that each individual is compelled, in order to exist, to labour, to save, and to economize. . . . This alone I am certain of: there is no economy, thrift, or saving in nature; it is one splendid waste. It is that waste which makes it so beautiful, and so irresistible! (*OHAC,* ch. viii)

In the last paragraph of the same chapter he summarizes his argument by saying, 'Thrift and economy and accumulation, therefore, represent a state of things contrary to the exemplar of nature, and in individual life they destroy its beauty.'

This contrast between thrift and abundance is paralleled by the contrast between 'house-life' and the life of nature:

> This is all — there is nothing more — is the iterated preaching of house-life. Remain; be content; go round and round in one barren path, a little money, a little food and sleep, some ancient fables, old age and death. Of all the inventions of casuistry with which man for ages has in various ways manacled himself, and stayed his own advance, there is none equally potent with the supposition that nothing more is possible.
>
> I want to be always in company with these, with earth, and sun, and sea, and stars by night. The pettiness of house-life — chairs and tables — and the pettiness of observances, the petty necessity of useless labour, useless because productive of nothing, chafe me the year through. I want to be always in company with the sun, and sea, and earth. These, and the stars by night, are my natural companions. (*SOMH*, chs.vi.vii)

If this is the only way for a man to achieve his full stature, what is to become of the objects for which the whole of modern life is at present organized? Jefferies' answer is simple and forthright: 'We live — that is, we snatch an existence — and our works become nothing. The piling up of fortunes, the building of cities, the establishment of immense commerce, ends in a cipher. These objects are so outside my idea that I cannot understand them, and look upon the struggle in amazement. Not even the pressure of poverty can force upon me an understanding of, and sympathy with these things. It is the human being as the human being of whom I think' *(SOMH,* ch. vii). Thus 'house-life,' or the life spent indoors, is identified with an industrial Britain and the hard headed Liberal economics of supply and demand. Its guiding principle is a sense of human limitations. Nature on the other hand stands for what is truly liberal and bountiful; from Nature we learn to think in terms of limitless human potentiality and growth.[21]

Jefferies then, like Blake, was moved by his visionary insights into Nature to desire a fundamental change in society, and, again like Blake, did not feel obliged to say precisely by what mechanism this change was to be brought about. 'The only idea I can give is the idea that there is another idea' (*SOMH*, ch. viii). One of Jefferies' main aims was to convince his readers that the assumptions and the consequences of current economic doctrines were intolerable, for if this is granted then an alternative must be found. For example, we can no longer accept with equanimity a world in which millions of people are starving if we realize that there is plenty of food and concede that everybody has a right to it. The fault must lie with our systems of production, distribution, and exchange. 'It is a fact, a very stubborn fact, that there is more than enough food in the world for all its human children' (*OHAC,* p. 70). Once again one hears echoes of Cobbett's mighty voice. And Jefferies, who hated the very name of Communism, often writes with a true Radical fervour:

> This our earth this day produces sufficient for our existence. This our earth produces not only a sufficiency, but a superabundance, and pours a cornucopia of good things down upon us. . . . Why, then, have we not enough? Why do people die of starvation, or lead a miserable existence on the verge of it? Why have millions upon millions to toil from morning to evening just to gain a mere crust of bread? Because of the absolute lack of organisation by which such labour should produce its effect, the absolute lack of distribution, the absolute lack even of the very idea that such things are possible. Nay, even to mention such things, to say that they are possible, is criminal with many. Madness could hardly go farther.
>
> That any human being should dare to apply to another the epithet 'pauper' is, to me, the greatest, the vilest, the most unpardonable crime that could be committed. Each human being, by mere birth, has a birthright in this earth and all its productions; and if they do not receive it, then it is they who are injured, and it is not the 'pauper' — oh, inexpressibly wicked word! — it is the well-to-do, who are the criminal classes. It matters not in the least if the poor be improvident, or drunken, or evil in any way. Food and drink, roof and clothes, are the inalienable right of every child born into the light. If the world does not provide it freely — not as a grudging gift but as a right, as a son of the house sits down to breakfast — then is the world mad. (*SOMH,* ch. x)

Thus it is the plenitude, of nature which inspires Jefferies to his vision of the potentialities of man and hence to his radical critique of contemporary civilization, a critique which is all the more devastating because he is not nostalgically yearning to put back the calendar to some Merrier Tyme but is genuinely trying to move mankind forward.

Since Jefferies succeeded in his later novels in presenting social ideas with great power through the medium of fiction, it is reasonable to ask why he chose for *The Story of My Heart* the confessional form which has deterred or distressed many readers. The

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[21] For Jefferies on 'sun-life' or 'soul-life' see the early draft of *SOMH* quoted in Looker and Porteous (p. 110). For Jefferies' ideas of the Life Force see *OHAC,* ch. V. The terms themselves are necessarily vague, but not deliberately so. Jefferies is really trying to convey almost inexpressible ideas, not to conceal woolliness of thought behind a high-sounding name. One witness of this is the persistent earnestness of his attempts to translate his vision into a series of hard and vivid physical images.

answer, I think, is that he felt the importance of his theme so strongly that he considered himself bound to establish his own credentials for handling it. These are simply that he has for many years devoted his most intense moments of perception to considering the nature of man and that he is himself sufficiently 'large-souled' to be qualified to speak on matters of such magnitude. The book then is to depend, as a novel does not, on the personal authority of the writer. To allow the reader to judge whether or not to acknowledge this authority, Jefferies unflinchingly describes without shame or conceit, without dramatization or sentimentality, how he has come to be the man he is, the intensity of the language suggesting the intensity of his experiences of the world. But this intimate history, although integral to the whole design, is not Jefferies' main purpose, for *The Story of My Heart* is a book about politics — how men ought to live, what alternatives can be found or imagined to the desperate Victorian struggle for advancement. In the century of Samuel Smiles it was no small achievement to write:

> I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle. I hope that nine-tenths of their time will be leisure time; 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. I will work towards that end with all my heart. If employment they must have — and the restlessness of the mind will insure that some will be followed — then they will find scope enough in the perfection of their physical frames, in the expansion of the mind, and in the enlargement of the soul. They shall not work for bread, but for their souls. (*SOMH*, ch. xi)

Then Jefferies, who was born to poverty, lived in want, and died in penury, added, 'I am willing to divide and share all I shall ever have for this purpose.'

This largeness of spirit in Jefferies is his most abundant gift. He has not all the attributes of a major author, but he has one quality of greatness without which the others are trivial and lifeless, an unfailingly elevated idea of the potentialities of man. Thus his simple natural observations are penetrated with his vision of the world and his vision is given life and power by his intense love of man, until at last Jefferies speaks not as a naturalist but as a prophet.

He was a prophet also in that he looked to the future rather than to the past. But even more he looked to the present. How can we find, he asks, 'something to give each separate personality sunshine and a flower in its own existence now; something to shape this million-handed labour to an end and outcome that will leave more sunshine and more flowers to those who must succeed? Something real now, and not in the spirit-land; in this hour now, as I stand and the sun burns' (*SOMH,* ch. vi). Although the well-being of succeeding generations must always be in our minds, each man must live from day to day, and faces a choice of ways of living which he defers at his peril: 'They [men] think that when they have toiled, and worked a long time, almost all their lives, then they will come to the flowers, and the birds, and be joyful in the sunshine. But no, it will not be so, for then they will be old themselves, and their ears dull, and their eyes dim, so that the birds will sound a great distance off, and the flowers will not seem bright' ('Saint Guido,' *OA).*

What Jefferies gained from his patient study and long contemplation of Nature was the gift of taking a detached view of his own age; he was able to remove himself from the narrow round of ambition and material progress and to think deeply about the passage of the human race through the unchanging natural forces. He had a tremendous sense of ecological *balance* and he was wise enough to see that humanity could exist only in a state of balance. Hence he was able to question the values of the dynamic society which many of his contemporaries considered the true state of mankind. He saw, moreover, a more intimate flaw in the system, that the individual man was being impoverished by his lack of contact with the natural world. 'As a few strokes from a loving hand will soothe a weary forehead, so the gentle pressure of the wild grass soothes and strokes away the nervous tension born of civilized life.'[22]

[22] 'Outside London,' *OA.* Some of Jefferies' more perceptive critics recognized that his books were able to supply a deficiency in modern life: 'It is only after reading a book such as this that one realises what is lost by being cut off from rural life and scenes. For the thousands

Again he said, 'I want a man to be a man. How can he be a man without some speck of nature in him?' And the whole tendency of his writings is to show or to remind urban industrial man how much of the world lies outside the city-wall, and how difficult it is for the individual to come to his complete development if his whole life is spent within doors:

> Though I cannot name the ideal good, it seems to me that it will be in some way closely associated with the ideal beauty of nature.[23]

> My sympathies and hopes are with the light of the future, only I should like it to come from nature. The clock should be read by the sunshine, not the sun timed by the clock. The latter is, indeed, impossible, for though all the clocks in the world should declare the hour of dawn to be midnight, the sun will presently rise just the same. (Preface to *RAAGE*)

In the last two paragraphs of *The Amateur Poacher* he summarizes, with a characteristic heightening of style, his feelings about the revivifying powers of nature for men whose lives must be spent in towns. And behind this plea for the simple pleasures of being out of doors one can hear Jefferies' impassioned faith that by looking deeply into the works of Nature modern man can, even yet, learn to make his own life an equally generous, noble, and harmonious thing.

> Let us be always out of doors among trees and grass, and rain and wind and sun. There the breeze comes and strikes the cheek and sets it aglow: the gale increases and the trees creak and roar, but it is only a ruder music. A calm follows, the sun shines in the sky, and it is the time to sit under an oak, leaning against the bark, while the birds sing and the air is soft and sweet. By night the stars shine, and there is no fathoming the dark spaces between those brilliant points, nor the thoughts that come as it were between the fixed stars and the landmarks of the mind.
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> Or it is the morning on the hills, when hope is as wide as the world; or it is the evening on the shore. A red sun sinks, and the foam-tipped waves are crested with crimson; the booming surge breaks, and the spray flies afar, sprinkling the face watching under the pale cliffs. Let us get out of these indoor narrow modem days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.

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who are condemned to town life knowledge such as is here revealed is beyond reach' (from a review in *The Albion,* quoted in a publisher's advertisement for one of Jefferies' later books). Another reader, a Mrs. Besemere, spoke of *WLIASC* in a letter to Jefferies as 'quite a book to take up when you wish to pay a fire-side visit to the country lanes and hedges' (quoted in Looker and Porteous, p. 116). In 'The Moucher's Calendar' (*AP*, ch. vii) Jefferies describes the life of a vagrant, who makes his living by culling wild things from the countryside and selling them (e.g., for food or decoration) in the suburbs of the new towns, where they are not to be found but are still in demand. One of the less important sides of Jefferies' writing was devoted to the literary equivalent of the Moucher's life, purveying country' matters to town dwellers.

[23] 'Nature in the Louvre,' *FAH.* This essay is one of the most remarkable examples in the language of an extended piece of criticism of a single work of art.