

‘Comprehending the Void’: Archaeology and the Transcendental in *The Story of My Heart*

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Paper presented at 'Disrupting Victorian Studies' conference: the 39th Meeting of the Victorians Institute at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, Oct 3-4, 2008.

The Story of My Heart, published in 1883, was described by Jefferies as his spiritual autobiography; the result of seventeen years of contemplation of the relationship between his thought, his existence, and the natural world. Jefferies has been a sadly neglected writer, not least because his work does not easily fit into one particular genre or category. Aside from nature, Jefferies wrote about a wealth of subjects; including humanist and Cartesian philosophy, science, history, and environmental awareness – in an equally adaptive and wide-ranging style of writing. Jefferies is known to have influenced, among others, the work of Leslie Paul, Ethel Mannin, Henry Williamson, Henry Miller, and John Fowles.

I suggest that placing the autobiography in the context of nineteenth-century archaeology can help to better clarify what scholars have recognised as being, at times, a baffling text. I aim to identify the struggle that Jefferies experienced – between human nature not being evolved enough to enter a new, transcendent state of being, while still being able to recognise the transcendent potential of ordinary, everyday experience.

Written in sensuous and at times, rapturous prose, the autobiography was an effort by Jefferies to erode the metaphysical divides that had grown between man and nature; to expose the potential for consciousness to ‘burst through the fetters’ (‘Absence of Design in Nature.’ Cited in Looker, 1948, 64) of ordinary, mundane experience, and attain what he termed ‘something infinitely higher than deity.’¹ It is an incomplete account – in the sense that it strives to accomplish more than it can comfortably contain, and is noted to have been a failure on publication (Looker, 1948, 139). Jefferies continually expresses his frustration with the limits of writing as a form of consciousness, stating that the ‘the word is a rude sign to the feeling’ (SH, 5, and was already drafting a larger, revised edition of the autobiography when he died. *The Story of My Heart* was not meant to be easy, or necessarily pleasant reading. It contains problematic sequences of thought; concentric metaphysical wanderings, alternating, and sometimes clashing, with linear dreamscapes. In his introduction to one of Jefferies’ earlier books, *The Gamekeeper at Home*, David Ascoli states that *The Story of My Heart* is little more than a patchwork vision, cobbled together from the ideas of Locke, Spinoza, and Wordsworth. As a result, says Ascoli, it is a ‘synthetic vision which, grasping at paradise, comprehends a void.’ (Ascoli, xiii). I argue that an interdisciplinary rereading of this text can reveal the risky search for self-realisation to be an end in itself; that oscillation between the risk of discovery – which is as threatening as the danger of there being nothing at all – offers the potential to momentarily displace the ego, and reveal a glimpse of something other to mundane experience.

At the heart of Jefferies’ vision was the Wiltshire landscape where he grew up. On a small farm, now a museum, backing onto fields and a reservoir, he wrote many of his early books and essays. The reservoir – used most poignantly in the children’s book, *Bevis* – was one of Jefferies’ most important symbols. In the autobiography he refers to the

‘sailing round and round the circle of ideas like a boat on an inland lake’, and reveals that through a deeper, more soulful connection with nature, a higher form of consciousness could be achieved. It was perhaps the chaos of nature that Jefferies admired most of all; something that rigorous nineteenth-century industrialisation seemed so set against. In one of his many essays about the natural world, called ‘Absence of Design in Nature’, Jefferies termed this ‘divine chaos’, stating that in ordinary, everyday life ‘the very idea of a design or purpose had grown repulsive, on account of its littleness.’ (Looker, 1948, 66). The narrative reflects this concern, and is thus more like stream of consciousness, written with a flamboyant urgency of spirit.² ‘There is no controlling it,’ said Jefferies, ‘and no bringing it to a design.’ (*Ibid*).

Writing in 1914, thirty years after its publication, Arthur Thorn, commented that *The Story of My Heart* is where ‘Jefferies’ supreme value becomes manifest.’ Thorn recognised that the book’s critical reception led to Jefferies being labelled as ‘mystic’ and ‘agnostic’. He also said that ‘while many have sought to invest his work with a materialistic or purely scientific value [...] the cosmic Jefferies has been mislaid.’ (*Preface to The Life-Worship of Richard Jefferies*.) While Walter Besant, writing in 1905, said of his reaction on first reading Jefferies: ‘here were the most wonderful things possible going on under our very noses, but we saw them not.’ (Besant, 1905, 167). Other, not so generous criticism, has labelled the work as pantheistic, pretentious, risky, and a failure. On reading the book W.H Hudson commented that there was a strain of ‘intense unnatural feeling’ in Jefferies’ prose that ‘touched the borders of insanity.’ (Ascoli, xiv, and Jenkins, 176), and he worried that the text threatened to undermine, rather than reinforce, the relationship between man and nature.

For Jefferies, writing in a society that had only recently begun to foster the idea of secularisation, an autobiography of such content and structure was indeed a great risk. In it Jefferies clearly states his belief that ‘there is no God in nature, anywhere.’ Mary Webb, in her novel *Gone to Earth* refers to Jefferies as the ‘consumptive genius’ (100), and stated openly that reading *The Story of My Heart* as a teenager caused her to reject Orthodox Christianity. (Moult, 1932, 60-61. Cited in Morris, 2006, 14). It was as if to celebrate the work of Jefferies his contemporary readers had to recognise the transience of long-established spiritual ideals and be willing to reject them – for something more uncertain, more risky to their understanding of themselves in relation to the world.

In the following quotation we see how closely Jefferies identified with the cadence of the natural world, and how this relationship facilitated his transcendent vision:

Dreamy in appearance, I was breathing full of existence; I was aware of the grass blades, the flowers, the leaves on hawthorn and tree. I seemed to live more largely through them, as if each were a pore through which I drank. (SH, 14)

Here Jefferies is conscious of the distinction and paradoxical interplay between his ‘dreamy’ outward appearance and his rapturous inner state. On the one hand there exists a disjuncture between the restful figure on the grass in the calm of repose and the storm of psychological innerness, while it is this very contrast that catalyses the psycho-spiritual vision. Throughout the autobiography Jefferies oscillates between the two states – natural calm, and natural chaos resting at points of illuminative discovery in between. That there was to be no place where he could truly rest is reflected in Jefferies’ domestic life that was fraught with illness, poverty, and an inability to find the right place to live.³ As Brian

Taylor wrote in 1982, there exists an 'underlying unity' (cited in Morris, 8) in the life and work of Richard Jefferies; something that none of his contemporaries could quite match.

An intrinsic part of Jefferies' vision was his understanding of the potential consequences of discovery – in areas such as science, philosophy, and archaeology. The Victorian revelation that the earth's timescale far preceded human history did not shock Jefferies. Rather, the idea that a human life could be of such small, transient consequence was a liberating and fascinating concept that in the autobiography Jefferies uses to his imaginative advantage. As an adolescent, writing in 1867, Jefferies described his local landscape as a 'mine for an antiquary' (Thomas, 49), noting that the 'Roman and British coins, arrow-heads, tumuli, and camps, made the country seem "alive with the dead".' (*Ibid*). He published articles on local history in the *North Wiltshire Herald* and was the first to notice Coate stone circle⁴. Jefferies' notebooks also record him spending considerable time at the Bronze Age and early Iron Age hill fort, Liddington Castle, where in *The Story of My Heart* he states that it was on this spot where he began to forge a deeper spiritual relationship with the natural world.⁵ Before the age of twenty Jefferies was already exploring the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical; how best to record the impact of man's interventions on earth, and what these records offered to the contemporary imaginative mind. For example, in notes written in Lydiard churchyard, he wrote that 'ink is more durable than iron.' (*Jefferies' Land*, edited by Grace Toplis. Cited in Thomas, 50). In this instance, by placing greater value on written history, Jefferies privileges the imaginative over the material world.

Although antiquaries of the preceding century had already made significant progress in establishing a better picture of how ancestors lived and died, nineteenth-century archaeology became a more accessible vehicle through which to better understand the elapse of time and humanity's place in the world. For Jefferies, a deeper, more comprehensive chronology of human activity within the landscape offered a greater visionary space across which to exercise his ideas. For example, in the autobiography, Jefferies dedicates fifteen pages to the description of his thoughts and feelings as he stood beside a tumulus at Liddington. His imagined life of the warrior is abstractly vague – he refers to the burial as when 'some warrior was interred there in the ante-historic times.' (*SH*, 37). As part of a general developing awareness of the importance of archaeological remains – as a means of connecting the present to the past – Jefferies seeks to identify his life with that of the warrior:

I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky. I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus; I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own [...] the abstract personality of the dead seemed as existent as thought. As my thought could slip back the twenty centuries in a moment to the forest-days when he hurled the spear, or shot with the bow, hunting the deer, and could return again as swiftly to this moment, so his spirit could endure from then till now, and the time was nothing. (*SH*, pp.37-8)

That nineteenth-century archaeology offered an impartial and incomplete account of human history was something that attracted Jefferies to the study of the material record. Ambiguity offered space for a moment of increased visibility; an elevated space where the ego becomes suspended between the realism of its origins and the transcendent 'void' of its future. In his account of his experience by the tumulus Jefferies rejects the existence of time: 'the years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since

this tumulus was raised; in a thousand more it will still only be a moment.' (*SH*, 43). 'There is no separation,' he says – 'no past; eternity, the Now, is continuous.' (*SH*, 45). In the next sentence, contemplation is followed directly by consideration of cosmic distance: 'How infinitely deeper is thought than the million miles of the firmament! The wonder is here, not there; now, not to be, now always.' We see here Jefferies' 'struggle to defeat the limitations of the written word' (Ascoli, xiii); where the immense contrast between the point of the individual life and the grandiose scale of the universe does not overwhelm but sparks outward cosmic contemplation.

Excavations by archaeologists such as Wake Smart in the 1870's were part of a newly emerging consciousness of the significance of small remains, the interpretation of which potentially had far greater implications for the understanding of human progress. For example, the unearthing of a collection of shale beads by William Greenwell during his excavations at the Aldbourne Four Barrows in the late 1880's were recognised as having been procured and manufactured on the Dorset coast at a much earlier date. Aldbourne was frequently visited by Jefferies – forming part of a chain of archaeological sites along the Ridgeway to Stonehenge, and is known best for its Bronze Age finds, including incense cups, a dagger, and a gold plaque. Late-nineteenth century research discovered that the small shale artefacts had as much – if not more – importance as the larger, more obviously Bronze Age artefacts. The shale ornaments not only inferred that prehistoric societies had exchanged commodities over long distances, but also extended the timeframe for the appearance of handcrafted ornaments. As late nineteenth-century archaeologists worked with the developing understanding that the small could withhold far greater consequences for understanding human activity within a landscape, so Jefferies wrote with recognition of the importance of the most minute details of the natural world – and the significance of that scale in understanding human progress. For example in an essay titled 'Under the Apple Tree' Jefferies imagines the beginnings of the universe as the germination of a giant 'plant', where he compares the tiny atom to the size of one of the sarsen stones of Coate stone circle, commenting that 'as the work of man goes on, the process of physical life will be thus plain and evident to the material eye.'

I can see the minute particle arising from under the turf and, finally settling, transformed to a speck of golden dust in the sunshine above. Suppose the plant a mile high: suppose the atom the size of a boulder, one of the sarsens scattered about in these meadows, and weighing a ton: suppose it were actually visible, coursing up the vast tube and separating into the various components of green stem and golden flower: that the ultimate speck of golden dust were as large as an orange: that the subtle force which compelled the gigantic plant to thus build itself (the root acting on the earth, the earth on the root): that this subtle force were as plain and visible as water, and could be felt and its action known as certainly as that water runs downhill. One day, as the work of man goes on, the process of physical life will be thus plain and evident to the material eye.' (Looker, 1948, 51)

In the autobiography Jefferies warns of the dangers of human ignorance; that in ambitiously searching outwards to understand how the world works we are ironically missing the smaller signs – closer to us, or within us – that could guide towards a more holistic understanding of our world. As he comments towards the end of the book, when he recounts an experience when a leaf had obscured his view of a certain star from his window:

we are this day as ignorant as those who painted the papyri were of light [...] Whatever has been found has been discovered by fortunate accident; in looking for one thing another has been chanced on. [...] For now the slightest particle is enough to throw the search aside, and the most minute circumstance sufficient to conceal obvious and shining truths. [...] At present the endeavour to make discoveries is like gazing at the sky through the boughs of an oak. Here a beautiful star shines clearly; here a constellation is hidden by a branch; a universe by a leaf. Some mental instrument or organon is required to enable us to distinguish between the leaf which may be removed and a real void; when to cease to look in one direction, and to work in another. (*SH*, pp.187-9).

Part of Jefferies' frustration in the autobiography is related to his idea that the progress of humankind was limited – both by practical ability, and the inability to adequately express itself. To Jefferies, human nature was too unstable, too primitive, to be able to fully let go of its fears and instincts, and achieve a more complete understanding of how spiritual consciousness could potentially evolve. A small analogy of Jefferies' desire to confront the larger, more obscure areas of the mind can be seen in the essay 'Among the Nuts', where he recounts an occasion when he blocked the path of an army of ants by creating a ridge of earth with his walking stick, and comments:

The most extraordinary thing was that not one ventured to explore straight forward; it was as if their world came to an end at that little ridge, and they were afraid to step into chaos. (*Field and Hedgerow*, 1895, 117).

The ants' being 'afraid' is an anthropomorphic reference to the human fear of exploring beyond the known material world; a fear that Jefferies sought to confront through his experiential use of the written word.

Over the last twenty years criticism has paid a little more serious attention to the ecological concerns so acutely expressed by Jefferies. For example, Brian Morris's book published in 2006, titled 'Richard Jefferies and the Ecological Vision' expands upon why Jefferies' vision was put aside for so many years. The chaos of the autobiography was perhaps too forceful, too far-reaching in its conceptual framework, for the average early twentieth century reader. The instability of *The Story of My Heart* as a narrative reflects the chaos of nature itself; revealing how concerned Jefferies was with conveying the state of confusion that is an intrinsic element of an awakening spiritual consciousness – yet one that still terrifies and shocks in its intensity. At the end of the book – as a sort of self-affirmative premature response to the accusation that David Ascoli was later to make – Jefferies states:

Through the heavens a beam slants, and we are aware of the star-stratum in which our earth moves. But what may be without that stratum? Certainly it is not a void. This light tells us much, but I think in the course of time yet more delicate and subtle mediums than light may be found, and through these we shall see into the shadows of the sky. (*SH*, 134)

To Jefferies, the human endeavour to better understand the world remained in its meagre, early stages. It was through the contemplation of activity within a landscape over time that Jefferies felt closer to realising a more luminous sense of being – only through seeking to transcend time could the boundaries of conscious thought be tested. As expressed by the naturalist, Alan Jenkins, in 1978, 'even the rhetoric, some would say the mawkishness, of Richard Jefferies has instilled in many of us an atavistic longing to regain contact with

the natural world.’ (Jenkins, 176). The inclinations, fears, and desires that Jefferies struggled with over a century ago are those which continue to disrupt our understanding of the world today. The challenge to let go of the self and reconnect with the environment continues.

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Endnotes

¹ Jefferies uses this phrase ‘infinitely higher than deity’ three times in *The Story of My Heart*:
 1. (p.6): ‘Touching the crumble of earth, the blade of grass, the thyme flower, breathing the earthen circling air, thinking of the sea and the sky, holding out my hand for the sunbeams to touch it, prone on the sward in token of deep reverence, thus I prayed that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity.’ (1905, Thomas B. Mosher: Portland, ME.)

2. (p.42) : ‘I see other and higher conditions than existence; I see not only the existence of the soul, immortality, but, in addition, I realise a soul-life illimitable; I realise the existence of a cosmos of thought; I realise the existence of an inexpressible entity infinitely higher than deity.’ (1905)

3. (p.149): ‘My soul of itself always desires; these are to it as fresh food. I have found in the hills another valley grooved in prehistoric times, where, climbing to the top of the hollow, I can see the sea. Down in the hollow I look up; the sky stretches over, the sun burns as it seems but just above the hill, and the wind sweeps onward. As the sky extends beyond the

valley, so I know that there are ideas beyond the valley of my thought; I know that there is something infinitely higher than deity.' (1905)

² This urgency was expressed by Jefferies in notes to the autobiography, where he writes that 'something says it must be done, it must no longer be postponed.' p.32 draft – British library.

³ As he said in an essay titled 'January in the Sussex Woods', "I am personally subject twice a year to the migratory impulse." (Cited in Thomas, 164).

⁴ He refers to this stone circle in "The Old House at Coate" as "the sarsens scatted about in these meadows, and weighing a ton". (Looker, 1948, 51)

⁵ In his depiction of how he came to write down his ideas for the autobiography, Jefferies recounts that spending time in and around sites of archaeological and historic importance facilitated this creative process: 'A visit to the sea increased the strength of the original impulse. I began to make efforts to express these thoughts in writing, but could not succeed to my own liking. Time went on, and harder experiences, and the pressure of labour came, but in no degree abated the fire of first thought. Again and again I made resolutions that I would write it, in some way or other, and as often failed. I could express any other idea with ease, but not this. Once especially I remember in a short interval of distasteful labour walking away to a spot by a brook which skirts an ancient Roman wall, and there trying to determine and really commence to work. Again I failed. More time, more changes, and still the same thought running beneath everything. At last, in 1880, in the old castle of Pevensey, under happy circumstances once more I resolved, and actually did write down a few notes. Even then I could not go on, but I kept the notes (I had destroyed all former beginnings), and in the end, two years afterwards, commenced this book. (1905, 145).