

A Comparative Study of Robinson Jeffers's Poetry and Persian Mystical Poetry

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Abstract

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), the American poet, is one of the most typical examples of a poet who postulated his own philosophical doctrine and declared it in his poetry. His deep acquaintance with science on one hand and his religious background influenced by his parents on the other resulted in his two-fold philosophy. While bearing in mind some contradictory ideas in Jeffers' poetry, I intend to compare the most long-lasting notions in Jeffers' poetry on man's relation to God/nature and life/death with the philosophic writings and poetic works inspired by Persian mysticism in this short essay. Finally, I will explain how the notion of 'love' is introduced in the philosophy of both and what it signifies. The obvious affinities between Jeffers and classical Persian mystical poets with completely separate social and philosophical contexts and in different times manifest that the great themes of love, humanity, God, death, and nature are reflected in very similar manners in both poetic traditions.

Keywords: Robinson Jeffers, Jalaloddin Rumi, American poetry, Islamic mysticism (Sufism), Persian literature.

بررسی تطبیقی شعر رابینسون جفرز و شعر عرفانی ایران

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چکیده

شاعر آمریکایی، رابینسون جفرز (۱۹۶۲-۱۸۸۷) یکی از نمونه‌های برجسته شاعرانی است که عقاید فلسفی مدونی داشتند و در شعر خود به بیان آن‌ها می‌پرداختند. از یک سو، آشنایی عمیق وی با علم و از سوی دیگر، پیشینه مذهبی‌اش که متأثر از تربیت خانوادگی بوده است، از وی متفکری دو وجهی ساخته است. با در نظر گرفتن برخی تناقض‌ها، این مقاله در پی مقایسه دیدگاه‌های پایدار در شعر جفرز درباره رابطه انسان با خدا، طبیعت، حیات و مرگ با اشعار عرفانی ادبیات فارسی است. سرانجام، به تعریف مفهوم عشق و نقش ادبی آن پرداخته است. شباهت‌های فکری شعر جفرز با شعر عرفانی ایران که متعلق به دو زمینه تاریخی، اجتماعی و فلسفی مجزا می‌باشند نمایانگر این است که مفاهیم عشق، انسانیت، خدا، مرگ و طبیعت به گونه‌ای مشابه در این دو سنت شعری به نمایش درآمده‌اند.
کلیدواژه‌ها: رابینسون جفرز، جلال‌الدین رومی، شعر آمریکا، عرفان اسلامی (صوفیسم)، ادبیات فارسی.

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Introduction

Robinson Jeffers is one of the most typical examples of a poet who postulated his own philosophical doctrine and declared it in his poetry. His deep acquaintance with science on one hand and his religious background influenced by his parents on the other resulted in his two-fold philosophy. Having witnessed man's cruelty during the World Wars and believing that man's state on earth is completely unstable and temporary made him search for its reasons. Having been disillusioned by the humanist positions of Christianity, he deviated from this religion while remaining religious in essence. He believed that man's ego-centricity is the reason for this 'tragedy'. Violence and incest as two major themes in his poetry served as the manifestations of this introversion and nature as a permanent 'being' became an ideal state for him.

While bearing in mind some contradictory ideas in Jeffers' poetry, I intend to compare the most long-lasting notions in Jeffers' poetry on man's relation to God/nature and life/death with the philosophic writings and poetic works inspired by Persian mysticism in this short article. Finally, I will explain how the notion of 'love' is introduced in the philosophy of both and what it signifies.

Humanity

Jeffers, in his "Roan Stallion", assumes that human beings should discard the very essence of humanity:

Humanity is the mould to break away from, the crust to break through,
the coal to break into fire,
The atom to be split. (Jeffers 1959: 149)

In order to understand fully what Jeffers means by this, one should be familiar with his doctrine of "inhumanism". He states his doctrine of "inhumanism" as,

... a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence.... This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist.... It involves no falsehoods, and is a means of maintaining sanity in slippery times; it has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty. (Coffin 1971: 242)

Regardless of the few instances when Jeffers declares man to be an all-loveable creature - as in "De Rerum Virtute," that is in contrast with the other poems in its praise of human subjectivity - on the whole he sees man as an "incestuous little beast who is in love with himself" (Waggoner 1950: 111). As Wilson O. Clough puts it, for Jeffers, man's misery lies in his "incurable

passion for viewing his universe in terms of his own introverted wishes, lusts, justifying his behavior or beliefs simply on the ground that they are his" (Clough 1964: 192).

Persian mystical poets also consider the usual state of man as imperfect and posit the same notion. Rumi, the great poet of Sufism, writes:

Since you are properly a clod, you will not rise into the air;
You will rise into the air if you break and become dust;
If you break not, He who moulded you will break you. (Kritzeck 1964: 25)

Most importantly, Persian mystics believe that man consists of two selves: the divine (*lahut*) and the earthly (*nasut*). Therefore man is capable of being the greatest creature or the lowest one. Man usually forgets his high status. He does not know himself, and sells himself cheaply: He was a piece of valuable satin and stitched himself on a tattered cloak (Rumi 1925: 10001). In order to achieve his lost greatness, man has to pass through some valleys to be reunited with God, i.e. the whole universe. The spiritual ladder consists of seven stages. Attar explains them as,

The first valley is the Valley of Quest, the second the Valley of Love, the third is the Valley of Understanding, the fourth is the Valley of Independence and Detachment, the fifth of Pure Unity, the sixth is the Valley of Astonishment, and the seventh is the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness, beyond which one can go no further. (Kritzeck 1964: 249)

Comparing Jeffers' 'Inhumanist' with the Sufis' 'Perfect Man' (*insan-e kamel*) merits more detailed consideration. The 'Inhumanist' is a person who has destroyed his human self and does not consider himself while thinking about universe. Jeffers in "The Women at Point Sur," a poem which he called "a satire on human self-importance" (Jeffers 1968: 115), declares:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves:
We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident
As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

In 'Perfect Man', God and man become one. Yet the most important difference between them is put by Jeffers himself in a letter dated September 1931:

Am I wrong in thinking that the Oriental mystic identifies the world with himself, and my "Orestes" identified himself with the world? The former imposes a human mind on an imaginary world - attributed to it his own "love," for instance, or desire of love; the latter let in the inhuman mind of the world ... to obliterate his human one. (Jeffers 1968: 184)

It is right that in Oriental mysticism the subjective nature of man is more significant and in the end man finds the whole universe inside him. Yet this 'self' is not any longer a human self. In the state of unification the human

soul is filled with the whole of nature. Therefore, Rumi writes: "Ask yourself everything you want, / Because it is only you." However, Jeffers, in some other poems such as "At the Birth of an Age", does not negate human subjectivity either: "I torture myself / To discover myself" (Jeffers 1959: 559).

Life and Death

'Life' in Jeffers' poems, in many instances, is joined with the terms 'pain' and 'agony':

I have chosen
Being: therefore wounds, bonds, limits and pains:
The crowded mind and the anguished nerves, experience and ecstasy...
(Jeffers 1959: 559)

Or in "Hungerfield" we read,

The poets who sing of life without remembering its agony
Are fools or liars. (Cited in Squires 1956: 86)

There is a tragic sense in life from which man should liberate himself. As Granville Hicks notes, "nothing in man's experience seems to him [Jeffers] so significant as suffering, and no quality of man's nature seems to him admirable except the capacity to endure suffering" (Hicks 1967: 264). Similarly, mysticism identifies man's life as 'pain'. In the Koran, we read: "We created man. We created man in pain." The reason why man feels pain is because he is excluded from paradise, i.e. he has departed from God. He was from God and he will join Him later. Therefore, life as a state of transition is full of the feeling of 'remoteness' (*faragh*), full of the pain of love. Ghazzali, the Islamic philosopher and literary figure, by mentioning the Prophetic sanction that "people are asleep and when they die they awake," concludes,

So perhaps life in this world is a dream by comparison with the world to come; and when a man dies, things come to appear differently to him from what he now beholds, and at the same time the words are addressed to him: "We have taken off thee thy covering, and thy sight today is sharp (Koran, 50: 21)." (Kritzeck 1964: 184-5)

Rumi, in a poem, points out the same notion:

The world is nothing, and we are nothing; imagination and sleep, and we are perplexed -
If the sleeping person would know 'I am asleep' - what grief would it be?
(Cited in Schimmel 1978: 245)

This is reminiscent of Jeffers' words, "My kingdom is not of this world / This world is nothing" (Jeffers 1929: 24) or when he writes in "Thurso's Landing", "Life's all a dream... /... No life / Ought to be thought important in the weave of the world" (Jeffers 1959: 325).

Jeffers considers death as a stage in which man loses his self-awareness and becomes dissolved in the other particles of universe. Death, for him, is a turning point. However, in some instances, he affirms the possibility of achieving this state in life as "The Inhumanist" section in "The Double Axe". The following piece, "The Humanist's Tragedy," also accounts for the same attitude while giving his general doctrine on death and life:

When you are dead you become part of
 peace; let no man
 Dream more of death; there is neither sight nor hearing nor any
 wonder; none of us Gods enters it.
 You become part of peace, part of the sacred beauty, but having no
 part: as if a flute-player
 Should make beauty but hear none, being deaf and senseless. But
 living if you will
 It is possible for you to break prison of yourselves and enter the
 nature of things and use the beauty.
 Wine and lawlessness, art and music, love, self-torture, religion,
 Are means but are not needful, contemplation will do it. Only to
 break human collectedness. (Jeffers 1929: 125)

For mystical poets, death can be achieved in life. It is a sort of annihilation (*fana*) in God. In other words, man destroys his lower self and while keeping his divine self dies inside God. He is like a still-burning candle in front of the sun. He is still living but simultaneously feels invisible. Hallaj, the great Sufi, felt this death and union with God and declared that "I am truth [God]". Moreover, in mysticism, death is considered as immortality:

A germ is nourished among a hundred cares and loves so that it may become an intelligent and acting being. It is instructed and given the necessary knowledge. Then death comes and everything is effaced, its dignity is thrown down. This that was a being has become the dust of the street. It has several times been annihilated; but in the meanwhile it has been able to learn a hundred secrets of which previously it had not been aware, and is given honour in place of dishonour. Do you know what you possess? Enter into yourself and reflect on this. So long as you do not renounce your self-pride, your vanity and your self-love, you will never reach the heights of immortality. (Kritzeck 1964: 252-3)

God and Nature

For Jeffers, nature is superior to man because of its permanence, peace and reality. In "Their Beauty Has More Meaning", a piece of rock contains all these qualities against man's temporary, painful and illusory life:

And when the whole human race
 Has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here: storms, moon

and ocean,
Dawn and the birds. (Jeffers 1948)

And in "Boats in a Fog", the "essential reality" is in "creatures going about their business among the equally / Earnest elements of nature" (Jeffers 1959: 163). Jeffers observed the unity in nature and explained his attitude towards God and nature explicitly in this letter dated 1 October 1934:

I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts are different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, influencing each other, therefore parts of one organic whole.... This whole is in all its parts so beautiful, and is felt by me to be so intensely in earnest, that I am compelled to love it, and to think of it as divine. It seems to me that this whole alone is worthy of the deeper sort of love; and that there is peace, freedom, I might say a kind of salvation, in turning one's affections outward toward this one God, rather than inwards on one's self, or on humanity, or on human imaginations and abstractions - the world of spirits. I think that it is our privilege and felicity to love God for his beauty, without claiming or expecting love from him. We are not important to him, but he to us.... (Jeffers 1968: 221)

And on the death of his wife, he explained how her awareness and beauty is dissolved into the world and has made nature more beautiful (Jeffers 1968: 327).

Similarly, Sufism considers nature as the manifestation of God. The whole universe, Sufis believe, is of one-existence (*wahdat-e wujud*). Therefore, everywhere you look you see the face of the Beloved (God). The universe is repeatedly portrayed as one ocean with waves and foams. But mysticism does not consider man lower than nature. Man, because of his capability for spiritual elevation, is always superior to animals or inanimate objects. Most importantly, the imagery of nature, which is very dominant in mystical literature, usually functions symbolically. In addition, nature has significance: a mystic can seclude in nature to contemplate and discover himself.

For Jeffers, God is everywhere and an energy which is spread in the world. In "The Beginning and the End", he sees man as "one of God's sense organs" (Jeffers 1963). In "At the Birth of an Age", he even maintains that: "I am one with him; I will share his being..." (Jeffers 1959: 505-561). This picture of God in universe is completely identical with mysticism with the only difference that God cares for man too. He shows the way to man, helps him on his quest and discloses His face to him. The journey towards God is repeatedly portrayed as the journey of a drop from the sea through the cloud and back to its home where it is put in an oyster to mature and change into a pearl. The pearl is unable to live without the ocean and yet distinct from it (Schimmel 1975: 284).

Love

Loving God or the whole universe is a repeated theme in both of these philosophies. Jeffers in "Going to Horse Flats" writes:

But for each man
There is real solution, let him turn from himself and man and to love God.
he is out of the trap then.... (Jeffers 1959: 583)

What is strikingly significant, though, is the meaning of love in life and death. Love is the reason for living and dying. The pain in life always reminds man of this love while death is its aim. Jeffers, in "Thurso's Landing", writes:

"... Life's all a dream," it said,
"And death is a better more vivid immortal dream
But love is real; both are made out of love,
That's never perfect in life, and the voids in it
Are the pains of life...." (Jeffers 1959: 266-357)

Annemarie Schimmel believes that for Rumi, "the whirling movement of the skies is the result of the wave of love. If there were no love the world would be frozen" (Schimmel 1075: 293). In contrast to Jeffers' limited love of God, Persian mysticism gives a more pervasive and unlimited view of love. Rumi writes:

Love cannot be described; it is even greater than a hundred resurrections, for the resurrection is a limit, whereas love is limitless. Love has five hundred wings, each of which reaches from the Divine Throne to the lowest earth....
(Cited in Schimmel 1978: 333-334)

In short, the obvious affinities between Jeffers and classical Persian mystical poets with completely separate social and philosophical contexts and in different times manifest that "love has a hundred different tongues!" (Schimmel 1978: 49) and,

All the particles of the world are loving,
Every part of the world is intoxicated by meeting. (Cited in Schimmel 1978: 333)

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