

**“THE GREAT EARTH SPEAKING”:  
RICHARD JEFFERIES AND THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS**

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“... the true meaning of utopia: it is a  
precipitate of collective dreams.”<sup>1</sup>

The presence in nineteenth-century writing of countervailing impulses between community and isolation, with the attendant utopian possibilities, reaches back to Romanticism but was notably marked in the American Transcendentalist movement, and its English transmutation in the work of the English nature-writer, Richard Jefferies (1848-1887). Jefferies once declared: “I am nothing unless I am a metaphysician.”<sup>2</sup> Whilst this is in some senses true, his central theme, transliterated by way of English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, is undoubtedly the influence of natural objects upon the human mind. The entire body of Jefferies’ work is concerned with men and women in a natural setting, and his treatment of the theme ranged from agricultural journalism to pantheistic mysticism cast in prophetic terms. Despite attaining a degree of popularity and esteem with the reading public, Jefferies remained a solitary individual “Who loves Nature can make no friends, everyone repulses, all seem different”, as he observed in his diaries.<sup>3</sup> Jefferies therefore seems in a way to stand apart from other contemporary observers of the rural scene such as Thomas Hardy, but his work does offer some deep affinities with Transcendentalism, a movement whose idealism,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLoughlin, Cambridge: MA, 2002, 906.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Nature Diaries of Richard Jefferies*, ed. S.J. Looker, London, 1948, 282.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

and utopian philosophy led to a view of the universe as a type of cosmic psyche.

In rebelling against Locke's epistemology, and in their neo-Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding, the American Transcendentalists veer towards pantheism and a belief in what they term "Universal Spirit". Philosophically speaking, Emerson argues, "the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul". Thus, "all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME", is to be "ranked under this name, NATURE".<sup>4</sup> The key document in this structure of feeling is Emerson's 1836 essay on "Nature", which proposes that the universe is composed of nature and soul, and memorably alerts the reader to the mystical connotations of this distinction:

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.<sup>5</sup>

According to the doctrine propounded here, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact".<sup>6</sup> Transcendentalism perceives as its central principle the unity in which each individual's identity is contained within the all. F.O. Matthiessen has pertinently noted Emerson's "delicate pleasure in his senses, and his even greater pleasure in soaring beyond them".<sup>7</sup> The core of Emerson's thought lies in its complex projection of isolation and community, and it has been well said that Transcendental models of individuation "cannot be completely reconciled with theories of social relationship; for the demands of self-reliance, especially the intuition of the 'divine' depths of the self, often pull one out of the social orbit into an intense introspection".<sup>8</sup>

For Emerson, or for Thoreau at Walden Pond, Transcendentalism desiderated a solitary existence in contradistinction to those more

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, London, 1856, 10-11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, Oxford, 1968, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Steele, "Transcendental Friendship", in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds J. Porte and S. Morris, Cambridge, 1999, 121.

communally oriented experiments in utopian living such as George Ripley’s Brook Farm project of 1840. The essence of Emerson’s concept of nature, to summarize, is his conception of an all-encompassing relationship between mind and nature, with its profound implications for human societies. It was the Transcendentalist role, as he interpreted it, to stand against the utilitarian tendencies of the age, and it is this project that relates him to the English nature-writer.

In Richard Jefferies’ spiritual autobiography, *The Story of My Heart* (1883), the open spaces of the Wiltshire Downs in southern England enable him to project himself towards the earth in a redemptive or utopian gesture:

Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth’s firmness – I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the book, when he has moved to Sussex, Jefferies discovers a “green hollow on the side of a great hill, a green concave open to the sea”, and he writes: “Silence and sunshine, sea and hill gradually brought my mind into the condition of intense prayer.” These experiences tend towards the annihilation of time in which he can seminally affirm, “Now is eternity; now is the immortal life”.<sup>10</sup>

This is surely messianic in its tendency. Such writing, like that of the Transcendentalists, stands in stark opposition to the materialism and teleology of the Victorian doctrine of progress, and to the literary realism which projects and critiques that materialism. In seeking a transcendent dimension opposed to contemporary values, Jefferies draws upon the potent tradition of Romantic nature philosophy. As Esther Leslie expresses it, in this mode of thought the human being stands in the midst of the natural world, “incessantly communicating with nature through all organs of sensory perception and through the intuition of the mind”. She adds, “Mystical, magical forces course

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart*, Dartington, 2002, 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 39.

through this energetic nature, structuring all that exists and leaving decipherable marks”<sup>11</sup>

Both Emerson, with his investment in the “Here and Now”, and Jefferies, with his sense of “the Beyond”, seek a utopian alternative to nineteenth-century positivism. In *The Story of My Heart* and other late speculative writing, Jefferies’ gestures register a protest against a forgetting of being in desiring a cancellation of temporality or causation in favour of an ecstatic cultivation of presence which signals his affinity with the more philosophically articulated position of Martin Heidegger. Indeed, Jefferies’ intimation of an “eternity” in which “now is the immortal life” resonates with the Nietzschean sense of “noonday” as explicated by Heidegger:

We know what Nietzsche means by this word *midday*, the moment of the shortest shadow, when forenoon and afternoon, past and future, meet in one. Their meeting-place is the moment of supreme unity for all temporal things in utterly magnificent transfiguration ... it is the moment of eternity.

This is “a point of time” which “no clock can measure”: “a point in being as a whole when time itself *is* as the temporality of the moment”.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Heidegger’s sense of the “clearing” in which being becomes manifest is directly related to this structure of ideas, a concatenation in which the quotidian reality of the everyday is transformed, so that, as he phrases it, “In the midst of beings as a whole an open space occurs. There is a clearing.”<sup>13</sup>

In Heidegger’s thinking, the history of being has been occluded or forgotten in favour of history as event. The work of the artist, in this reading, is thus fundamentally utopian – indeed, in his definition all art is, “in essence, poetry”, an activity which takes place in “the open region which poetry lets happen”, so that beings “shine and ring out”.<sup>14</sup> The artist, that is to say, enables a rediscovery of being. Jefferies’ vantage points on the Wiltshire or Sussex heights are saturated with a sense of space and light. In such “alternative” writing,

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<sup>11</sup> Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds*, London, 2005, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Stuart Eldin, *Mapping the Present*, London, 2001, 48-49.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell, London, 1993, 178.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 197.

as Heidegger puts it, “Light can stream into the clearing, into its openness”.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger’s notion of “pure space and ecstatic time” is liberating for mankind, a sense of liberation which the philosopher shares with Emerson and Jefferies: the earth becomes, in this body of writing, not a resource for agricultural or industrial exploitation but rather a “dwelling-place”. As Paul de Man observes in his commentary on Heidegger’s reading of Hölderlin:

Before Being produces itself, one lives in expectation; the mind stands vigil and is brought closer to the moment as concentration increases, in thought and in prayer. It produces itself then in the lightning of the *Jetzt*, in absolute temporal present. If one could say it, it would be founded because the word has durability and founds the moment in a spatial presence where one could dwell.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar spirit, in an essay entitled “On the Downs” written shortly before his early death, Jefferies wrote:

Stoop and touch the earth, and receive its influence; touch the flower, and feel its life; face the wind, and have its meaning; let the sunlight fall on the open hand as if you could hold it. Something may be grasped from them all, invisible yet strong. It is the sense of a wider existence – wider and higher.<sup>17</sup>

Jefferies here gestures towards an affinity with nature and “the beyond” which would elude his contemporaries in the age of a teleologically defined sense of “progress”. Then towards the end, in his notebooks, he would ruminate further:

I fetish Nature. Sea, sunshine, clear water, leaves. If I can see why not – if they cannot see I cannot help that – I see the sands and the stars, and subtle cosmical material far up, and feel through, and the more I touch these the greater grows my soul life and soul touch.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>16</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, London, 1983, 258.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Jefferies, “On the Downs”, in *Jefferies’ England*, ed. S.J. Looker, London, 1945, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*, ed. S.J. Looker, London, 1948, 283.

The drift of meaning here is towards an affinity with the natural world as a redemptive force in an age of mechanism.

In a fragment entitled "To the Planetarium", Walter Benjamin offers a gloss on this type of celebratory response to landscape, arguing that what distinguishes ancient from modern man is "the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods", and he goes on:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.

Thus, Benjamin stresses that such rapturous communion is not simply individualistic, "unimportant and avoidable". On the contrary, he avers, "its hour strikes again and again", as was made manifest "by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with cosmic powers" in a form of degraded sublimity conjured up in almost biblical terminology: "Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth." At this historical conjuncture, as the logical consequence of the industrial revolution, the "lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction" through this ecstatic union, and thus "technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath". In this catastrophic process, the ancients' rapport with nature gave way to a different response, so that "In the nights of annihilation of the last war the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic".<sup>19</sup>

More than a century earlier, Hegel had propounded the conditions for what he termed a "new religion", marked by many of the elements

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1985, 103-104.

that would characterize the thought of both Jefferies and the American Transcendentalists. This prophetic religion, Hegel suggests, is one “which already announces itself in revelations to single individuals”, and would be “discerned in the rebirth of nature as the symbol of eternal unity”.<sup>20</sup> It is the stress upon the individualistic character of the response to nature which both validates and undermines the utopian tendencies of Jefferies’ strain of thinking, tendencies which may be framed with reference to Ferdinand Tönnies’ concept of the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from a world of organic fellowship (which some Transcendentalists attempted to revive) towards a bourgeois society where individuals become units in the chain of production. Is Jefferies’ thought, despite its pantheistic ecstasy and luminous intensity, an anguished response to this crisis? Certainly he was never to espouse or join one of the many alternative communitarian projects in Victorian Britain, his utopia remaining an idiosyncratic model with apparently no followers. Nonetheless, it is incontrovertible that both Thoreau and Jefferies, in the words of their disciple, Henry Salt, sought “to combine the power of minute and patient observation with the exercise of a highly idealistic and imaginative faculty”.<sup>21</sup>

There is, however, another aspect to Jefferies’ thought which stands in opposition to this solipsistic version of Transcendentalism. In some of his sociological and agricultural essays he devotes much thought to issues of land ownership, and comes close to espousing a type of organic socialism. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the growth of ideas about a more equitable distribution of land ownership and a consequent alteration in society posited upon the thesis that the peasants had been progressively alienated from the land they worked. This dispossession, reaching its climax in the enclosures, would lead dialectically to the evolution of a range of social alternatives ranging from the Chartist communes of the 1840s to Ruskin’s quasi-feudal Guild of St George in the 1870s.<sup>22</sup> These movements, like Jefferies’ own thinking, owe their origins to elements of English Romanticism. In his “Thoughts on the Labour Question”,

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<sup>20</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, “On the Relation of Nature to Philosophy in General” (1802), in *Between Kant and Hegel*, eds G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris, Albany: NY, 1985, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Henry S. Salt, *Company I Have Kept*, London, 1930, 98.

<sup>22</sup> On these issues see Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities*, London, 1979, *passim*.

published posthumously in 1891, Jefferies offers a daunting picture of human labour and the “Divine Right of Capital”:

The fierce sunshine beats down upon the white sand, or chalk, or hard clay of the railway cutting whose narrow sides focus the heat like a lens. Brawny arms swing the pick and drive the pointed spades into the soil. Clod by clod, inch by inch, the heavy earth is loosened, and the mountain removed by atoms at a time. Aching arms these, weary backs, stiffened limbs – brows black with dirt and perspiration. The glaring chalk blinds the eye with its whiteness; the slippery sand gives beneath the footstep, or rises with the wind and fills the mouth with grit; the clay clings to the boot, weighing the leg down as lead.

The “director” or “financier” is depicted “Rolling in his carriage”: “One man whipped with Hunger toils half-naked in the Pit, face to face with death; the other is crowned by his fellows sitting in state with fine wines and the sound of jubilee”.<sup>23</sup> As Diana Morrow points out, in an acute analysis of this piece, during the 1880s Jefferies would assume “the mantle of transcendental nature priest” at the same time as he forged political links with the New Liberalism. She argues that in his later transcendental essays and *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies writes prophetically, as one who “deplored the prevailing mechanistic, commercial ethos of the times, and envisaged a future when man, inspired by the abundance and beauty of nature, would cast off the constrictions of the present and fulfil his potential”.<sup>24</sup> This late thinking, Morrow demonstrates, began to have a practical effect after Jefferies’ death, exerting a crucial influence, for instance, upon both the formulation of Lloyd George’s Liberal programme of land reform and of Robert Blatchford’s communitarian socialism.

In this important sense, therefore, Jefferies’ writing possesses both visionary and practical elements, and it was this potent conjunction of qualities that was to trigger one of the most significant of all literary utopias. In the spring of 1885, William Morris was returning from a visit to the north of England, and on the train he read what he designated “a queer book” which he greatly enjoyed: “absurd hopes

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Jefferies, “Thoughts on the Labour Question”, *Richard Jefferies Society Journal*, VIII (1999), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Diana Morrow, “‘Thoughts on the Labour Question’: An Alternative View”, *ibid.*, 25.

curled around my heart as I read it.”<sup>25</sup> This book was Jefferies’ fantasy-romance, *After London* (1885), a work which Morris “was never weary of praising”, as J.W. Mackail recalled, because “it put into definite shape, with a mingling of effusive romance and a minute detail that was entirely after his heart, much that he had half imagined”.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to Mrs Burne-Jones, Morris welcomed the “destruction” of civilization: “how often it consoles me to think of barbarism flooding the world, and real feelings and passions ... taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.”<sup>27</sup> This consolation, I suggest, derives at least in part from Richard Jefferies, and a reference in the letter to “the days of Noah” clearly alludes to a significant feature of *After London*, the great lake that inundates southern England. The first part of Jefferies’ romance deals with “The Relapse into Barbarism”, the recession of England after some aboriginal calamity, so that the landscape is once again cloaked in forest, the towns evacuated, mechanical inventions lost and forgotten, and a great lake flooding the “South Country”.

The book’s action centres upon the career of a young man, Felix Aquila, and his progress around the lake. The theme of a “dispeopled” England, the quasi-medieval social order, and the quest-theme all resonated with Morris, and served crucially as determinants in the composition of *News from Nowhere*. In *After London*, the destruction and flooding of the city has led to the creation of a desolate landscape in which the blackened water “bears a greenish-brown floating scum, which for ever bubbles up from the putrid mud” in a scene dominated by a low cloud hanging over the “oily liquid”.<sup>28</sup> The dystopian elements here and in Morris’ account of “the change” may both owe something to Dickens’ powerful depiction of the American “New Eden” in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844):

A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the

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<sup>25</sup> William Morris, *The Letters of William Morris*, ed. P. Henderson, London, 1950, 236.

<sup>26</sup> J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols, London, 1899, II, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Letters*, 236.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Jefferies, *After London*, Oxford, 1980, 37-38.

very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burnt them up ... this was the realm of Hope through which they moved.<sup>29</sup>

In the last analysis, Richard Jefferies and William Morris are crucially, unlike the satirical Dickens, however, “pilgrims of hope”, looking towards a renovated future society, and both of their romance texts partake of the seminal elements of the literary utopia as defined by Michel Foucault:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up ... countries where life is easy, even the road to them is chimerical .... This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula.<sup>30</sup>

The writings of Jefferies and the American Transcendentalists, to sum up, are equally marked with traces of that crucial connection between man and the spatial world permeated with the desire for transcendence. In the final notebook entries for the early summer of 1887, written when he was mortally ill, Jefferies avers, “The transcendental soul I understand”.<sup>31</sup> The insistent quest in these final ruminations for what Jefferies terms “the Beyond” signify what Homi Bhabha has designated a “spatial distance” that “promises the future”. Bhabha’s carefully inflected argument goes on:

The imaginary of spatial distance ... throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, not longer a synchronic presence .... We are now confronted with what Walter Benjamin describes as the blasting of a monadic moment from the homogeneous course of history, establishing a concept of the present as the “time of the now”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, ed. P.N. Furbank, Harmondsworth, 1968, 442.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York, 1994, 194.

<sup>31</sup> Jefferies, *Notebooks*, 281.

<sup>32</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, 2004, 5-6.

In his scattered and gnomic closing remarks, Jefferies rejects what he classifies as the “Transcendental excitement of the soul” in favour of a sense of “touch” which he associated with the sense of his days on the Ridgeway: “The *transcendental repose* is most.”<sup>33</sup> In this complex moment of revelation, consciousness itself functions as the “index of transcendental ideal beyond spiritual”: “Sun Life is the recognition of the Beyond not in everything but by everything, as the sea now roaring.” Again, “Sun Life, the sea, contemplation leads to the Beyond most”, to what Jefferies designates, “The immense Mind beyond Mind”. At the end, Jefferies makes a final prophetic gesture away from his intense individualism and towards that communal utopia which he both sought and evaded throughout his life: “I feel myself so very very stupid: I cannot see or understand. If not settle the infinite I may start a social band.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Jefferies, *Notebooks*, 284.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.