
Violence, Violation, and the Limits of Ethics in Robinson Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks"

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“Hurt Hawks” opens with a brutal scene—a broken wing and a bloody shoulder, a hawk waiting to die. The wing bone “jags,” the shoulder is “clotted,” and the misery of this broken totem is brought into stark relief. Resonating with the rawness of a life on the threshold of death the poem transitions from this harsh portrayal of an unforgiving wilderness to the speaker’s defiant ethical stance toward humanity, and finally to the fierce sublimity of nature that is released through the hawk’s death. On both a rhetorical and ethical level there is an “anarchic rupture” of the human subject, a splintering of the notion that the human, through reason and language, is the dominant being in the world.¹

This close reading of “Hurt Hawks” focuses on the rhetorical and thematic violence and violation that challenge the primary ontological status of the human in relation to the nonhuman.² Jeffers’ assault on the human throughout much of his work upsets the historical anthropocentric classification of value that regards the nonhuman as unworthy of serious ethical consideration. Bryan Moore writes that “many of his poems remain valuable in their function as a corrective to the purely anthropocentric view of the world that dominates Western thought” (61). Broadening Moore’s assertion, this essay also claims that Jeffers’ poems, as evidenced by “Hurt Hawks,” are valuable for revealing the possibilities of poetic language and the limit of common ethics.

Jeffers’ conviction that the nonhuman, or the “transhuman” as he refers to it, deserves to be included within our ethical sphere finds its clearest prose expression in his “Preface” to the collection *The Double Axe*, in which he defines the concept of “Inhumanism.” Though Jeffers’ poetic and ethical vision is best accessed through the poetry itself, his explicit formulation of this idea allows us to determine to what extent “Hurt Hawks” satisfies or frustrates or exceeds its demand. Inhumanism is

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 is neither misanthropic nor pessimistic.... 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. (xxi)

This grave but cautiously hopeful challenge to humanity to relinquish its assumed dominion over the nonhuman is Jeffers' attempt to situate us fully in the world. "Hurts Hawks" rejects human primacy and acknowledges the grander context that both the human and the nonhuman inhabit, allowing us to recognize the "transhuman magnificence," which may also be called the sublime.

The poem's rhetorical power lies in its coldly violent tone and imagery, catachreses such as "lead gift," jolting narrative breaks, shifts in voice that alter the reader's relationship to the subjects of the poem, and finally in its resignation to the impossibility of language to express the sublime. The first fourteen lines of stanza one present, in a reasonably detached third-person voice, the hawk's injured and tormented condition, and beyond our role as reader-witness, we are not involved in these events:

The broken pillar of the wing jags from the clotted shoulder,
The wing trails like a banner in defeat,
No more to use the sky forever but live with famine
And pain a few days: cat nor coyote
Will shorten the week of waiting for death, there is game without talons.
He stands under the oak-bush and waits
The lame feet of salvation; at night he remembers freedom
And flies in a dream, the dawns ruin it.
He is strong and pain is worse to the strong, incapacity is worse.
The curs of the day come and torment him
At distance, no one but death the redeemer will humble that head,
The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.

The speaker's somber yet unsentimental portrayal of the hawk's circumstance—broken, bloody, lame, yet defiant—reveals the hawk's fierce pride; yet he is not one of "the arrogant."

In lines 15-17 the speaker's voice abruptly shifts to the second-person, and assumes an accusatory tone: "You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him; / Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him; / Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are dying, remember him." This shift in voice brings the reader into blunt contact with the speaker, who pulls him or her into the hawk's psychological space and the ethical realm of the poem.

This address to the reader, “you communal people,” is a curious epithet. “Communal” refers to those living in close society with others and to the positive ideals of such a social organization: cooperation and sharing. Yet to the speaker it is a tainted word connoting a humanistic arrogance and is intended as a term of shame. This is a double-sided indictment: it may refer to those who have had no exposure to wild nature, those residing only in the human-social realm, which leaves open, however, the prospect that by venturing beyond human society and into wildness it is possible to escape this criticism. Less optimistically, it may refer to all of humanity, implying that the entire species has fallen irreparably from the grace of the “wild God.” This is a universal, all-encompassing sphere of condemnation; and the accusation of a fundamental misanthropy is unjustly leveled at Jeffers by those critics who adopt this second perspective without qualification, as the poem’s complex ethic ultimately illustrates. Whichever view is taken, though, both of these perspectives shift the reader’s initially remote position to that of an implicated reader-object now acted on by the poem.

The indignant tone of these final two lines of the stanza exposes the ethical gap between the “communal people” who do not know or have forgotten the “wild God,” and the hawk, who remains close to him. For the speaker, virtue lies only in proximity to this transcendent god. These lines are problematic however, as it is uncertain whether the hawk or the wild God is “Intemperate and savage” and “Beautiful and wild.” This uncertainty demonstrates Jeffers’ subtle poetic maneuvering and rhetorical subversion: by thwarting a straightforward reading here, in addition to unbalancing the poem’s tone through the recriminatory interlude into the narrative, he disorients us in the act of reading.³

As the poem transitions to the second stanza, the speaker’s voice shifts to the first-person singular. But this time, when he addresses us, he does not simply criticize our narrow perspective or lapsed memory; he threatens us with death.⁴ With a violent narrative break at line 18, the speaker suspends his account of the hawk’s agony and stages a hostile exchange with the reader: “I’d sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk,” he says. The speaker is no longer simply a narrator but an antagonistic agent who destroys any aesthetic distance we may have had from the poem’s violence. This rupture, serving no narrative function, is a direct ethical statement to the reader, which will be discussed toward the end of this analysis.

After this second aggressive intrusion, the speaker returns to his narrative: “but the great redtail / Had nothing left but unable misery / From the bones too shattered for mending, the wing that trailed under his talons when he moved” (18-20). Despite his attempt to repair the broken wing—synecdochic for the broken

life—the hawk has only “unable misery.” The hawk’s absolute lack in this crippled state is made plain; thus, the hawk is defined by its wild and predatory nature. Its metaphorical power lies in this wild nature as well. It represents everything that the human should embrace: strength, freedom, “intrepid readiness,” and an awareness of the “wild God of the world.” Through this dual recognition of its actuality and referentiality, the speaker reveals a deep and knowing compassion for the hawk. He expresses his compassion also by trying to nurse it back to health: “We had fed him six weeks, I gave him freedom,” he says (21). But he is ultimately resigned to the hawk’s fate and his own: it must die, and he must be the one to kill it.⁵ This final freedom is a noble end: “If there is anything resembling hope in Jeffers’ inhumanism,” Moore writes, “it is in the idea that death is a humbler, ‘the redeemer’” (60). And not only is the hawk redeemed through death—the speaker and reader are also allowed the possibility of their own redemption.

Peter O’Leary’s cynical perspective on this act allows for a more comprehensive response to the hawk’s death:

The conflict Jeffers works through in this poem is the guilt he feels slaying the mythic hawk striking against his sense of despair at the world of people he lives in. This poem relates an inflation of poetic self-consciousness—infused with super-ego—too rapidly expanding, such that a ritual slaying exposes human, spiritual weakness refuted in the hampered creature being killed. Jeffers is neither prophet nor speaker here, only a man filled with shame and a mean pride in knowing how to express his shame. (361)

For O’Leary, the killing redeems neither hawk nor speaker nor reader. It is simply the grim act of an ashamed man. But the poem is more complex than he admits: though the speaker feels remorse for shooting the hawk, and though he does despair at human society, he does not experience guilt. Instead he suffers a sorrowful ethical righteousness from his obligation to euthanize the hawk. While the poem does expose “human, spiritual weakness refuted in the hampered creature,” this is not expressed during the kill. This refutation of the human comes earlier, with Jeffers’ condemnation of the “communal people.” With the “lead gift” the speaker fulfills his responsibility to a creature that is, cruelly, “No more to use the sky forever.” The ritual slaying displays the speaker’s respect for the hawk, contrasted with his contempt for the “beggar, still eyed with the old / Implacable arrogance” (23). In the killing moment the speaker appears a worthy example of humanity by satisfying the Inhumanist imperative. By releasing the hawk from its miserable corporeality, he realizes the transhuman magnificence and allows us, through the experience of the poem, the same possibility: “I gave him the lead gift in the twilight. What fell was relaxed, / Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what / Soared: the fierce rush:

the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising / Before it was quite unsheathed from reality” (24-27). Jeffers’ speaker here is not “a man filled with shame and a mean pride,” but rather a catalyst for the sublime, and this is precisely what makes him both poet and prophet.⁶

Immediately following the hawk’s death lay the poem’s inhumanist core. The speaker attempts to articulate what Rudolph Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, terms a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁷ For Jeffers, this “mysterium tremendum” is a fierce and unbound wild Other. The poem’s diction changes from the concrete “hawk” and “him” in lines 1-24 to the indeterminate “what” and “it” of lines 25-27. It shifts as well into a passive voice: “What fell was relaxed, / ... but what / Soared: the fierce rush...” This passivity highlights the uncertain agency of the “fierce rush.” The first “what” is clear: the hawk’s body. The next instance—“what soared”—is ambiguous.⁸ The “rush” and the final two occurrences of “it” are similarly obscure. These signifiers point to formless, immaterial things, and for the first time the poem necessarily ventures into abstraction. It is here that we encounter Jeffers’ sense of the sublime, which loosely corresponds with, yet also exceeds, the Kantian sublime. Kant writes, “The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as *limitlessness* is represented in it” (128). The hawk’s body—a concrete, bounded object—is beautiful; what soared—undefinable and limitless—is sublime.

In this indeterminate “it,” as it soars and frightens and is “unsheathed from reality,” we can detect some kind of might or power. For Kant, “*Power* is a capacity that is superior to great obstacles. The same thing is called *dominion* if it is also superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power. Nature considered in an aesthetic judgment as power that has no dominion over us is *dynamically sublime*” (143).⁹ Though the sublimity of nature in “Hurt Hawks” transcends the limits of this definition, the formulation of “power” is crucial for reconsidering human dominion over the nonhuman. The “fierce rush” is powerful not only to the night-herons, who “cried fear at its rising,” but also—and more significantly—in its overpowering of determinate language it is fearful to us. Kant writes, “If nature is to be judged by us dynamically as sublime, it must be represented as arousing fear” (143). The speaker’s language is, like the hawk, fearful, “intemperate and savage”; still, it cannot overcome the inarticulability of this rush, an awesome phenomenon of nature. It can only be a “what,” and to the extent that we are made human by language, this rush has dominion over our humanity.¹⁰

A stubbornly humanist mind would take offense at this failure of language when confronted with this ineffable nonhuman rush. Similarly, the Kantian

sublime initially offends the mind as it dwells at the point at which both the imagination and reason realize that there is something uncapturable beyond them, a blankness or void, a logical gap. Yet for Kant the sublime is still an intricately rational experience of the mind, not an object or element of nature external to it: “we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some *object of nature* sublime.... We can say no more than that the object serves for the presentation of a sublimity that can be found in the mind; for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason” (129). He continues: “it indicates nothing purposive in nature itself, but only in that possible *use* of its intuitions to make palpable in ourselves a purposiveness that is entirely independent of nature” (130). Here we begin to see the limits of a theory that confines the sublime to the mind and denies any purposiveness to nature. The Jeffersian sublime, which is both an experience of the mind and a “thing,” a boundless object of nature (the fierce rush), transcends the Kantian sublime. For Jeffers, an experience of a sublime that is a powerful, albeit formless, object external to the mind is simultaneously a sublime experience in or of the mind.

Grasping Jeffers’ expression of the sublime demands a further willingness to complicate and rethink Kant’s theory.¹¹ Kant ultimately identifies the mind as the victor over the inexpressible sublime, writing, “Thus nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to the point of presenting those cases in which the mind can make palpable to itself the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature” (145). Jeffers, on the other hand, through the rhetorical amorphousness of the final lines of the poem, recognizes the nonhuman sublime as existing beyond any linguistic or epistemological possibility, and thereby accepts its vocation over the human. The poem further shows the constraints of a philosophy that posits that the sublime can only be experienced “as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature” (144). Rhetorically, this poem offers no safe space in which to resist or find courage to gauge ourselves over and against the natural world. The “all-powerfulness of nature” is not apparent or illusory, but actual.

Albert Gelpi questions whether the shortcomings or “disconnections” of language that we find in Jeffers’ work can provide a safe point of access to the sublime: “Can language be a sign and instantiation not just of disconnection but of connection? More precisely, can language in its disconnection thereby offer the frail human a protective stratagem for engaging the sublime without submitting to

its annihilative totality? The poems answer, tentatively but persistently, yes” (15). Yet “Hurt Hawks” does not provide any such “protective stratagem”; its language ultimately breaks down in the face of the fierce sublimity of nature, thus violating whatever power we may have as a result of language, leaving us annihilated.¹²

Despite the narrowness of Kant’s theory its usefulness for reading “Hurt Hawks” is not yet exhausted, especially in its analysis of the initial inability of the imagination to grasp the sublime: “Nature is thus sublime in those of its appearances the intuition of which brings with them the idea of its infinity. Now the latter cannot happen except through the inadequacy of even the greatest effort of our imagination in the estimation of the magnitude of an object” (138). Infinity, as defined here, is inestimable by the imagination. The “fierce rush,” as it is “unsheathed from reality,” is not containable or calculable, and insofar as Jeffers’ imagination and language are inadequate to render this infinite rush beyond a “what” and an “it,” it is similarly infinite and sublime.

Though Kant is dismissive of any inherent sublimity in nature, the natural world is Jeffers’ poetic foundation, and as such his poems desire to reveal its innate sublimity and purposiveness. “Hurt Hawks” expresses a sublime in nature whose effect is ironically consistent with Kant’s design: “that which, without any rationalizing, merely in apprehension, excites in us the feeling of the sublime, may to be sure appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that” (129). This violence to the imagination is evident in the speaker’s inability to adequately judge or present the sublime in language. But the fact that for Kant the sublime cannot be found in any object of nature, nor does it “indicate [anything] purposive in nature,” and can, in the end, be overcome by rationality, displays a refusal to expand his formulation beyond the human sphere or grant the sublime any real and transformative power. This refusal enables the marginalization of nature and the nonhuman. However, what “Hurt Hawks” accomplishes through the valuation of the hawk’s life over human life and the ultimate failure of its language (which is actually its great success), is the exact opposite: the marginalization of the human. The poem thus reverses the common trajectory of definition in determining the human in relation to the hawk and the fierce rush, making us other to them. This violent reversal is the ethical crux of this poetic act.

In crafting this experience of a fierce natural sublime, Jeffers establishes a tripartite ethicality between the reader-object and his poetic subjects (the hawk, the speaker, and the rush), which obliges us to question our ethical stance toward the nonhuman, as embodied, or now more accurately disembodied, in the hawk.

1) Initially, the reader responds to the hawk. From lines 1-14, the hawk is the primary subject of the poem, and through the description of its suffering the poem illustrates the harsh reality of nature and provokes a feeling of compassion for the injured creature. 2) The reader then responds to the speaker, who directly addresses us in lines 15-17, through the shift to the second-person voice and the pointed use of “communal people.” Sympathy for the hawk is promptly displaced by a solipsistic concern for the insulted human ego. At line 18, with the threat of death, the reader is provoked to indifference to the hawk’s suffering, contemplating instead his or her own mortality. 3) Finally, the reader responds to the sublime, the indeterminate “ferce rush.” Now, linguistically, psychologically, and ontologically unsettled, we are left with a lack of feeling, an emptiness, in the face of this power. After rousing us to feel compassion for the other, the poem suddenly compels us into confronting our own limitations in the face of this other. “Many readers of Jeffers’s ‘somber and God-tormented poems,’” Gelpi writes, “find them disturbing and offensive. Understandably and rightly so: they are meant to be so jolting that they will, in the words of ‘Carmel Point,’ ‘uncenter our minds from ourselves ... unhumanize our views a little’—and thus change the way we think and live” (12). The poem’s stratified ethicality problematizes the human relationship to the nonhuman, and through this complex rubric Jeffers demands that we reevaluate our judgments about the human self and the nonhuman other.

I have specifically used the term “response” in regard to the way the reader engages with the poem precisely because a response is what it requires, rather than a psychologically or emotionally defensive reaction to its violence. There is an analogical relationship between Jeffers’ ethical rebellion against humanism and Derrida’s deconstruction of the human/animal—response/reaction binary in his essay, “And Say the Animal Responded?” Derrida’s purpose in this essay is to cast suspicion on the very possibility of being ethical. He argues against the anthropocentric Cartesian and Lacanian conceptions of the animal as a simply reactive other and questions Lacan’s position that (in Derrida’s words), “the animal has neither unconscious nor language, nor the other, except as an effect of the human order, that is, by contagion, appropriation, domestication” (123). According to Derrida, Lacan contends that “When bees appear to ‘respond’ to a ‘message,’ they do not respond but react; they merely obey a fixed program, whereas the human subject responds to the other, to the question posed by the other. This discourse is quite literally Cartesian ... Lacan expressly contrasts *reaction* with *response* in conformity with his opposition between human and animal kingdom” (125).¹³ For Derrida, Lacan’s animal is defined, made other, and marginalized by the human.¹⁴

Derrida aims to unsettle this distinction and challenge this marginalization by first simply posing the question: what if the animal responded? Imagining this possibility, he writes,

casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one's own being-ethical, seems to me to be—and is perhaps what should forever remain—the unrescindable essence of ethics: decision and responsibility. Every firm knowledge, certainty, and assurance on this subject would suffice, precisely, to confirm the very thing one wishes to disavow, namely, the reactivity in the response. I indeed said 'to disavow' [*denier*], and it is for that reason that I situate disavowal at the heart of all these discourses on the animal. (128)

For Derrida, then, any knowledge we take for granted, any unquestioned principles we hold with regard to our ethicality, undermines that ethicality and confirms our own reactivity, which is exactly what we desire to deny in ourselves and affirm in the animal.

Embracing Derrida's assertion that "casting doubt" is a necessary component of ethics, we realize,

It is less a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power ... than of asking whether what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal, and whether he can ever possess the *pure, rigorous, indivisible* concept, as such, of that attribution. (137)

What this means is that if we are to act ethically, we must, at the very least, be circumspect in our self-attribution of any absolute and singular responsiveness. In the same way that Derrida interrogates this responsiveness, "Hurt Hawks," in its violence and perfect linguistic failure, challenges our agency and dominion over the nonhuman, and insists that we reconsider our ethical position toward the animal and nature.

Though we may jealously guard our ontological status as the primary subject in the world, the aporia that results from this deconstructed binary—the same aporia that results from the experience of the sublime in the poem—opens up an intellectual and imaginary space in which we can recognize the myth of pure human subjectivity and pure animal objectivity, and consequently extend to the animal our ethical consideration. Derrida asks at the beginning of his essay, "Would an ethics be sufficient, as Levinas maintains, to remind the subject of its being-subject, its being-guest, host or hostage, that is to say its being-subjected-to-the-other, to the Wholly Other or to every single other?" He answers that it would not: "It takes more than that to break with the Cartesian tradition of the

animal-machine that exists without language and without the ability to respond” (121). Jeffers’ Inhumanism, itself an affirmative ethical statement, only partially suffices. It suggests that we acknowledge the transhuman magnificence, but does not exemplify or perform it, nor does it cast doubt on our subjectivity. This mode of thought is to be found instead in Jeffers’ fierce poetic sublime. “Hurt Hawks” is not cynical or misanthropic, but severe and ethically demanding. As it violently exposes human rational, rhetorical, and ethical limitation we find that perhaps it is sufficient to remind us of our being-subjected-to the nonhuman other. ✱

Notes

¹ I have adopted this expression from Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. She uses this term to discuss one of the rhetorical developments of Modernist poetics, writing, “Modernism inaugurated a reversal of values which emphasized ... anarchic rupture and innovation rather than the conventional appeals of sentimental language” (1). In stressing Modernism’s desire to defamiliarize the established operations of language, Clark’s use of this term is well-suited to describe the effect of Jeffers’ poem: the alienation or estrangement of the reader-subject from the text, and thereby from his or her own subjectivity.

² Albert Gelpi delineates these themes in “Robinson Jeffers and the Sublime,” his introductory essay to the anthology, *The Wild God of the World*. In expanding on the poem’s performance of these elements, I hope to show their necessity for expressing Jeffers’ poetic and ethical desire.

³ This is one instance where Jeffers’ work is stylistically “Modernist,” as these lines to exemplify the previously mentioned “anarchic rupture.” It is this layer of Jeffers’ work that is often overlooked, as he is commonly read today, save for certain critics like Gelpi, simply as a “nature poet,” and was often read in his time, by New Critics like Yvor Winters, with a grand disdain. Winters views him as a misanthrope who “has abandoned narrative logic with the theory of ethics, and he has never achieved ... a close and masterly style. His writing is loose, turgid, and careless; like most anti-intellectualists, he relies on his feelings alone and has no standard of criticism for them outside of themselves” (282). Winters continues, “One might classify [him] as a ‘great failure’ if one meant by the phrase that he had wasted unusual talents; but not if one meant that he had failed in a major effort, for his aims are badly thought-out and essentially trivial” (286). Though he is not viewed so negatively now, such a myopic view of his work has confined Jeffers’ reputation, a circumstance this article desires in part to redress.

⁴ Moore finds a similar narrative path in “The Purse-Seine.” He writes that it “opens by grounding the subject in concrete action,” in this case the efforts of sardine fishermen to haul in their catch. He then follows Jeffers’ “objective narrative” voice in the first six lines through the more subjective later stanzas, which utilize the first-person singular. Jeffers then “abandons his narrative for direct commentary, and the purse-seine becomes a metaphor/personification for the inevitability of the downfall of civilization” (59). By the end of “Hurt Hawks,” as we will see, the release of the hawk’s spirit from its body becomes not a metaphor for the downfall of civilization, but an instantiation of the sublime.

⁵ Why the speaker himself must kill the hawk, and why his act is ultimately neither sentimental nor an interference into the natural order is a difficulty the poem does not perhaps fully resolve. Without knowing the circumstances of the hawk’s injury (whether caused by human cruelty

or carelessness or through nonhuman causes) it is possible to read his actions as those of a sentimental man who feels pity for the injured creature, but this view neglects to account for the terribly pointed language of his address to the reader. The speaker does not consider himself one of the “communal people”; he dwells more fully with the hawk than with us, allowing him to somewhat avoid charges of interference. However, he does appear to struggle with his desire to engage the hawk on its own terms rather than on human terms: he feeds and cares for it before resigning to killing it. This impulse to nurture an injured animal is a typically sentimental human behavior. The speaker pulls himself off this path in the end, though. It is apparent, finally, from his coarse, grim tone that he is profoundly attuned to the hawk’s bleak condition without falling prey to nostalgia or romanticizing nature.

⁶ Gelpi writes, “Jeffers is a prophet, and prophecy is meant to be a performative act. His words translate into human terms the reality of the transcendent power—often in challenging but intentionally transformative denunciation of the values and conduct of the prophet’s hearers and readers. The prophet’s message demands a conversion” (12). As we will see, this conversion, or redemption, comes with the poem’s deconstruction of the human/nonhuman—response/reaction binary.

⁷ This can be translated as “a mystery that terrifies yet fascinates.” Otto’s “mysterium” is that which is “beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other,’ whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in a wonder that strikes us chill and numb” (28). The fact that this “wholly other” is simultaneously fascinating and terrifying allows us to draw a connection between it and Jeffers’ use of poetic violence to disquiet us in the face of the fierce natural sublime. We are repelled by this violence while at the same time compelled to confront it.

⁸ Compounding this ambiguity, there is a curious feminization of the hawk’s body in death, with the phrase “Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers” (25). Though at this point merely superficial, this switch parallels the philosophic move Barbara Freeman makes in her work *The Feminine Sublime* (cf. Note 11).

⁹ The dynamically sublime is contrasted with the “mathematically sublime,” which is concerned with the magnitude of an object or thing. A thing is considered mathematically sublime when its magnitude can be comprehended only in discrete parts, but in its entirety is beyond full comprehension. The mind can engage this magnitude only in fragments (131-140). The dynamically sublime, on the other hand, cannot be adequately grasped in any configuration or collection of fragments.

¹⁰ In Lacan’s conception, to be born into language is to become human. He writes, “the moment at which desire is humanized is also that at which the child is born into language” (262). Though this will be expanded on this later, for now it is sufficient to state that Lacan denies language to the animal, which to him possesses only fixed signs of communication. In referring to the communication system of bees, he writes, “We can say that it is distinguished from language precisely by the fixed correlation of its signs to the reality that they signify. For in a language signs take on their value from their relations to each other ... in sharp contrast to the fixity of the coding used by bees. And the diversity of human languages (*langues*) takes on its full value from this enlightening discovery” (Derrida 125). Lacan here asserts a firm linguistic and thereby psycho-ontological boundary between the human and the animal.

¹¹ Barbara Claire Freeman undertakes a similar project in her book *The Feminine Sublime*, writing, “From Longinus’ day until ours writers have viewed the sublime as a more or less

explicit mode of domination. The vast majority of theorists conceptualize it as a struggle for mastery between opposing powers, as the self's attempt to appropriate and contain whatever would exceed, and thereby undermine, it....” She continues: “For Kant ... the sublime moment entails the elevation of reason over an order of experience that cannot be represented” (2). For Freeman, the value of conceiving a feminine sublime lies not in “represent[ing] the object of rapture as a way of incorporating it, as the traditional sublime of domination does,” but in “not attempt[ing] to master its objects of rapture” (3). Though it is too simple to label the Jeffersian sublime a “feminine sublime” there is a distinct resonance between Freeman’s project and my own: to show how “Hurt Hawks” complicates the notion that we can master the sublime and thereby confirm our dominance over the nonhuman.

¹² However, in remarks on “Rock and Hawk,” Gelpi reads in a manner similar to mine and provides a valuable insight into the sublime in Jeffers’ work: “The imagined, perhaps unrealizable ideal would therefore be ... a fusion of the ‘fierce consciousness’ and ‘bright power’ of the hawk with the ‘final disinterestedness’ and ‘dark peace’ of stone. Nevertheless, Jeffers finds a flawed but honorable function for the activity of the conscious imagination in striving through language to exceed the limits of ego and thus achieve the disposition in which he can embody his experience in the poem with something of the sublimity of nature” (17). “Hurt Hawks” similarly displays Jeffers’ “striving through language” to express the sublimity of nature while recognizing the ultimate impossibility of doing so.

¹³ Derrida continues: “As for the absence of a response in the animal-machine, as for the trenchant distinction between *reaction* and *response*, there is nothing fortuitous in the fact that the most Cartesian passage of all is found following the discourse on the bee, on its system of information, which would exclude it from the ‘field of speech and language.’ It is indeed a matter of the constitution of the subject as human subject to the extent that the latter crosses the frontier of information to gain access to speech: [Lacan writes] ‘For the function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question’” (126). Derrida objects to Lacan’s acceptance of Descartes’ unquestioning denial of the animal’s ability to pose a question to, and thereby elicit a response from, the other.

¹⁴ We can see here a parallel between Lacan’s perspective and Kant’s theory, which also subordinates the nonhuman through a denial.

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