Bachelor of Philosophy Sample Thesis Prospectus
(English Literature/Philosophy)

Title: Looking at the Visible: Robinson Jeffers, Perception, Earth, and Visible Essentials

This is a rock.

A rock performs, endures, and gradually changes position. Robinson Jeffers writes, “the strain of the rock has no repose.” Each time an object is described or intoned in Jeffers’ verse, whether ontologically, scientifically, or aesthetically, there is a concomitant analysis of how we look at it. A looking which may be described as a pre-reflective moment of perception, a looking dependent on binocular eyeballs that pivot in sockets, that swivel on neutral information systems anticipating balance and visual input, foveating objects in the environment. What could a pre-reflective visual experience possibly reveal? In “De Rerum Virtute” the poet offers a suggestion:

One light is left us: the beauty of things, not men;
The immense beauty of the world, not the human world
Look – and without imagination, desire nor dream – directly
At the mountains and sea. Are they not beautiful? (CP 3:404)

The world that is “not the human world” is the Heideggerian earth. The human world is the constructed universe that overlies its unacknowledged basis: earth. For Jeffers, the earth foretells the godhead because “the earth is his prophet.” The only things worldly prophesy projects are cultural boomerangs. When we treat the “abstract references” of the world as prophetic it is our own obstructions that swing back at us, supposedly from the future. The world “cannot endure anything closed” (PLT, 47). The parasitic world, Tadeusz Slawek tells us, “is a result of semiotization of nature, of interpreting it as a message, communication, or revelation” (45). So for Jeffers it is from reading the oracle bone of world that religion may cull the prophecy of a savior – earth makes no such intimations. To return to the poem above with this framework, we can pick up on the really interesting thing happening here. According to the poem, one can perceive, cognize, and fell beauty by looking “directly / at the mountains and sea.” These components of the planet, free of human abstractions and systems, exude it. This direct, transcriptual alchemy occurs with via the simple conjunction of a visible, phenomenal world and the active perception of a human brain. The poem is the work which as “work lets the earth be on earth” (PLT, 46)

The act of looking is the key catalyst in this reason. A chemical catalyst, strictly defined, is not consumed in a reaction. In the verse of Robinson Jeffers visible perception, the fundamental act of looking, is taken up, taken in, and hidden, by the manifold. Our looking is then regurgitated back into a world described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as saturated with perceptions. Here is a peculiar and intriguing catalyst in the reaction between phenomenon and mind. We have not studied it thoroughly enough as a component of Jeffer’s epistemology for human knowledge of beauty and earth. A more in-depth treatment is a primary aim of this thesis, through a thorough reading of the collected poems as well as theoretical engagement with Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wilfrid Sellars.

In a book embracing the metaphoric power of composting for reading
postmodern American poetry, Jed Rasula writes that "the work of poetry is mulching human order through language" (90). The deconstructive mulch that results from such linguistic composting often leads to a fecund verse, but this is not the modicum of composting that Jeffers employs. In his poetry human order is mulched by the visible. It is not a poetry of the mountains (language) that is most efficacious for "burning off some of the acid of the age," (check "") but rather the mountains themselves (the visible) and it is our looking at them prepares them to be effective for deconstructing misapplied human orders.

Robert Zaller rightly claims that Jeffers reverses the Romantics' hierarchy of imagination over nature ("California Sublime," 54). In fact, Jeffers turns the hierarchy upside down and shakes it so that its interconnections are jumbled and refigured, no longer a linear, vertical hierarchy. Earth is not only not a product of the human imagination, but it is an organic curative for the wounded human imagination as Jeffers's recurrent call to look, turn, and think "outward" attests.

To look is to embrace an incredible power of perception available to all that exists. This is power not over something, but power in terms of opportunities the perceptive ability and its saturation affords us. This power predominates in earth, and its tendrils ultimately pierce through to and influence world. This thesis will investigate how Jeffers's poetry engages with the quanta of perception available to us in the world with the goal of returning us to full communion with the omnipervasive denizens, living and nonliving, of earth.

Introduction: Existence and phenomena, a philosophical framework

In The Loyalties of Robinson Jeffers Radcliffe Squires investigates Jeffers' intellectual and philosophical influences. He addresses the influence of Nietzsche on Jeffers to dismiss that he is a vital influence. Rather than look to Nietzsche, Squires points us toward Arthur Schopenhauer as Jeffers' much stronger philosophical ally.

Schopenhauer's thought is an attractive resource for reading Jeffers. The poet's fundamental imperative to "turn outward" and "love the coast opposite humanity" reverberates through Schopenhauer's own calls to diminish the importance of the individual consciousness. Schopenhauer's extensive philosophy of the will clearly has applications for understanding the poet's work. Jeffers and Schopenhauer are both interested in the way that human beings look at the world, and have faith that molding and changing our ways of looking hold promise for changing the way we live on this earth and the way the earth lives with us. With the belief that the quality of "objectconsciousness is vital to the quality of subject-consciousness," Schopenhauer suggests that "aesthetic perception of objects be maintained as long as possible" (Wicks). Schopenhauer's thought appeals to artists and academicians because it privileges the artist as an elite perceiver. The artist's perception probes Platonic forms and then the task is to communicate these to "those who cannot have the idealizing power to see through.. the ordinary world of spatiotemporal objects" (Wicks). While Schopenhauer and Jeffers share a belief in the plasticity of our looking, I believe that they differ on some of the fundamental particulars of just what we are and should be looking at.

For Jeffers "The beauty of things-- / Is in the beholder's brain" (SP 596), each human being already carries the equipment for seeing the world's fundamental element (beauty) with him. This more egalitarian distribution of the ability for true
and full perception is in stark contrast to the superior interlocutor Schopenhauer suggests most people need to see the world. Squires suggests an ideological homology between Jeffers and Schopenhauer—that "there exists behind appearance, a reality which is discoverable, though not easily so" (51). But this conclusion is too simplistic. Even if Schopenhauer's artist and Jeffers as poet are probing a world beyond, Jeffers' poems are heavily involved in a ritual looking that embraces the quotidian, the always and everyday perseverance of rock and hawk. Jeffers poems are fundamentally *a looking at* rather than a *looking through* the "ordinary world of spatio-temporal objects" which Schopenhauer maligned as mere facade.

I point up these inconsistencies between Jeffers and Schopenhauer not to indict the use of the latter's philosophy for reading the poetry, but to demonstrate that if other, more amenable thinkers are available we should explore what they have to offer. These thinkers are available, and this thesis is animated by the great potential within the phenomenological and existentialist philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty for a re-reading of the poetry of Robinson Jeffers.

**Jeffers and existentialist phenomenology**

*Husserl*

Jeffers is not a phenomenologist, nor does he belong to an objectified category as a "phenomenological poet." Phenomenology's founder. Edmund Husserl, reigned in scientific categories and conceptions to bracket them during phenomenological investigations. Instead of rejecting the sciences, Husserl saw phenomenology as one effort to improve and sharpen it. While Jeffers attempted to separate the application of "pure" scientific findings from scientific knowledge in his thinking, he erects no strict motes around scientific epistemologies. His work consists of both poetic science and poems that advocate a similar boundary making to Husserl's reduction:

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A little too abstract, a little too wise,
It is time for us to kiss the earth again,
It is time to let the leaves rain from the skies,
Let the rich life run to the roots again.
I will go down to the lovely Sur Rivers
And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders.
I will find my accounting where the alder leaf quivers
In the ocean wind over the river boulders.
I will touch things and things and no more thoughts,
That breed like mouthless May-flies darkening the sky,
The insect clouds that blind our passionate hawks
So they cannot strike, hardly can fly.
Things are the hawk's food and noble is the mountain, Oh noble
Pico Blanco, steep sea-wave of marble. (CP 2: 409)

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Unlike Husserl's aim of bracketing scientific ideas to establish a firmer foundation for investigation, Jeffers suggests cordonning off science because of the bracketing and boundary-making it hoists upon us, making us "too abstract, .. too wise." The metaphoric actions of "kissing the earth " and letting the "rich life run to the roots again" gain phenomenological concreteness and application when the speaker tells
us that he will "go down to the lovely Sur Rivers / And dip my arms in them up to the shoulders." Food is the primary need for hawk and human, and "Things are the hawk's food." In this poem it is things that will sustain human thinking and passion. This poem, entitled "Return," is a return to a more primordial sense of perception. It is a return to a consciousness that acts with a firmer sense that things are primary, and our conceptions of them derivative and secondary. This hierarchical scheme avoids the empiricist vs. idealist arguments on the origin of cognitive categories-"To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks" (MP 65). The poem strives toward the pre-human, where the arrangement of things is already established and only becomes translated into something like a "hierarchy" with the arrival of the human.

Slight differences in perspective are already apparent between Husserl and Jeffers. Husserl is an initiating fount for much of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty's thought, so we should discern more reasons to discard his thought. Throughout his work, Husserl maintains the importance of a transcendental ego that trumps the secondary, nonhuman domain. Much like Heidegger's early conceptions of Dasein in Being and Time, being is uncomfortably dependent on human consciousness. Robinson Jeffers presents us with a more embodied consciousness, ensconced in being, a part of it as well as observer of it. Because of this clear difference, we should move beyond Husserl and into the later thought of Martin Heidegger and the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty for a clearer guide to Jeffers' poetic world, a world where human ego is not primary.

Heidegger & Merleau-Ponty

While there are surely interesting applications of a fully developed analysis of Jeffers in terms of Being and Time, I am going to engage the poetry with Heidegger's mature thought in the series of interconnected essays, Poetry, Language and Thought. The book works out reflections on the application of poetics to both poetry and the world as it steps back from and analyzes the role of language in human life. The first essay, "The Thinker as Poet," itself engages in poetry as a philosophical vehicle:

Forests spread
Brooks plunge
Rocks persist
Mist diffuses

Meadows wait
Springs swell
Winds dwell
Blessing Muses (page)

In his introduction, Heidegger's translator Albert Hofstadter writes: "The poet it is who, looking to the sky, sees in its manifestations the self-concealment of the unknown god, bidding the unknown to come to man to help him dwell" (xiv). Jeffers writes in "Shine, Perishing Republic" that God "cares not for human beings" (CP ?). Jeffers' poems discuss an "unknown god" and the poetry is an engagement with this god as unknown, rather than a naive attempt to pull down the shrouds from around divinity. At times our common perceptions of entities in nature are called into question, and appear as a veil: "Through rifts in the screen of the world pale gold gleams" (CP get quote). Here though the only veiling is of a more primary perception
of earth that rational perception has obscured. A key part of this acknowledgment in Jeffers' poems is recognition that the shrouds (nature, the visible) of this world are not shrouds that conceal anything—they are unconcealedness. In the poem "The Women at Pt. Sur" Jeffers writes that "God thinks through action" (CP ?). Robert Zaller reads this theme in the late work as an "activity, as natural process, [that] binds both the animate and inanimate worlds. What is posited then in the mature Jeffers is a continuum of being which partakes of divinity at every point, however differentiated it may appear on the phenomenal level" (RZ #?). The poems embrace an identity function between the unconcealedness of the world and divinity. Jeffers posits this continuum and takes on major step further: he takes up how the continuum is related to what we may direct perceive in the "differentiated" visible world. To help understand how Jeffers engages this relationship, we can employ Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical views of perception.