

## FATE, FEAR AND HUMAN WILL IN POEMS BY DELMORE SWARTZ AND ROBINSON JEFFERS

In this paper I will present “The Ballad of the Children of The Czar”<sup>1</sup> (from *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*) by Delmore Schwartz (1913-1996) in terms of the historical and personal narratives it relates and the language used. I will consider its thematic elements in relation to “Apology for Bad Dream” by Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), paying particular attention to the function of history in Schwartz’s poem and nature in Jeffers’ My analysis will focus on judgment and innocence, the drama of sacrifice and victim and the interplay of fear, fate and human will.

“The Ballad of the Children of The Czar” appeared in 1938 in Delmore Schwartz’s collection of poems and short stories, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. In the opening lines of this six stanza poem of five to eight two line groupings we see the Czar’s children tossing a ball back and forth. It is spring; Russia has not yet succumbed to revolution and the Czar and his family still live.<sup>2</sup>

The ball which is made the focus of the reader’s gaze falls beyond the children’s reach. Looking up as they run to fetch it, they see the moon hang at the limits of their world. It is their father’s face we hear them liken it to, a protective presence that hangs above the garden, the country he lords over and the innocents playing below.

A daylight moon hung up  
In the western sky, bald white

Like Papa’s face, said Sister,  
Hurling the white ball forth.

In the second stanza Delmore Schwartz introduces himself as the child he was at the time the Czar’s children were playing: “In Brooklyn, in 1916, Aged two, irrational”. Then the author addresses the Czar directly with familiarity, expressing pity or concern over his fate: “O, Nicholas! Alas! Alas!” Telling him and us as well that his grandfather was a conscript in the Czar’s army who fled Europe to become what the Czar was: a man who seemingly ruled over his destiny, a king himself.”

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1 Ballad, n. (Fr. *Ballade*, a dancing song, from L. *ballare*, to dance) 1. A romantic or sentimental song with the same melody for each stanza. 2. A song or poem that tells a story in short stanzas and simple words, with repetition, refrain, etc. : most ballads are of unknown authorship and have been handed down orally, usually with additions and changes.

2 The children of the Czar/ played with a bouncing ball.// In the May morning, in the Czar’s garden,/ Tossing it back and forth.// It fell among the flowerbeds/ Or fled to the north gate.

O Nicholas! Alas! Alas!  
My grandfather coughed in your army,  
  
Hid in a wine-stinking barrel,  
For three days in Bucharest  
  
Then left for America  
To become a king himself

In the third stanza, The Schwartz and the Romanov family histories are rendered as one. The personal becomes historical; coming of age, the foundation or dissolution of civilization. At the moment the child takes on the life that precedes him, he has no choice; history, which is no child's game, intrudes. The child who must make a new beginning bears burdens of the past, and the past is in dissolution.

I am my father's father,  
you are your children's guilt.

In history's pity and terror  
The child is Aeneas again;

Troy is in the nursery,  
The rocking horse is on fire.

Child labor! The child must carry  
his fathers on his back

In each of these passages the individual speaks. In the first stanza we overhear the children, assuring themselves, saying: "Like Papa's face", in the second, Delmore Schwartz cries out: "O Nicholas! Alas! Alas! And in the third an anonymous condemnation: "Child labor!" emerges from the well-wrought and controlled use of language. These cries fall on deaf ears. History, delmore Schwartz goes on to tell us, is ruthless; its terror outweighs its pity.<sup>3</sup> For the anonymous individual who is anyone and everyone, "for the individual who drinks tea, who catches cold," there is only a general anger realized as the force of history. For the Romanovs, for the Schwartzes, for all those taken up by that history, the battle lines are drawn close to home, in the family itself.

In the fourth stanza, the Czar's children continue to bounce the ball, while the sun, depicted in the language of epic poetry intrudes upon their play. As the bouncing ball marks the passage of time the sun moves inevitably on its terrible course towards the February and October revolutions.

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<sup>3</sup> But seeing that so much is past/ And that History has no Ruth// For the individual,/ Who drinks tea, who catches cold,// Let anger be general:/ I hate an abstract thing.

Brother and sister bounced  
the bounding, unbroken ball,

The shattering sun fell down  
Like swords upon their play,

Moving eastward among the stars  
Toward February and October.

It's the spring of 1916, all of Europe is at war, and in the Czar's garden nature still conspires to protect them. In this temporary respite, this calm before the storm, the children reveal their human nature. They quarrel among themselves, their play turns to anger. They are no different than those who will render history's verdict against them.

But the May wind brushed against their cheeks  
Like a mother watching sleep,

And for a moment they fight  
Over the bouncing ball

And sister pinches brother  
And brother kicks her shins,

Well! The heart of man is known  
It is a cactus bloom.

In the fifth stanza the earth itself is seen as a ball that moves beyond their or anyone's control. Innocence is no protection against its pitiless and arbitrary movement. No one is innocent. Not only in hindsight do we realize the murder of the Czar's children, but as their fate, as their inheritance.

The ground on which the ball bounces  
Is another bouncing ball.

The wheeling, whirling world  
Makes no will glad.

Spinning in its spotlight darkness,  
It is too big for their hands.

A pitiless, purposeless Thing,  
Arbitrary and unspent,

Made for no play, for no children,  
But chasing only itself.

The innocent are overtaken,  
they are not innocent.

They are their father's fathers,  
the past is inevitable.

In the final stanza, Delmore Schwartz returns to the time of the writing of the poem and also to his second year, to his own Eden, yet a world beyond his control. The terror that greets the Czar's children mirrors his own. There is no escape from the fall of innocence and the assumption of one's fate.

Now, in another October  
Of this tragic star,

I see my second year,  
I eat my baked potato,

It is my buttered world,  
But, poked by my unlearned hand,

It falls from the highchair down  
And I begin to howl.

And I see the ball roll under  
the iron gate which is locked.

Sister is screaming, brother is howling,  
The ball has evaded their will.

and under the garden wall.  
I am overtaken by terror

Thinking of my father's fathers,  
And of my own will.

For Delmore Schwartz pity and terror mark man, history, and nature equally. The children play and quarrel, though the moon and May wind are their protective father and mother, the sun falls like swords upon their play. Terror outruns pity. Innocence is threatened from within and without. There is no dividing line. The heart of man is a cactus bloom. Trojan horse and a child's rocking chair are one and the same. And they are aflame. The force and power of history and nature are beyond control. Nowhere and at no time is one safe. The past is inevitable and it is present. There is no avoiding of history and the complicity of one's forefather's and one's own actions.

The fate of the Czar's children mirrors his own. For isn't he also a son of a (would-be) king? He howls as a child because he cannot hold onto what's his. His inheritance is beyond his grasp, or it

is given only in his father's name, or it is taken from him at the moment it is to be given. It is marked by appropriation. He can claim it only as it is taken from him, as it was taken from others before him. Delmore Schwartz's terror is born of his recognition of inheritance as burden and his need to act in the face of this awareness --against or with pitiless purposeless force. He looks upon his fate as Hamlet does. In Schwartz's case however, the act he need avenge is the one he himself must undertake. And does undertake each day "again and again, while History is unforgiven."<sup>4</sup> Not unforgiving, but unforgiven; it is the writer himself that cannot forgive history for his part in it, for his fate "on this tragic star".

In "Apology for Bad Dreams,"<sup>5</sup> written in 1925, Robinson Jeffers, within the setting of the California coastal area where he lives, describes the beating of a horse.<sup>6</sup> A woman, her son, and the horse which is being punished and mutilated, diminished from Jeffers's vantage in the hills above, are seen merely as figures in a panorama of natural beauty. This witnessed torture, characteristic of the bad dreams Jeffers would apologize for, stands without condemnation as part of what is.

Seen from this height they are shrunk to insect size.  
Out of all human relation. You cannot distinguish the blood dripping...

...You can see the whip of the flanks  
    You cannot see the face of the woman.  
  
...Unbridled and unbelievable beauty  
covers the evening world. ...not covers, grows apparent out of it  
    What said the prophet? "I create good  
    and I create evil: I am the Lord"

In the second stanza Jeffers implicates the California coast in the acts he witnesses. The grandeur of the coastal range lacks the intensity of human suffering. Fearful of becoming a victim or perpetrator himself, Jeffers devises a strategy for warding off tragedy and pain. The canvas that takes in this natural beauty lacks a few strokes; Jeffers will provide them.

This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places  
  
Demands what victim?  
    The hills like pointed flames  
        what immolation?

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4 From: "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave. *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*

5 Apology, n. 1 something said or written in defense; an argument to show some idea, religion, etc. is right. 2. An acknowledgement of and expression of regret for a fault, injury, insult, etc.

6 "Below on the sea cliff,/ A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside;/ a roof under the spared trees. Then the ocean/ Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and/ polished to shining. Beyond it, the fountain/ And furnace of incredible light flowing up for the sunk/ sun. in the little clearing a woman/ is punishing a horse;"

I said in my heart  
better in vent than suffer: imagine victims  
Lest your own flesh be chosen agonist, or you  
Martyr some creature to the beauty of the place

In this soliloquy Jeffers anticipating tragedy,<sup>7</sup> forewarns himself to enact it in the imagination. Midst the sea embattled coastal hills Jeffers has found his human niche, he has quarried granite and built a stone house for himself and his family. Like those who roamed there long before him, he recognizes the need to appease the animal spirits that inhabit the land and clamor within.

I said,  
burn sacrifices once a year to magic  
horror away from the house, this little house here  
you built over the ocean with your own hands

Pain and terror, the insanities of  
desire; not accidents but essential,  
And crowd up from the core, "I imagined victims for  
those wolves, I made them phantoms to follow,  
They have hunted the phantoms and escaped the house."<sup>8</sup>

In the third stanza Jeffers bears witness to the tribal inhabitants who haunt the coast, who were not imagined victims, but real. Who fell beneath the movement of history, the same history that brought Jeffers in its wake.

Here the granite flanks are scarred with ancient fire. The ghosts of the tribe  
Crouch in the nights beside the ghost of a fire, they try to remember the sunlight  
Light has died out of their skies. These have paid something for the future  
luck of the country, while we living keep old grief in memory

It is not their fate that bothers Jeffers, but his own people's encounter with the coast. Out of this troubled history, Jeffers fashioned his dramatic poems, his violent tales of pride and lust, and he reminds himself through the appearance of one of the phantoms from these tales (from the narrative poem *Tamar*, based on a biblical account of incest) that the retelling in the imagination is all he has to ward off the reoccurrence of evil.

To forget evil calls  
down sudden reminders from the cloud: remembered deaths

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7 Tragedy, n. 1. A serious play having an unhappy or disastrous ending brought about by the characters or central character impelled, in ancient drama, by fate or, more recently, by moral weakness, psychological maladjustment, or social pressures.

8 For Jeffers it would be a mistake to forget how tentative the human niche is. "It is not good to forget over what gulfs the spirit/ of the beauty of humanity, the petal of a lost flower/ blown seaward by the night wind, floats /to its quietness."

be our redeemers  
Imagined victims at night: white as the half-moon  
at midnight  
Someone passed e saying, "I am Tamar  
Cauldwell, I have desire,"

The midnight violence that haunts the California coast cannot be denied. In the final stanza, it becomes clear that the Apology offered for the occurrence of bad dreams is not an expression of regret, but an unreasoned justification for the tragedies Jeffers has written. Through the fate of the characters he's created, Jeffers bears witness to the incommensurable power of Nature and all creation. Moreover, he would have us believe that the horrible deformations of the human spirit are the closest man comes to the power that formed the natural world, that the mind of man were a crucible for that suffering and that the beauty of nature were a counterweight, a compensation for its violence.

A man having bad dreams, who  
invents victims, is only the ape of that God.  
I know of no reason  
for fire and change and torture  
...they are the ways of my love.  
...The fountains of the boiling stars, the flowers on the foreland  
the ever-returning roses of dawn.

Jeffers feels uneasy. In this poem and in the verse narratives he has written, he witnesses cruelty undifferentiated from the unmeasured power of nature. He would ward off that power, that cruelty by imitating it. By imagining victims he appeases the forces that besiege him. In this imagining, in this human tragedy realized within the safety and distancing of dramatic verse, he claims that the essence of the human spirit is made known:

the atom is broken, the power that massed it  
Cries to the power that moves the stars, "I have come  
home to myself, behold me.  
...I tortured myself, I flew forth,  
Stood naked of myself and broke in the fragments

For Jeffers what is seen as evil or good, cruel or beautiful is a reflection of the force and power of nature. For Delmore Schwartz, human feeling and intention colors his experience of nature. The moon, wind and sun are reminders of the human. Yet in a more fundamental way, nature marks the human. The inexorable movement of the sun and the earth is beyond control, qualifying the human and bringing pitiless uncontrollable nature into human affairs

Both Schwartz and Jeffers feel the terror of human experience; they feel it for themselves and for their families whom they would protect or whose burden they must take on, or for the judgments

they might render. Jeffers allies himself with that force; Swartz is divided and feels guilt over the role he must play. Jeffers hopes that the sacrifice of his imagined victims will allay the power before him, Schwartz sees that sacrifice as (unavoidably) his own and everyman's.

Overwhelmed by history or nature, both speak of irrational forces rising up or breaking out from within: "the cactus heart", "the insanities of desire". Both in their writing see man made small by place, for Jeffers the mountains of California, for Schwartz, the buildings of New York. In the poem "O, City, City," "the office building rises to its tyranny/ ...our anguished diminution until we die" and in "Someone Is Harshly Coughing as Before," Schwartz says "the buildings height like broken teeth/ repeat necessity on every side."

Both offer some counterforce to nature or history; Jeffers explicitly, with the magic of sacrifice; Schwartz implicitly. For him there is some measure of control gained from experience; there is also the safety of the garden, a temporary respite, and the possibility of taking on the burdens of the past, of acting according to one's will. But Schwartz pauses prior to decision, prior to action, knowing that regardless of his will, the act will be chosen for him. The garden is not securable, to be master of one's destiny, an illusion. In these ways Schwartz, the grandson of a Jewish immigrant and Jeffers, the son of a Presbyterian minister, of Scotch-Irish forbears, are brothers. Ask them their names and Jeffers would say: "Cain"; Schwartz: "Abel". Schwartz finds himself the victim; Jeffers would rather not be one.

What's tragic here is that Jeffers moves with a cruel hand. His work demands a sacrificial victim; his apology, a justification that makes sacrifice a necessity with aesthetic and natural dimensions. Schwartz foresees with precision that he cannot escape from his fate. The death of the Czar's children stands with hindsight outside the Ballad, as Schwartz's lonely death in a New York hotel stands in parenthesis to his work.

We walk away from "The Ballad of the Czar's Children" with the image of the bouncing ball, the earth beneath our feet moving against us and with the images of a rocking horse aflame and a child carrying his father on his back. "Apology For Bad Dream" leaves us with the lines: "this coast crying out for tragedy" or "better invent than suffer". But it is the image of the mortar and the bruised root, or the crucible and the calcifying fire, or the whip on the flanks of the horse, or the massed power in God's hand that Jeffers would have us keep in mind.

I bruised myself in the flint mortar and burnt me  
in the red shell, I tortured myself

Jeffers writing in the aftermath of the first World War, quarried away near the California coast, his back turned to man, while Schwartz writing as the world spun out of control in the thirties, anticipated the tortured face of this century. The torturer is the inhuman form Jeffers apologizes for. As terror outlines the face of the persecuted, the twentieth century comes home to itself. For Delmore Schwartz, there is little chance of escape whether he directly experiences that suffering or not.

And when it comes, escape is small; the floor  
Creaks; the worms of fear spread veins; the furtive  
Fugitive, looking backward, sees his  
Ghost in the mirror, his shameful eyes, his mouth diseased.<sup>9</sup>

For both writers man's fate is taken up with fear; for Schwartz this fate is felt as guilt and this guilt is a sin; for Jeffers it is judgment, the hand of God, and if accepted, even the horrible spirit deformed in its agony, if beheld, it is beauty, fleeting, inhuman, human. Willed.

Robinson Jeffers and Delmore Schwartz are writing within the classical western tradition; Schwartz's sensibility is philosophic, his references Greek; Jeffers model is the Greek drama, his sensibility, biblical. If Schwartz sees himself, not as the hero Aeneas but as Hamlet, given his subsequent bouts with mental illness, the progression of his persecution mania, ought we not see him as martyr willing his own victimization? As for Jeffers, are his verse dramas portraying as a human depravity any different than the stories the media offers up as a steady diet, phantoms born of real victims and perpetrators, that the public can magic away the crimes from their own homes and from our own willing selves? *Apology for Bad Dreams* is literature, yet it would have us forget the angel of mercy's staying hand; the *Ballad of the Children of the Czar* is song, yet it is too logical in its concurrence of the historical and the personal. O Delmore! Alas! Alas! Did you forget? That when the door of the house was marked, the angel of Death passed by?

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<sup>9</sup> "The sin of Hamlet" from *Selected Poems: Summer Knowledge*