

# INTRODUCTION

This volume presents transcriptions of Robinson Jeffers' handwritten manuscripts of the four primary attempts at the Reverend Barclay's story collectively designated *The Point Alma Venus Manuscripts*. From spring 1922 through February 1927, a period of not quite five years, Jeffers wrote and published the long narrative *Tamar*, the verse drama *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, the shorter narrative *Roan Stallion* (all gathered in the 1925 collection *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*), as well as the book-length narrative *The Women at Point Sur* (published in 1927). In these years he also wrote a number of his most important—and most admired—shorter poems. The transcribed manuscripts published in this volume show that Jeffers was even more productive in this period than we had realized. In these crucial years and perhaps the year or so prior, he also developed these substantial attempts at what became *The Women at Point Sur*. These attempts, which he came to designate *Point Alma Venus*, and related material comprise nearly 270 pages of manuscript. Each attempt is recognizably part of the same project, but each develops along different lines as Jeffers evolved his sense of the poem's central figure, the Reverend Arthur Barclay, “who outgrew his God,” and as he, also, evolved his approach to narrative poetry. Even though Jeffers never completed any of the attempts at *Alma Venus*, they are a significant addition to his canon.

If these abandoned drafts were fragments from an otherwise lost work, a primary goal would be to consider how they might allow imagining the unavailable whole—much as an archeologist might infer an ancient vase from the bits of design and lettering on the surviving shards. Instead, these drafts reveal poems that might have been but never were—each anticipating *Point Sur* as completed, each overlapping with the other attempts, and each diverging from the others. The attempts share certain characters (most obviously Barclay), scenes (such as the seance), and settings (such as the lighthouse), but they develop these elements in shifting configurations and to somewhat different purposes as Jeffers' thematic sense of the material developed and as his approach to narrative poetry evolved in tandem with it. Read as a series, they document Jeffers' conceptual explorations

of the figure of Barclay, who outgrows his Christian God and embarks on a Faustian quest for ultimate knowledge—a series that culminates in *The Women at Point Sur*, the poem he would later claim was his “most inclusive, and poetically the most intense” (CP4: 390). Read in relationship to *Tamar*, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, and *Roan Stallion*, the *Alma Venus* attempts challenge us to reread these well-known poems and, as well, to understand them as related to (perhaps even aspects of) Jeffers’ ongoing explorations of Barclay’s story rather than as poems that precede his final development of Barclay’s story in *The Women at Point Sur*.

Just as importantly, the attempts at *Alma Venus*, though unfinished and abandoned, reward being read in their own right. They develop compelling narrative situations. They are rich in implication. And they contain passages equal in power and beauty to Jeffers’ best writing. And, too, the versions show Jeffers probing the aesthetic, psychological, and theological challenges evoked in the initial version as he searches his way toward *The Women at Point Sur*, while writing *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, *Roan Stallion*, and perhaps even *Tamar* along the way. For those who value Jeffers’ narrative poetry, these are works they will want to read and savor. For those who seek to understand Jeffers’ thought and achievement as a poet, these are poems they must read and study.

But why, one might ask, read these abandoned drafts at all? Reviewers who had hailed Jeffers as a major poet when *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems* was published mostly viewed *The Women at Point Sur* as a misstep and at least a partial failure. In his 1938 Foreword to *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, Jeffers himself characterized it as “the least understood and least liked” of his narratives and included only a single brief passage from it. And in the years since, critics and scholars who have engaged his narrative poems have followed his lead and mostly skirted *Point Sur* to focus, instead, on other narratives that have, I’d suggest, seemed more approachable. Moreover, some Jeffers scholars have argued—and continue to argue—that his lyrics and shorter meditations are his best work. In their view, we should quietly move the long narratives and verse dramas featured in the original collections to that critical back burner labeled *of historical interest* and focus, instead, on such poems as “Salmon Fishing,” “Shine, Perishing Republic,” “Boats in a Fog,” “The Purse-Seine,” “Oh, Lovely Rock,” and “Vulture,” which they contend most fully realize his artistry, best argue for his place in the canon of American poetry, and most clearly convey his philosophical, ethical, and environmental vision.

While the shorter poems clearly merit serious attention, it should be remembered that Jeffers’ long poems were the basis of his initial reputation in the mid-1920s when he was widely regarded as a major poet. They were also central to his ambitions as a poet, including his rejection of the aesthetic paradigm of

the Modernists, especially T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Just as we would not think of trying to assess their careers without considering *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, neither can we fully understand Jeffers without engaging his long poems with their sweeping cadences and violational plots, compelling imagery, and philosophical reach.

Even though recent scholarship has enriched our accounts of American poetry in the 1920s by recovering the voices of previously marginalized groups, the ascendancy of the Modernists remains an important element in our understanding of the period's poetic production. We celebrate their aesthetic break with the Victorians. We parse their alliances and competitions. And we tend to privilege their commitment to formal experimentation (collage, elision, juxtaposition, and such) and accept their view that narrative poetry was a mode whose moment had passed and was not a viable option for a serious modern poet. Jeffers' decision, as he put it in his Introduction for the 1938 Modern Library reissue of *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*, "not to become a 'modern,'" was both a rejection of the Modernists' emphasis on stylistic experimentation and a commitment to transforming narrative poetry into a viable modern form. We cannot, then, understand his alternative vision for poetry in this era, his determination to offer an alternative direction to what the Modernists were urging, without considering his narrative practice. His long narratives are not only the poems that made and initially defined his reputation, and they are not only the poems in which he dove the deepest and reached the farthest, they are also the poems we must engage if we are to recover Jeffers as a significant figure in the tapestry of modern poetry. It may be easier to demonstrate that Jeffers wrote poems of merit and significance by focusing on the shorter poems, but setting aside the longer poems distorts what he achieved and makes it significantly more difficult to understand why his work matters for our understanding of American poetry in the first half of the twentieth century. We can admire Jeffers through his short poems, but we can only understand his full importance by engaging, as well, his long poems, including *The Women at Point Sur*, both in and of itself and in the context of the *Alma Venus* material that led to it and which underscores the complexity of its relationship to the better "liked" narratives featured in *Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems*.



The body of this collection presents the four primary preliminary attempts Robinson Jeffers made at composing the long narrative poem he subsequently completed and published as *The Women at Point Sur*. These versions of the Reverend Barclay's story, transcribed from Jeffers' handwritten manuscripts, are

presented in the presumed order of their composition. Each primary version is preceded by a headnote that indicates the basis of the title assigned to it, and its relationship to the fragments and workings that have been grouped with it. For additional discussion of these matters and matters pertaining to the transcribing and editing of the material, please see the sections “Chronology” and “Textual Notes and Apparatus” that follow the transcriptions.

In the transcriptions, words that are conjecture (informed by the problematic visual evidence, the context of the passage, and the context provided by similar or related passages but still uncertain) have been placed in square brackets. Words that can be neither determined nor conjectured are indicated by empty square brackets. Words and passages that Jeffers cancelled as he composed (and presumably would have omitted had he completed and typed the draft) are scored through. Jeffers’ working notes have been boxed, placed (in general) to the right of the verse lines, and positioned to indicate the note’s relationship to the developing draft. In Jeffers’ manuscripts, some notes are circled, some boxed, some have no border. Some run vertically, some diagonally. The setting does not attempt to reproduce these features.

The manuscripts themselves show that the first and third versions were titled, when Jeffers was drafting them, *Storm as Deliverer*. The title for the second version as it was being drafted is unknown. In this edition “Point Alma Venus” serves as a comprehensive term for the attempts to write the Reverend Barclay’s story that precede *The Women at Point Sur*. In part because this is the title Jeffers used for the fourth and most nearly completed version and in part because his remarks in his September 4, 1925 letter to Benjamin De Casseres and April 26, 1926 letter to Donald Friede (see “Chronology” for the relevant passages) indicate that he had come to think of these versions collectively as a single evolving project under the title *Point Alma Venus*.

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