

“THE PERIPATETIC PHILOSOPHER”: UNLOCKING THE CHILDHOOD TRAUMA OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

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RICHARD Jefferies (1848–1887) was one of England’s foremost writers on nature and the countryside. After his death, aged thirty-eight, his works found greater popularity, and he was often included with high-profile contemporaries in assessments of Victorian and Romantic literature. The Manchester Literary Club, for example, ranked Jefferies alongside Thomas Hardy, Wordsworth, Gilbert White, Tennyson, and Thoreau (197). It was his stated goal as an adult writer to express the “magic of sunshine and green things” (qtd. in Matthews and Trietel 81), and we see the early germination of this ambition in the series “Chapters on Churches,” written about his home locality and published in the local paper in 1866 under the pseudonym “The Peripatetic Philosopher.” The opening paragraph of “Chapters on Churches I” is mystical and serene: “Nature is the church of the philosopher; to him the dim vistas of the forest are as the gloom of a cathedral, the roll of the thunder as the organ’s diapason, and every light in heaven a lamp of God. ... I listen with a holy calm, approaching delight to the sacred chant” (6). Works such as this can readily be read and enjoyed for their observations of the countryside; the “dim vistas” and “gloom” can thus be easily overlooked.

However, there is also an underlying sense of personal tragedy and unhappiness in Jefferies’s writing, which may have its roots in childhood trauma, exacerbated by an innate sensitivity. In 1851, when Jefferies was two years old, his sister Ellen, then aged five, was killed in an accident involving a runaway horse on the road outside the family home. Just over a year later Jefferies’s younger brother Harry was born, after which time—when Jefferies was approximately four years old—he was sent away from the rural environment of his boyhood to live in Sydenham with his aunt and uncle.¹ He returned to the family farmhouse at Coate, Swindon, every summer for a month, and at age nine went back there to live. “In effect,” as Hugoe Matthews and Phyllis Trietel note, he “was fostered during these years Difficulties at Coate, with the death of one child and the recent arrival of another, probably precipitated the move, but

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the inevitable result was that he was separated from his parents at a critical stage in his emotional development” (9). His aunt, having no children of her own, was fortunately able to give him focused attention while he lived with her, and the two remained close well into Jefferies’s twenties; his return home at the age of nine may therefore be seen as yet another separation, this time from a surrogate parent. Moreover, Jefferies seems to have been a sensitive and gifted child who was little understood—and much mocked—by the local Swindon community. At the boys-only school he attended, Jefferies never “greatly distinguished himself as a pupil” and did not find popularity with his fellow students, while at home he was “somewhat supercilious, not caring much, if at all, for outdoor games” (Hall 103). This child, sensitive but socially isolated, grew into a rebellious and solitary adolescent.

Although we must be cautious in drawing conclusions based on biographical readings, there is strong evidence in Jefferies’s surviving teenage writings that his early life experiences, coupled with the scorn and prejudice he experienced in adolescence, significantly contributed to his feeling of being an outsider and that this feeling spurred him to hone his skill as an observational writer. In this essay, I draw on traumatic stress studies to take a psychobiographical approach to Jefferies’s juvenilia, with the aim of identifying the impact of his early experiences on his character and on the writing he produced both as a youth and an adult. Early trauma may account for the persistent, vivid recollections of Coate that Jefferies never stopped writing about and for the antisocial behaviour he describes in his autobiographical work, especially the juvenile novel *Ben Tubbs*. Placing his juvenilia alongside his mature writing, and reading both through the lens of trauma theory, allows us to trace the impact of early experiences in Jefferies’s writing, for whom nature—especially the nature of his childhood—remained perpetually a healing source of solace and a place of escape. The natural world was also for him, from childhood, a place to go and think; hence, the wandering philosopher element of “Chapters on Churches” soon became the driving idea of his works, the element that gave his nature writing its distinct feel, as he observed directly and recorded what he saw.

JEFFERIES did not conform to what was expected of a landowner’s son. He knew he was different in some way from everyone else and yet was painfully unable to understand why.² Biographers agree that he was unhappy at home, “out of sympathy with his parents, with his brothers and sisters,” and had no close friends in the neighbourhood (Foerster 531). His nurse, Matilda Boulter, recalled him as a “delicate young man ... of solitary habits” (“Richard Jefferies’ Nurse” 66). His biographer Walter Besant, writing in 1888, similarly described him as a “reserved” boy with “a highly nervous and sensitive temperament, ... hasty and quick-tempered, impulsive,” and “strong in his likes and dislikes.” Moreover, “all these qualities remained ... to the end; he was always reserved, always sensitive, always nervous, always quick-tempered ... the child was truly father to the man” (Besant 13). His family considered his literary interests an anomaly; until the age of fifteen Jefferies irregularly attended the schools of “the

poorer middle class,” but after that received no further education (Foerster 531). However, according to his cousin he preferred spending his time in the attic writing “blood-curdling romances” to working on the farm (Matthews and Trietel 14). By 1866, aged seventeen, he began work as a local reporter on the news.

His unhappiness, characterised by Andrew Rossabi as “alienation, spiced by teenage rebelliousness” (434), was the likely incentive behind an attempt to run away in 1864, when he was sixteen years old, with a cousin, with the aim of reaching Moscow: an episode that is recreated in his earliest known novel *Ben Tubbs Adventures* (written in his teens but unpublished in his lifetime). The boys got as far as France before turning back and deciding to go to America instead. After buying tickets for a sailing from Liverpool they had no further funds, and so they were again forced to abandon their trip and return home. Escape out of the question, Jefferies “began to resort to the hills”; he “had little human companionship; he was, in fact, for the most part disliked or merely pitied” (Foerster 531). In “My Old Village,” an essay Jefferies wrote towards the end of his life, he recalls the attitudes of his local community: “Was every one, then, so pleasant to me in those days? Were the people all so beneficent and kindly ... no, the reverse; there was not a single one friendly to me” (327).

Jefferies is noted for recalling the house, gardens, and wider rural setting of his childhood in his works—most of all his children’s books *Bevis* (1882) and *Wood Magic* (1881), both written in his early thirties and both set in Coate. Many of these descriptions are in the form of prose poetry: meticulously crafted through a process of imaginative recall of his environment exacting in colour and detail. To many readers this has been taken as evidence of nostalgia, as the memorialising of a happier time. However, trauma theory suggests a different interpretation: that Jefferies’s consistent recalling and eulogising of his childhood environment and boyhood experiences in his adult works points to a source of unresolved trauma. According to Lenore Terr, children who have experienced trauma—defined as “the mental result of one sudden, external blow, or a series of blows, rendering the young person temporarily helpless and breaking past ordinary coping and defensive operations”—are often characterised by “strongly visualized or otherwise repeatedly perceived memories” (qtd. in Baker 53). Compare Besant’s observation:

Many of us who go away from our native place forget it, or we can only remember it from time to time; the memory grows dim; when we go back we are astonished to find how much we have forgotten, and how distorted are the memories which remain. Richard Jefferies, however, who presently left Coate, never forgot the old place. It remained with him—every tree, every field, every hill, every patch of wild thyme—all through his life, clear and distinct, as if he had left it but an hour before. In almost everything he wrote Coate is in his mind. (17–18)

But what gave Jefferies such constant, “clear and distinct” memories of Coate as Besant describes? In a letter to his Aunt Ellen in 1864, the year in which he ran away to the continent, Jefferies writes, “I still walk about with my gun stalking like a chained ghost continually over the same ground” (Matthews and Trietel 13). This may recall Judith Greenberg’s analysis of the “echo” of trauma, where she suggests that the “disembodied” nature of the echo resounds “phantom-like” in texts, as it does in life (343). It is this echo that gives post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) its “haunting power” (Caruth 4)—so that “the memory” never “grows dim.”

It is now widely recognised that trauma can result from the forced displacement of evacuee children during wars. For instance, Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen found that forced displacement can create “drastic, bodily experienced and memorized, psychophysical experiences that continue to affect people’s ties, sights, and practices of belonging later in their life,” along with an enhanced sense of place through smells, sounds, and kinaesthetic information (307). A study of Swiss children similarly found that parental separation affected both aggressive and internalising behaviour and that separation had a “direct effect” on child problem behaviour (Averdijk et al. 184). Thompson et al. even argue that youth “who have separated from parents at an early age due to running away or being forced out of parental homes” could be at risk for PTSD (553). Unfortunately, “the process of running away, being kicked-out [*sic*] or even abandoned by families induces complex emotional and behavioural responses,” and trauma symptoms among runaway youth may be easily missed (Thompson et al. 563). Diagnosis is further complicated by the fact that, as Cathy Caruth explains, PTSD is a delayed form of reaction: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (4). In light of such research, it seems reasonable to postulate that the sudden loss of Jefferies’s sister, followed by the forced separation from his parents when aged four, caused Jefferies to experience some form of PTSD, which may have contributed to his later persistent, vivid recollections, and to look for evidence of this trauma appearing “belatedly” in his later writings.³

Jefferies’s juvenile novel *Ben Tubbs Adventures*, a highly autobiographical novel that is Jefferies’s earliest book-length work to have survived, offers compelling evidence that childhood trauma contributed to his problem behaviour as a youth.⁴ The exact date of composition is not known, but Andrew Rossabi believes it was most likely written between 1865 and 1866, when Jefferies was seventeen, and just before he began working for the *North Wilts Herald* (Introduction ix). The importance of *Ben Tubbs* to Jefferies’s later work cannot be overestimated. This early foray in the boys’ adventure novel genre is the prototype for *Bevis* (1882), which the *North Wilts Herald* described as “the best boy’s book in England,” on the grounds that Jefferies brought to life the boyhood experience set deep in the heart of his beloved countryside (9). As Rossabi notes, “there is already something of Bevis in Ben ... a mischievous prankster: willful, spoiled, defiant, destructive, impulsive, reckless, easily bored,

but also plucky, proud, and imaginative” (Introduction xxvii). But there is also something of the young Richard Jefferies in fifteen-year-old Ben, whom Rossabi considers “autobiographical” (Introduction xxviii). Ben lives in an “obscure village” in southwestern England (Jefferies, *Ben Tubbs* 1).⁵ After the death of his father and without discipline, he becomes rebellious and difficult to manage. At boarding school he is bullied and publicly flogged by the headmaster, which precipitates his escape to America with his friend Ned Snicks. We may easily recognise the absent parent and the hostility of others as features of Jefferies’s own youth.

Moreover, some of the particular problem behaviours that Ben exhibits suggest trauma, and for this reason offer insight into the complex emotional consequences of Jefferies’s move to Sydenham at four years of age. Consider, for instance, Ben’s parody of emotion in a scene depicting his separation from his mother. When his mother tearfully leaves him at the new school, we are told that “Ben certainly had a genius for two things, mischief and imitation ... nobody could have guessed as he stood there with red eyes, waving handkerchief and deep-fetched sighs that he was laughing and yawning” (23). His mother’s emotion is real, but his is feigned. Ben’s lack of attachment to his mother recalls Jefferies’s biography, since, as we have seen, after he was sent to Sydenham he transferred his affections from his mother to his aunt. It is reasonable to assume that the disruption Jefferies experienced at age four involved a considerable degree of sadness and separation anxiety, yet as it occurred at an early time in his life he may not have been able to recall or indeed recognise these feelings in detail when older, let alone understand them as a cause of problem behaviour. The tough exterior that Ben Tubbs (and, later, Bevis) exhibits is consistent with the kind of coping strategies observed in youth who have experienced forced displacement and parental separation.⁶ It is also consistent with the “depression and aggressive problem behavior in children, as well as later delinquency,” that Averdijk et al. see as resulting in whole or in part from parental separation (184).

Another episode in *Ben Tubbs* that dramatises Ben’s rebellion against authority is the scene in which Ben dresses up as a ghost in order to scare the parson. This is comically stylised, in a manner that gives the upper hand to the child who manages to frighten Parson Snobbs convincingly enough for him to turn and run in the other direction. The scene also reproduces a piece of local knowledge that Jefferies reports to his aunt in a letter written in 1864 (the year he ran away to the continent): “Our curate Mr. Salisbury is a most singular individual and though a clergyman is, verily I believe, afraid of meeting ghosts in his walk home from Coate” (Matthews and Trietel 13). We may compare the tone of mockery here with his description of Ben’s response to being reprimanded by his mother for scaring the parson: he “burst into a loud laugh” at her “grimly comical expression of face” (*Ben Tubbs* 11–12). Given that the parson was a respected figure, central to the healthy functioning of the community, Ben’s ridicule of him therefore conveys a youthful rebellion against

authority that Jefferies at least in part, if not wholly, identified with himself. That Ben's fictional capers had a basis in real experience can also be confirmed in recollections by Audrey Horsell who records the young Jefferies persuading other boys to help him scare the village women at night (49).

Although the character of Ben may suggest that Jefferies saw himself as having been an aggressive child, what we read into the text has to be weighed against what might be considered normal for a young boy of that time. One scene that deserves particular attention in this regard is the one in which Ben and Ned encounter American Indians during their expedition: "A thought struck Ben. Should he shoot him? Ben had not the slightest twinge of conscience as this thought passed quicker than lightning through his mind As for Ned, he also had observed the Indians ... but he had not entertained the murderous intentions Ben had" (103). Whereas Ben's impulse is to shoot, Ned is more reserved. That Jefferies makes this comparison between Ben and Ned suggests that he did perceive himself to be more aggressive than his friends. Moreover, Jefferies describes Ben with similar phrasing when deer walk away from him because they have "smelled his murderous intentions" (142). Jefferies also makes a point of mentioning that when in England "Ben and Ned had been much addicted to the exhilarating practice of riding refractory donkeys and were therefore in capital training. For he who can ride a gypsy's donkey—which they could—can ride anything" (*Ben Tubbs* 98). This taste Jefferies had for cowing stubborn donkeys to his will is expanded upon in *Bevis* when Bevis and his friend Mark have "a wicked thought in their hearts" concerning their donkey, and seek to subdue it through force:

All the times they had run in vain to catch him; all the times they had had to walk when they might have ridden one behind the other on his back; all his refusals to be tempted; all the wrongs they had endured at his heels boiled in their breasts. They broke their sticks upon his back, they cut new ones, and smashed them too, they hurled the fragments at him, and then got some more. They thrashed, thwacked, banged, thumped, poked, prodded, kicked, belaboured, bumped, and hit him, working themselves into a frenzy of rage. (99–100)

Bevis even finds a log to throw at the donkey: "the same Bevis who put an aspen leaf carefully under the fly to save it from drowning" (100). The steady accumulation of the wrongs the boys feel that the donkey has done them can be read as an allegorical representation of Jefferies's own trauma response.

Through this lens, we gain a greater sense of how rebelliousness against the mistreatment of his youth partly drove Jefferies's fervent desire to become a successful writer. His notebooks for the period just after leaving his hometown, for example, chronicle an almost obsessive preoccupation with getting as many articles into print as possible, and he was constantly revising his novels at this time too, and spurring himself on in his notebooks not to give up. In letters to

editors concerning the rejection of his works he was persistent, questioning, and on occasion, demanding.⁷

Even if we consider that aggression towards animals tended to be a fairly ordinary part of Victorian farming life, it is important to note the length of this scene and the detail that Jefferies goes into concerning the “scourg[ing] of this miserable citizen” (100). The fact that Jefferies characterises Bevis as more aggressive than Mark and also characterises Ben Tubbs as more aggressive than Ned suggests that Jefferies himself saw the kind of unprovoked aggression that both Bevis and Ben demonstrate as unusual. His repeated depiction of aggression in largely autobiographical characters is consistent with the biographical evidence that he himself was subject to sudden bouts of unprovoked aggression, a trait that could have had its origins in the traumatic earlier years.

Experiences of his teen years could well also have contributed to such behaviour. According to those who knew him, as a teenager Jefferies was “careless as to his dress and appearance,” wearing his hair much longer than was customary at the time. This hairstyle, along “with his bent form and long, rapid stride, made him an object of wonder in the town of Swindon,” reports Besant (57). However, I question Besant’s assertion that Jefferies “was perfectly unconscious of this [reaction], or indifferent to it” (57). It is not often that we are simply “indifferent” or “perfectly unconscious” of ridicule based on our appearance, manner, or occupation. Coate was a tight-knit rural community, populated by families who had lived there for generations. Coate Farm, with its large rambling house, and its farm buildings set by the main road, was a focal point of the hamlet; a place where villagers would come to collect water and an employment centre for labourers.⁸ It is highly unlikely that Jefferies could have gone about his daily life oblivious to the undercurrent of feeling towards him from the local community. And this undercurrent was strong. As Thomas notes in his biography, the gun that Jefferies carried caused suspicion among local landowners, one of whom reportedly said, “That young Jefferies is not the sort of fellow you want hanging about in your covers” (47–49). Besides ridicule, Jefferies also faced hostility and distrust.

Local attitudes towards young Jefferies, as well as the general surprise when in later years the awkward, lanky, and mysterious lad from Coate fledged into one of the world’s most respected nature writers, is recorded by an article published in the *North Wilts Herald* in 1937. Marking fifty years since Jefferies’s death, the article reports that “*The Story of My Heart* [1883], his spiritual autobiography, shows us the abnormal and contemplative young man in those solitary walks that earned for him amongst the rustics the nickname of ‘Loony Dick’ or ‘Moony Dick,’ and the reputation of being a lazy loafer” (9). The fact that this piece of information concerning the prejudice against Jefferies and the judgement of him as “abnormal” survived in the form of a local tradition until the late 1930s is testament to its enduring nature.⁹ Jefferies’s awareness of this prejudice at the time is strongly suggested by “Chapters on Churches III”

(published in January 1867), where Jefferies reflects on a set of stocks outside the church in Chiseldon. The original “instrument of punishment” is still in a condition to be put to use, he notes: “There it stands, a memento of the past, a warning to the urchins who play around its gaping but now harmless and powerless jaws, and it does not require any very great stretch of imagination to see an incarcerated offender suffering from the gibes and finger pointings of the church-goers” (3). That he so readily empathises with the “suffering” of the imagined “offender” may suggest sensitivity to local ridicule. A similarly cynical vein is present in the opening pages of his “Essay on Instinct,” written in 1868 when he was nineteen, in which he refers to “a very deep gulley called the Pit of Prejudice, by which there is a great stumbling block called Vanity, in which pit numbers have lost their lives ... enshrined as the martyrs of science” (6). This “Pit of Prejudice” refers explicitly to the academic community, where he was also fighting prejudice at the time; nevertheless, it vividly conveys Jefferies’s sense of prejudice as a threat to his every step.¹⁰

Moreover, Jefferies describes just such derision and lack of acceptance in his adult fiction. Consider, for instance, his description in *The Rise of Maximin* (1876–77) of the twenty-five-year-old Maximin. As he leaves his homeland he recalls his younger days: “As he walked and the cool night breeze refreshed him his spirits rose. He looked back upon Sandover with contempt—that cruel, heartless place which had treated him so roughly, and despised him a presumptuous fool. He had sailed from island to island until he discovered those beautiful Pineries in mid-ocean, the very existence of which was denied and scoffed at by the town near which he was born” (41). Jefferies too had lived among people who “despised him as a presumptuous fool,” and *Maximin* makes it clear that he was far from oblivious. He knew exactly what they thought, and years later he described the pain of it.

AFTER HIS marriage in 1874, Jefferies left Swindon to live in Surbiton in order to be closer to London publishers and never returned. And yet his later work echoes the tone and content of the first paragraph of his 1866 “Chapters on Churches I”:

It was a beautiful evening. The moon, when not concealed, rather I should say dimmed by the passing of fleecy clouds—those barks of the sky, those heavenly messengers, cast a brilliant, a pleasant, though a cold and somewhat melancholy light upon the earth. My way lay between hawthorn hedges, and high trees, despoiled by the combined agency of frost and wind on their leaves, which lay—making the road appear in a very dark shadow—spread beneath their bare, gaunt, skeleton-like branches. (6)

Even specific images from this early passage recur in his later work. For instance, Jefferies’s description of clouds as “heavenly messengers” in this early work is repeated in *Greene Ferne Farm* (1880), when the character Geoffrey

notices “messengers” heralding darker cloud and weather while out riding on the Marlborough Downs with Margaret (65). These “messengers,” Jefferies explains here, are “small detached clouds, that precede the rest” (65).¹¹ The metaphor appears again in the essay “Hours of Spring,” written in 1886 when Jefferies knew he was dying: “Dark patches of cloud—spots of ink on the sky, the ‘messengers’—go drifting by; and after them will follow the water-carriers, harnessed to the south and west winds, drilling the long rows of rain like seed into the earth. After a time there will be a rainbow” (16). The essay recalls other experiences of walking out of doors as well. For instance, Jefferies describes how, “In time past, strong of foot, I walked gaily up the noble hill that leads to Beachy Head from Eastbourne” in East Sussex (4), and how he saw larks in Wiltshire: “It is years since I went out amongst them in the old fields, and saw them in the green corn” (3). In this context, we may read Jefferies’s repetition of the term “messengers” in this late essay as evidence that, as he wrote, he recalled the late November walk of 1866 with sad poignancy: whereas the nature of cloud formations does not age or falter, the ageing human, susceptible to changes in health and circumstance, inevitably does.

The freedom to wander off into the night that he once rejoiced in contrasts poignantly with his situation twenty years later where he is confined to his room:

Through the bars of my prison I can see the catkins thick and
sallow-grey on the willows across the field, visible even at that
distance; so great the change in a few days, the hand of spring
grows firm and takes a strong grasp of the hedges. My prison
bars are but a sixteenth of an inch thick; I could snap them with
a fillip—only the window-pane, to me as impenetrable as the
twenty-foot wall of the Tower of London. ... it is the tyranny of
circumstance, the lot of man. (“Hours of Spring” 16)

Whereas in his juvenile essay Jefferies comes across as an ambitious, confident, young man celebrating his solitude, the older man speaking in “Hours of Spring” can only view the unfolding spring “through the bars” of his “prison.” The themes of imprisonment and freedom so evident in this essay, and also so pertinent to the adolescent imagination, are also noted by John Fowles in his introduction to *After London* (1885), where he refers to Jefferies’s “passionate, if distinctly adolescent, attempt” to imagine his way out of “the prison of the world” (xii). Fowles observes that “this particular polarity, between the sense of imprisonment and the determination to escape it, remained intensely strong in Jefferies all his life, for both biographical and innate reasons” (xii). To this I would add that placing “Hours of Spring”—already recognised as one of Jefferies’s most poignant essays¹²—alongside the youthful “Chapters on Churches” sheds a “melancholy light” on both juvenilia and mature work.

Of course, there are other reasons besides trauma for an image or theme to recur. Jefferies’s juvenilia are also valuable for offering insight into his

perseverance and self-belief; his nature perhaps contained something of the spirited stubbornness of the donkey in *Bevis*, who after the boys' attempts to scare and starve him "beat them" after all (Jefferies, *Bevis* 100). Several ideas that he put forward in the local papers during his late teens re-emerged in later work, either because they did not receive the attention he was looking for or because they persisted in his mind and required further working out. One instance of the latter that Matthews and Trietel note is Jefferies's revisiting the "lampooning style" (18) of his early work "The Battle of 1866," a satirical poem about the Reform Bill, in his later satire *Jack Brass and Suez-Cide!!*.

Jefferies's stubborn perseverance is perhaps also evident in his recurring use of a particular paraphrase of Homer, learned from his father but used to critique his father's values. In "Traits of the Olden Time," his first essay concerning social conditions and labourers, written when he was eighteen, Jefferies openly challenges the moral worth of institutions and traditions:

Manners and men flourish and fall as the leaves, each succeeding generation bringing with it fresh men and fresh manners as each spring fresh leaves, preserving a general likeness to the preceding ... In the olden time, before the "style and calendar" was altered, since which, according to the generation fast disappearing, there has never been, nor will be good days in old England again ... though these times have frequently been styled "good," there were many practices scarce likely in modern estimation to sustain the title. (2)

Jefferies's assertion at the start of the essay, that "Manners and men flourish and fall as the leaves," invokes a passage from *The Iliad*, which Pope translates as "Like leaves on trees the race of man is found, / Now green in youth, now withering on the ground" (6.181–83). Eleven years later, Jefferies draws upon the same Homeric metaphor to express the same sentiment in *Wild Life in a Southern County*, in a reflective scene concerning a hare's skull and the short lives of animals: "This skull here, lying so light in the palm of the hand, with the bright sunshine falling on it, and a shadowy darkness in the vacant orbits of the eyes, fills us with sadness. 'As leaves on leaves, so men on men decay' how much more so with these creatures whose generations are so short" (12).¹³

Notably, the teenage essay invokes that most canonical author Homer to critique parochial attitudes by suggesting that the prejudices and attitudes of olden times were restrictive to modern progress. Around the same time that Jefferies was writing "Traits of the Olden Time," his father was known to "point with disgust to 'our Dick poking about in them hedges'" (Thomas 47). The father is present elsewhere in the article as well, as Matthews and Trietel observe; he is suggested by Jefferies's ambiguous reference to the "educated farmer" and to the stamping iron bearing the initials J.J. (23). Jefferies's allusion to Homer further invokes his father, who introduced him to Homer, and it is likely that the Pope translation of *The Iliad* that he references did belong to his father.¹⁴ Jefferies's reference to his father in this context hints, therefore, at a

degree of conflict between the young, progressive thinker and the older, traditional father. The reference to the stamping iron can be read as symbolising the imprint of traditional values on the young psyche and Jefferies's resistance to them. The edition of Homer thus both connects and distinguishes the father and son: they both admire the work and yet perceive it in different ways, each shaped by the conditions of their generation and the nuances of their individual perspectives. It is reasonable to surmise that his father's inability to accept Jefferies's self-directed vocation in life—a vocation that by its very nature challenged conventional ideas—was a source of conflict and trauma for the young, developing writer.

In tracing the associations of one reference to Homer from its appearance in Jefferies's juvenilia to its reappearance in his mature work, I have hoped to show the usefulness of such a methodology for tracing the impact of early experiences in Jefferies's writing. Although material that documents the emotional impact of Jefferies's traumatic experiences is scarce, some interpretative insight may be gained through such comparisons. Of particular interest therefore is the fact that a piece of wasteland in the vicinity of his birthplace appears four times in his writing, in four guises, between 1864 and 1882. The first reference occurs in *Ben Tubbs*, where the explorers reach a deserted piece of “ground ... broken up by numerous small conical mounds, some covered with vegetation, the greater number of sand. The herbage here was very scanty and large boulders of a grey stone began to strew the ground” (114). This “broken” terrain anticipates an area of uncultivated land peppered by anthills that Jefferies describes just a few years later in the fifth instalment of “History of Swindon” (1867):

Liddington Wick is a place of great antiquity, and has been inhabited from time immemorial. A field near here affords a curious fact to the lovers of natural history. It is covered with what appears at first sight simply small turfy and thymy hillocks of earth, but which turn out upon investigation to be ant hills placed so close together that it is possible by springing from one to the other to pass from one side of the ground to the other without setting foot on the level earth. These hillocks represent the industry of millions—countless myriad—of ants, continued no doubt for years, since the field appears to have had the present appearance from time immemorial. (5)

Jefferies associates the ancient days of Liddington Wick with the field of anthills, both of them “inhabited from time immemorial,” even though the field is located some distance away, only “near” the hamlet. As an instance of natural history this passage hints at the direction in which he would have liked to take the writing, even as its clipped appearance in the instalment conveys the compromise he had to make in order to suit the interests of his local readership.

With the image he conjures of “springing” from one anthill to the next, Jefferies also establishes this wild place as a symbol of the wild type of freedom that he associated both with childhood and with ancient tribal days.¹⁵

Eleven years later, in *Wild Life in a Southern County* (published in serial form in 1878), Jefferies revisits the scene of the anthills and treats it—and his memory of “springing” across it—in more detail:

There must have been eight or ten acres of these hills. They rose about eighteen inches or two feet, of a conical shape, and overgrown by turf, like thousands of miniature extinct volcanoes. They were so near together that it was easy to pass twenty or thirty yards without once touching the proper surface of the ground, by springing from one ant-hill to the other. Thick bunches of rushes grew between, and innumerable thistles flourished, and here and there scattered hawthorn bushes stood. ... How many millions of ants must have been needed to raise these hillocks! and what still more incalculable numbers must have lived in them! A wilder spot could scarcely have been imagined, though situate between rich meadow and ploughed lands. (*Wild Life in a Southern County* 307–308)

Some of these details reveal that the landscape of the anthills also influenced *Ben Tubbs Adventures*. Most notably, the “thousands of miniature extinct volcanoes” that the anthills call to mind echoes a scene in when Ben and Ned encounter a landscape of “extinct” volcanoes: “a long low range of what appeared mole hills and one a little higher than the rest rising in the form of a cone” (148). The “innumerable thistles” in this passage also recall the “scanty” “herbage” of *Ben Tubbs*.

Furthermore, *Wild Life* recalls Jefferies’s association of this well-remembered place with “great antiquity” in the much earlier “History of Swindon.” Here Jefferies notes that the wasteland—a last bastion of the pre-modern world—eventually becomes lost to modern agriculture: “The land for agricultural purposes was almost valueless, there being so little herbage upon which cattle could graze, and no possibility of mowing any; so in the end gangs of labourers were set to work and the ant-hills levelled, and, indeed, bodily-removed. Thus this last piece of waste land was brought into use” (308).

The same field of anthills, and the same use of the term “waste” to describe it, is once again returned to in detail in *Bevis* when the boys go to the mainland to an area they call “The Waste.” Unlike a meadow or cornfield, where the “glance [can] travel at once” and discern the boundaries, the Waste has an “uneven surface,” so that Bevis finds himself disoriented:

Incessantly winding round and round the ant-hills, he did not know which way he was going ... he reached a boulder, another one not so large as that they had examined together; this was about as high as his chest.

... he felt utterly alone. It was wilder than the island—the desolate thistles, the waste of rushes, the thorns, the untouched land which the ants possessed and not man, the cold grey boulder, the dots of mist here and there, and the pale light of the moon. Something of the mystery of the ancient days hovers at night over these untilled places. He leaned against the stone and looked for the flicker of light which he had seen, and supposed must be a will-o'-the-wisp, but he did not see it again. (350–351)

Nature is a trickster here. The anthills occupy a “dim uncertain expanse” concealed by grey mist; a “silent” owl startles Bevis; a “will-o'-the-whisp “flicker[s]” and disappears, and he hears vague unidentifiable “rustlings” and “wings.” The activity of “springing”—now termed “leaping”—from one anthill to another, which Jefferies mentions in both “History of Swindon” and *Wild Life in a Southern Country*, is also recalled here: “Then Mark came leaping from ant-hill to ant-hill, and crushing through the thistles in his haste” (351). Even though the significance of the anthills only finds its full expression in *Bevis*, published relatively late in Jefferies’s life, it is worth noting that this is a children’s novel, indicative of just how important and vivid Jefferies’s boyhood experience remained in his mind, twenty-five years later.

Taken together, these passages, written over a sixteen-year period, suggest the importance of the sense of timeless wilderness and of childish freedom that Jefferies had experienced in that “waste place” as a boy. Moreover, these four passages not only provide insight into Jefferies’s development as an observational writer but also illustrate the psychic significance of that last piece of “untilled” land that had remained “untouched” for centuries. In light of the prejudice Jefferies experienced as a teenager, it is appropriate that he should be drawn to a piece of land where no one goes; a liminal space that is perceived by others as worthless and unfit for the modern world yet holds mysterious potential and abundance. Jefferies’s repeated references to this area of land can thus be better understood in the context of the scorn directed at him during his teenage years as well as his own ambition.

This theme of nature as a place of solace and escape from the judgement of others for the young self also appears in *The Story of My Heart*, where Jefferies explains, “I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe, and indefinable aspirations filled me. I found them in the grass fields, under the trees, on the hill-tops, at sunrise, and in the night. There was a deeper meaning everywhere” (199). However, as he also makes clear, his wish to have time to reflect on these musings and formulate them was not considered acceptable. Seeking a quiet place away from the eyes of the hamlet or the workers at Coate, he would go out “on rising” to stand beneath “some elms” at the edge of the farmhouse garden where, for a few moments, he could “think unchecked”:

... thence I could see across the dewy fields to the distant hills over or near which the sun rose. These elms partially hid me, for at that time I had a dislike to being seen, feeling that I should be despised if I was noticed. This happened once or twice, and I knew I was watched contemptuously But I went every morning (75–76)

Although he wrote several drafts of the book, Jefferies still considered his being “watched contemptuously” a significant enough detail to include in the final version. We may also note in this context the “laughter and contempt” the autobiographical Maximin received from the local community upon his first publication (*The Rise of Maximin* 42). It is significant that Jefferies’s memories of watching the sunrise—in what should have been the privacy and protection of his family garden—were marred by his memories of feeling “despised” by onlookers. The concealing, sheltering qualities of the wasteland in *Bevis*, which are also detectable in *Ben Tubbs* in the boulders that conceal the watcher, clearly correlate with this adolescent desire to hide oneself from view in fear of ridicule or scorn. It can thus be reasonably conjectured that the field of anthills was for Jefferies a place of retreat; somewhere he went to be alone and think.

I would further argue that the field of anthills was significant to Jefferies as a symbol not only of safety from scorn and of freedom but also of his own scorned self. In the absence of any direct references to adolescent mistreatment in his diaries and letter, we may turn to his treatment of scorned plants and animals as his career as a naturalist developed. Describing a visit to Kew Gardens, for example, Jefferies notes that “despised groundsel—the weed which cumbers the garden patch, and is hastily destroyed, is here fully recognized” (“Herbs” 188). Writing of Darwin’s book on earthworms he similarly notes: “At first it has a repellent sound, but we quickly learn how clumsy and prejudiced have been our views of the despised worm thrown up by every ploughshare” (“Walks in the Wheatfields” 150). In *The Open Air* he again observes that, although in early aquariums snails and weeds were “excluded as eyesores and injurious,” it was soon realised that “the despised snails and weeds were absolutely necessary” for maintaining the health of an aquarium (102). He regretted the disregard and poor treatment of waste spaces, with a seemingly acute awareness of neglect: “when fields became more generally enclosed it was still only in patches, and these strips and spaces of green sward were left utterly uncared for and unnoticed” (“The Labourer’s Daily Life” 67). When he gives attention to plants traditionally dismissed as common or useless and recognises their values, he teaches us not just about nature but about human nature too.

THIS EMPATHETIC form of observation lay at the heart of Jefferies’s generous, all-encompassing vision: the antithesis to the parochial scorn he experienced when young. Trauma, as Greenberg notes, “defies a linear conception of one’s relation to experience or memory; it hovers outside of one particular moment, reassembling or confusing the boundaries of time” (321). As a haunted survivor of traumatic experience, Jefferies was compelled to imaginatively return to

places of childhood refuge, and sought in his mature work to nourish respect for aspects of the natural world that he felt deserved more attention. The therapeutic process of writing out the experience many years later, even in guarded form, may have allowed Jefferies to reframe the prejudice and disparagement he had been subjected to when young.¹⁶ Indeed, an overall trajectory towards healing has been previously noted in Jefferies's work; a form, as I argue elsewhere, of "personal archaeology" that was "facilitated by the imaginative return to landscapes which had emotional significance."¹⁷ This is a trajectory that can be seen most clearly when Jefferies's juvenilia are considered alongside his mature work (both essays and autobiographical fiction) and viewed through the lens of contemporary research concerning traumatic stress. Such an approach points to some form of unrecognised boyhood trauma that, though unrecognised by scholars and largely unrecognised by biographers, nevertheless leaves its traces throughout his writing.

Jefferies was, by all accounts, a sensitive and gifted child, whose ideas went largely unrecognised within his family and community. The refuge he evidently found in the waste spaces around Coate indicates how important his home landscape was to his emotional wellbeing and to his maturation as an author and thinker. From the reuse and development in his mature work of ideas that first appear in his juvenilia, we can see that Jefferies arrived at some important ideas early on, and spent the rest of his life developing them and finding acceptable ways to present them in print. From being "despised and unnoticed,"¹⁸ his abilities uncelebrated, he went on to carve out a successful literary career devoted to noticing and cherishing the small, often overlooked lives of flora and fauna—creatures like himself—and advocating the vast wonder of discovery in the most ordinary things.

NOTES

¹ The exact year and date are unknown (Matthews and Trietel 9).

² Emergent therapeutic perspectives now recognise that emotionally intense, sensitive, and gifted people are often misunderstood and mislabelled (Lo). Jefferies's feeling of being an outsider and misunderstood is clearly demonstrated in "Alone in London," a fragment of early prose describing a walk through busy London streets: "I look in the faces and can get no consolation, for they are all so thoroughly convinced; without a doubt. ... As I walk the pressure of this silent but immense energy around begins to fill me with all manner of difficulties" (2). He becomes anxious, self-conscious, and uncertain of his purpose there. People in the crowd wear an expression that "is identical as if they were replicas of the same plaster cast. ... They have all got boots that fit them and they have all got fitted into this society. I cannot understand it. I begin to feel creepy and queer. Something odd about me" (3). Though beyond the scope of this essay, one avenue for further research would be to consider the evidence that Jefferies had Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In addition to his sensitivity and difficulty with socialisation, his intense identification with the natural world and the ease he felt in company with natural things (more than in human company) point to ASD as a possible diagnosis. In these qualities as

- well as in his intense interest in natural history, teenage Jefferies resembles the teenage author Dara McNulty (*Diary of a Young Naturalist*, 2020), who has ASD.
- ³ Research has also found an association between ASD and PTSD. See, for example, Nirit Haruvi-Lamdan, Shiri Lebendiger, Ofer Golan, and Danny Horesh, “Are PTSD and autistic traits related? An examination among typically developing Israeli adults,” *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, Vol. 89, February 2019, pp. 22–27, doi: 10.1016/j.comppsy.2018.11.004.
- ⁴ As an alternative we might also consider Reactive Attachment Disorder, which is a more uncommon and understudied form of psychopathology, wherein children “may exhibit behaviours that do not seem to make sense to the rest of us” (Herr 1). For a discussion of the characteristics of RAD see Colby Pearce, who notes that RAD often relates to “traumatic care in the first four years of life” (50) and that sudden changes in parenting or the loss of a parent can contribute to this effect (99–100).
- ⁵ *Ben Tubbs Adventures* remained in manuscript form until 2016 when it was published by the Richard Jefferies Society.
- ⁶ See, for example, in Hill et al., their analysis of the general coping skills and mechanisms that help with the common challenges of everyday life, in which the authors argue that a key feature of resilience is “a capacity to deal with severe adversity, so that two crucial conditions need to be present (Luthar et al., 2000; Gilligan, 2001): a significant threat or difficult circumstances” and “positive adaptation” (2).
- ⁷ See, for example, a letter to the publisher George Bentley (22 April 1876) concerning the novel *In Summer Time*, in which Jefferies asserts, “I forwarded to you the MS of my novel That date being over two months ago I would like to hear from you respecting it. I think you will have found it original and perhaps not unamusing in the delineation of country scenes” (qtd. in Matthews and Trietel 73). Jefferies wrote again to Bentley on 25 May that year, requesting specialist advice on how to improve his novel-writing: “I am just entering upon the prime of life being in my 28th year and very likely a little advice from you may save me years of disappointment by putting me into the right path” (qtd. in Matthews and Trietel 75).
- ⁸ In *The Old House at Coate*, a collection of essays written in his thirties, Jefferies recalls the farm’s two blue doors, set within the stone wall perimeter, “banging ceaselessly, from dawn to midnight” with the comings and goings of the mowers, milkers, and haymakers. He also mentions “folk” coming to use the farm pump for water, as the pump was “thrown open to all who liked to use it” (42–43).
- ⁹ It is important to note that at this time Jefferies began to experience episodic illness, which was most probably the beginning of the tuberculosis that eventually took his life two decades later. Although it was perceived at the time as a mysterious illness, and not tuberculosis, we should not underestimate the traumatic impact that knowledge of his declining health may have had on his adolescent psyche. In 1867 Jefferies wrote letters describing a bout of illness that lasted several months. Besant states that this episode represented the “start of chronic tuberculosis” (70–71). Matthews and Trietel note that Besant’s account would have relied upon letters that are no longer extant (25). The episode was followed by recurrent bouts of illness, worsening in severity, for the rest of Jefferies’s life.
- ¹⁰ He felt he was fighting prejudice at every step—from the local, immediate neighbourhood, to the wider world of authorship and research. In his first signed letter to *The Times*, in 1872, which acted as a springboard for his reputation as an authority on agricultural subjects, and thus kick-started his career, Jefferies gave his address as “Coate Farm” in order to lend the letter greater authority and weight (Matthews and Trietel 54). The letter concerned the plight of the agricultural labourer—a topic of much interest at the time. By this point his observations of

people were becoming increasingly accurate and objective, marking a development from the juvenile observations in his “Chapters on Churches” that were clearly hampered by his own prejudice. See, for example, his disdainful dismissal of a homeless person in “Chapters on Churches II”: “These are the class of men who hang like a dead weight upon the community ... for they do not even perform the office of the carrion-crow—as do the Pariahs in India; they are the carrion themselves” (2).

- ¹¹ “Messengers” was a term coined by John Constable to describe what today are known as *stratus fractus* clouds. The term appears in the 1834 edition of his *English Landscape Scenery*, in the text accompanying *Spring. East Bergholt Common, Hail Squalls – Noon* (qtd. in Thorne 43).
- ¹² Matthews and Trietel describe it as “one of his best pieces of work” (203).
- ¹³ I have not been able to trace the exact wording Jefferies uses. Pope’s translation comes closest: “Like leaves on trees the race of man is found, / Now green in youth, now withering on the ground; / Another race the following spring supplies, / They fall successive, and successive rise: / So generations in their course decay” (6.181–85). Most likely Jefferies is either paraphrasing or misquoting from memory.
- ¹⁴ Keith cites a letter from Jefferies in which he writes: “it was my father and not the schoolmaster who introduced me to Homer” (18).
- ¹⁵ He makes this connection more obviously in “After London” and “The Story of my Heart.” From his youth, the waste offered a space where he could be himself, unfettered by the expectations and pressures of his family and school life; suggested by the enjoyment of leaping between the anthills. In 1867 he writes to his aunt concerning waste: “This neighbourhood is a mine for an antiquary. I was given to understand at school that in ancient days Britain was a waste—uninhabited, rude and savage. I find this a mistake.” (Besant 69). He describes seeing Roman coins, arrowheads, tumuli, and camps, and concludes that the archaeological landscape in the vicinity of his home was “alive with the dead.” Again, this was at a point in time when archaeology was still emerging as a science. Previously, prehistoric life had been largely dismissed as merely savage, and the significance of archaeological settings had been overlooked. Jefferies was the first to notice the Bronze Age stone circle within half a mile of his house. (See Welshman, *Imagining Archaeology*.) The smallest finds often had dramatic implications: something that attracted Jefferies to archaeology and inspired his writing on the subject. See, for example, “The Commonest Thing in the World,” an 1875 essay about the prehistoric significance of a flint he picked up on the Wiltshire Downs, as well as “The History of Swindon,” in which Jefferies details the archaeology of his home landscape.
- ¹⁶ See therapeutic approaches which recommend the writing out of trauma as a path to healing PTSD. For example, Davis notes, “Clinically we have observed that the process of writing out the nightmare seems to take the power out of the nightmare. ... Somehow, the nightmares are not as frightening for some people when they get them out of that dark place in their minds and look at them on paper” (195).
- ¹⁷ See Welshman 367.
- ¹⁸ See his description of the milestone in “Meadow Thoughts” as “half hidden by docks and nettles, despised and unnoticed” (65).

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