In the title poem of Robinson Jeffers’ final collection, *The Beginning and the End*, the poet asks a fundamental question, at the heart of which lies a mystery his entire body of poetry has sought to elucidate. He writes, “What is this thing called life?”. He continues:

…. – I speak of life
That oxidizes fats and proteins and carbo-
Hydrates to live on, and from that chemical energy
Makes pleasure and pain, wonder, love, adoration, hatred and terror:
How do these things grow
From a chemical reaction?¹

A deeply mystical poet, Jeffers recognized that his question was a religious one; however, his rigorous study of science convinced him that his enquiry was as much a matter of physics.² The mystery of man’s dual

² Two early influences in the life of Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) were the Bible, impressed upon him by his father, a theology professor and Presbyterian minister, and the work of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Like his fellow Californians Jack London and George Sterling, his work also displays the influence of scientists who were revealing that the universe was much larger and much older than had been previously believed. In addition, Jeffers felt that Charles Darwin “formed (with Roman Lucretius and several others) the largest poem / Up to that time” (*CP IV*, 536). Finally, his reading of Freud and Jung is fundamentally responsible for the emphasis he places on unconscious, biologically-rooted traits that help shape and control aspects of one’s personality and behaviour. He often suggests in his work that, unlike animals, mankind has lost touch with his nature. Men, he remarks, “have choked / Their natures until the souls die in them” (*CP I*, 373).
nature – matter and spirit, object and subject, automaton and autonomous – fascinated Jeffers and helped to shape his world view, his life, and his poetry. Jeffers concurred with Bertrand Russell, whose essay *What I Believe*, which Jeffers read and admired, began with this line: “Man is a part of nature, not something contrasted with nature. His thoughts and his bodily movements follow the same laws that describe the motion of stars and atoms.”³ Like Jeffers, Russell was a materialist who stated blankly in his *Religion and Science*: “what science can not discover, mankind can not know.”⁴ Here, however, the two thinkers diverge.

While Russell was an atheist, Jeffers was a pantheist. In a prose fragment from the early 1950s titled “Preface – or Suffix” (just recently published) Jeffers states that in regard to the existence of God, “there is no doubt” (*CP IV*, 557). In “Themes in My Poems”, he writes of the “certainty … that the universe is one being, a single organism, one great life that includes all life and all things; and is so beautiful that it must be loved and reverenced; and in moments of mystical vision we identify ourselves with it”.⁵ Identifying one’s self with the universe suggests knowing the universe as much as possible. And for a pantheist, this knowledge leads to union with the whole, or God. Unlike Russell, Jeffers felt that science was not the only means of knowing. Mystical visions, he felt, could also provide certainty. But as with scientific discovery, Jeffers’ mystical experience was grounded in the natural world. His mysticism, he explained, was not like that of “the Hindu mystic” who “finds God in his own soul, and all the outer world is illusion”. For him, it is “the outer world” that “is real and divine” (*CP IV*, 412).

In his lyric “Credo”, the title of which is the Latin equivalent to

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⁵ In her book *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*, Buffalo: NY, 1997, Barbara Noske notes that an “organic view” of the universe, such as Jeffers describes here, prevailed among “hunter-gatherers and early cultivators” and still persists among Australian Aboriginals. The generally held modern view of nature as “the Other and the lesser”, she notes, is the result of the “devaluation of nature” that accompanied the development of Western civilization. She writes, “This anthropocentric notion happens to be a fairly recent one in the history of human ideas, however. Previously, people were happy to consider themselves not as other than but as part of that greater comprehensive whole: nature. They had a holistic and organic view of the world (the metaphor used was that of a living organism).” She notes that American Indians tended to view humankind as “part of a cosmic whole, a natural and sacred order connecting everything with everything else. Humankind’s relationship with the rest of the universe is one of symbiosis, both practical and spiritual” (41-42).