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For the Tenth Anniversary

of

Robert P. Tristram Coffin

1892-1955

Pulitzer Prize Poet

Novelist, biographer, essayist, painter,
lorist, teacher, lecturer, unique lover
and chronicler of Maine life.

*

"Poetry is saying the best one can about life."

★
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IN MEMORIAM:

ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

Perhaps no greater contrast in American poets exists than that between Thomas Stearns Eliot and Robert P. Tristram Coffin. In total turnabout of the former's famous dissociation from his native literature, politics, and religion, Coffin wrote: "I am a New Englander by birth, by bringing up, by spirit." The three insuperable facts of life to this most intense and distinctive regionalist were poetry, Maine, and poetry about Maine.

No State-of-Mainer has written more sensitively or authentically about indigenous "cows and horses, barns and haymows, hired men . . . a red schoolhouse . . . the sleepless eyes of lighthouses, deer going like poems down the hills, shoals of fish with scales frosty in the light of the October moon." To Coffin, the phenomena of his encompassing countryside and sea were as Poe's "regions which are Holy-Land." Upon his return to Brunswick in 1934, Coffin jubilated over once more being "in my own state, my own college, my own home town, within a stone's throw of the first school I attended, and I am living in the same block with the house in which I was born." This was more than nostalgia; it was millennial affinity.

As a boy Coffin "planned" to be a poet, and as a man he kept himself "in training" as a poet. On his two Maine farms — one saltwater, the other freshwater — he explored the familiar surfaces of life around him. By a process known to Vergil and to William Blake, he penetrated these to their profounder internal meanings and presented them to his readers with glimmering archetypal connotations. For many who might have missed the mystical aspects of the ordinary, Coffin transformed the fact to dream and then back to fact again. He deliberately limited his poetic range but within that range he is still unmatched. — R. C.
PURITANISM VERSUS THE OLD GREEN GODS: NEW ENGLAND IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

BY WILLIAM C. WEES

NEW ENGLAND — Maine, in fact — dominates the poetry of Robert P. Tristram Coffin. Like Emily Dickinson, Coffin tried to "see New Englandly." For a poet to so limit his subject matter and point of view, to be so provincial, does not necessarily limit the richness of his work: witness the poetry of Dickinson, herself, and Coffin's contemporary, Robert Frost. Although Dickinson and Frost preferred to make their poems complex, ambiguous and symbolic, and experimented with sound and rhythm patterns, while Coffin tended toward a more open and direct statement of themes and an uncomplicated use of rime and meter, all three poets achieved universality by dealing with New England people and the world they live in.

This world, where man and nature remain close (as farmer to land or fisherman to sea) was the only world that interested Coffin. His decision to ignore industrialized and urbanized America — a decision his thoroughly happy boyhood on a Maine salt water farm apparently made inevitable — allowed him to turn his full attention to creating a poetic response to the world he knew best: the New England world of fishermen, farmers and dwellers in small coastal towns, the sea, the fields and pastures, the rivers, the trees and flowers, the wildlife and, most important of all, the earth itself, which affected Coffin like a deep, strange, primitive power that elicits man's fear and reverence.

It is Coffin's development of an atavistic awe before the power of nature, a nature that destroys man's domesticated world, but at the same time revitalizes man sexually, that I find most interesting in his poetry — interesting, especially, because it led Coffin to repudiate New England's Puritan heritage in favor of a radically anti-Puritan, even pagan, primitivism. To see how Coffin arrived at this commitment to primitivism, we will examine, first, the New Englanders who inhabit Coffin's world and, second, the natural environment in which they live.
Colby Library Quarterly 137

Then, finally, we will see how the two—people and environment, man and nature—come together in a sexually charged, animistic universe.

I

Some of Coffin’s people too much resemble the old lobsterman in the New Yorker cartoon, who tells two summer people that he’s sorry, but he has already been someone’s “Most Unforgettable Character”; others remind one of Sherwood Anderson’s “grotesques” in Winesburg, Ohio, that is, people who have turned in upon themselves so that they seem “queer” to the outside world, but inside have a touching, bittersweet humanity that makes them sadder and more sensible to the harshness of the world. Most of Coffin’s people are neither local characters nor “grotesques,” however, but simply ordinary people whose lives most clearly illustrate man’s condition and his place in nature.

Typical local characters are Jim Bibber who every Sunday stood on his hill above the town and swore great, booming oaths as the people went to church, and Grandfather Noah Staples who always insisted that only chance had prevented the Confederate Army from capturing Washington “by way of Washington County.”1 Coffin’s poems about people such as these do not touch upon basic human problems, but when he writes about “grotesques” like Thief Jones, Lomey Catlin and Roxiney Boody, Coffin reveals universal problems of loneliness and deep unhappiness. Thief Jones steals from everyone in town, but since he always lets the rightful owner have his goods when he comes for them, Thief has become an accepted part of the town’s everyday life. But Thief’s plight becomes pathetic when we read that although people “liked to hear him lie, . . . Thief ate his victuals by himself.” (CP, 223) Pathetic, too is Lomey Catlin who believed that

The sins of all the world were hers,
They stuck to her like burdock burrs. (CP, 331)

1 Collected Poems (New York, 1939), 334. The Collected Poems hereafter are abbreviated CP; other abbreviations as follows: Poems for a Son With Wings (New York, 1945), PSW; People Behave Like Ballads (New York, 1946), PBLB; Apples by Ocean (New York, 1950), ABO. All references appear parenthetically in the text.
She felt responsible when “Sade Carter had a woods-colt child . . . Sim Sinnett did not give up drink . . . a gale blew off the Baptist steeple,” and she prayed constantly, “Dear God, I wish I’d never been got!”

The loneliness of Thief Jones and the sense of sin in Lomey Catlin unite in the lamentations of Roxiney Boody, who had danced with all the boys and made love under the spars and nets until “the sun came up, and youth had gone.” (CP, 330) Then, old and repentant, she put her misery into a kind of sea-coast spiritual:

“If I had the flippers of a seal,  
I’d fly to Jesus, and he would heal.”

“If I had the wings of a coot or a loon,  
I’d fly to my Jesus in Malagoon!”

“If I was a shad with a silver side,  
I’d swim to Jesus and be his bride!” (CP, 328-330)

But Jesus, like Malagoon, was too far away, and Roxiney Boody “spent her groans/ Along Sabino’s icy stones.” (CP, 329)

Roxiney Boody’s isolation also characterizes many ordinary people who must learn to face life, in all its ordinariness, alone. A universal condition, certainly, but given particularity in lonely New England settings along the Maine coast. Thus, the isolation is physical as well as psychological, and the individual’s loneliness appears in stark relief against the vast background of sea, sky and rocky, forested shore line.

Coffin captures exactly this sense of physical and psychological isolation when he describes the loneliness of a young wife on a coastal island:

There was the sea, the wall of winds between  
The life she knew before and this life here,  
Her loneliness was a very steady thing . . . . (ABO, 48)

This steady loneliness can totally dominate men’s lives. In “Being,” Coffin presents a clam digger who

had no garden and no friend,  
He did not borrow things or lend,  
Never in all his silent life  
Had he found room for any wife  
Of his own or other men’s;  
He’d never kept as much as hens. (CP, 224)
Equally lonely is John Popham, a lobsterman who “kept away from other men,” and “found his lonely way about/ Shoals and blows and low-ebb hours.” (CP, 226) But John loved “being lonely,” as he loved “bold water at his door.”

Isolation, then, is not necessarily a bad thing, as Coffin shows in “The Island.” On a treeless, deserted island an old cellar hole gives proof that men lived there once and might return,

When men grow tired
Of being what their neighbors are and find
That things to have are not the things to own.
Men may need frontiers again, and turn
Back to cabins and a loneliness
Which puts them close to stars and tapping rain,
To waters moving, rainbows, and the wind. (CP, 157)

Men, in other words, may desire loneliness as a way of escaping conformity, finding new frontiers, and returning to a close relationship with nature. Here Coffin touches upon an archetypal image in the American consciousness: man alone in nature.

Coffin’s use of this image undoubtedly stems from several impulses: a rejection of today’s suburban barracks and urban renewal parking lots; a desire to play the role of the sturdy, self-reliant Yankee; an expansion of his own childhood into a metaphor of general happiness; an innate sympathy with the many American writers who have been drawn to the man-in-nature image. That image stems partly from the Romantic, Rousseauist faith in the beneficence of nature and partly from the direct American experience of being alone in nature, as frontiersman, homesteader and, indeed, even today as fisherman and farmer in Maine. In America the actual experience of being alone in nature was intensified by the peculiarly strong sense of isolation fostered by American Puritanism, with its painful soul-searching and its emphasis on the inevitably lonely confrontation between the individual soul and God. The New England loneliness in Coffin’s poetry reflects some of this Puritan-based isolation, but Coffin generally evades its more terrifying and tragic consequences in order to emphasize the positive value of being alone in nature.

Puritanism affects Coffin’s ordinary people in another way, by shaping their ethics according to what we might call the
old way of doing things, a way that is better because it is harder, simpler and more independent than newer ways of doing things. On this scale of values, labor rates above leisure, farms above cities, thrift above generosity, even sons above daughters. Yet, the hard old way is passing, as Coffin tacitly admits in two poems that ironically undercut the old way of life. "The Mark" describes a shining white country church without fallen shingles, loose nails or crooked blinds. Yet, the poet says, "People do not go there any more,/ The church is full of sermons of the dust." (CP, 205) Its only purpose is to satisfy the people's compulsion to have clean, orderly structures, and "to have a good mark when they plow/ To run their furrows by." The church has become an ossified, hollow image of the old way of life. In "Last Ear," Coffin personifies the old way in "one very old New England man" who continues to hunt for the last ear of corn after all the younger men "who have sons in their bodies/ Have called it a day, unhitched, and gone." (PSW, 47) So it is, "This man with not a seed in him/ Searches for seeds still, searches on." Like the coming winter, like death itself, "he comes ahead of dark . . . holding the last ear like a vise." In the last stanza Coffin specifically applies his metaphor of impotence-winter-death to New England:

This would not be the true New England
Without this old man on weak feet
Bringing the final ear of the year's
Corn he will not live to eat.

The obsession for finding the last misshapen ear of corn is like the obsession for keeping an old, unused church in perfect condition: though the good old way of life is virtually dead, it must not be abandoned.

More directly, Coffin describes the decay of the old standards in four poems that tell a similar story. In "Thomas King" we find a man who

liked straight furrows and clean panes
And lofty talk at night,
Weedless corn and pride that keeps
The shoulders square and right. (CP, 107)

But Thomas King's son "Let the plowing go/ Took the easy way" and married a woman who left everything "orderless and
slack," and finally Thomas King could stand it no longer and killed himself. In “He Hoes” another father has a son “mated with a wife/ Coarse and common as the weeds.” (CP, 38) The result is again the decay of the old standards:

- Sharp words and dirt are everywhere
- In his house that once was clean.
- His grand-daughters run with the men
- And have a wormy fruit to glean.

And all the father can do is weed the corn until after dark, and remain “clean and shining as his hoe” until death finds him still hoeing and “not a weed in any row.” (CP, 39) In “Head Up Like a Deer’s,” a father has a “weak” son who had an “old streak/ Of his mother’s taking the easy way,/ Living for the fun and for the day.” (ABO, 45) This boy, too, marries a girl who is “dirty” and for whom “Fun came too easy, she found it everywhere.” Rather than see his son “wallow [in]/
- All the dirty years he knew would follow,” the father kills him with a twelve-gauge shotgun. Finally, in “The Monument” Coffin describes a house that is half white and half weathered gray. Old Dan Lord had been busily painting his house when death took him, and

- Thereafter people looking up there knew
- A man had worked the last breath that he drew
- And had a lazy son to be his heir
- Who went on living with his house half bare. (PSW, 27)

This degeneracy of sons can spread through a whole community, as Coffin shows in “Run-Out Harbor,” where the old way has surrendered to the new: the roofs tumble and the gables lean; yards are littered with clam shells and wash hangs on front porches; the people are up to no good long after midnight, and they “loll about and sing/ As they run their shad nets clear.” (CP, 208-209)

The degeneracy theme, like the loneliness theme, has direct connections with New England Puritanism. What is degenerating in these poems is the harsh moral standard imposed by the harsh view of man and the world, which was central to Puritan culture. Thus, we find Coffin revealing the Puritan compulsion for order and cleanliness (dirt equals sinfulness, hence Cleanliness is next to Godliness), its deep suspicion of
"having fun," "lolling," and taking the "easy way," of generosity and expansiveness, of the gentler, "weaker" sex, indeed, of sex itself, since it produces degenerate sons and even granddaughters who "have a wormy fruit to glean."

Certainly not all the ordinary people in Coffin's poems live in run-out harbors, marry dirty women, or shoot their sons or themselves; just as not all his people are lonely. But both themes, the decay of the old way and man's isolation from his fellow man, do recur in Coffin's poetry, and they help to explain why nature comes to play such a significant, indeed, dominant, role throughout his work. When man is alone, he is alone in nature; when the world around him is decaying, he can turn to nature to find perpetual vitality. Nature offers an alternative to a world that divides man between a compulsion for weedless fields, clean windows and white-washed empty churches on the one hand, and a degeneration to clamshell littered yards, crooked gables and dirty, loose living on the other. Nature shows man the way to a different and better kind of existence.

II

Although the majority of Coffin's nature poems are simply observations and appreciations of curious and beautiful objects in nature, some take up the more interesting problem of how nature affects man. They show how the seasons, especially winter ("My country has the Winter for its year," [PSW, 831]), affect men's lives. Fog, rain, ice, frost, snow, wind and sun determine when a man can fish, cross bays, plant and harvest crops, and even visit his neighbors. But this sort of man-nature relationship is fairly obvious and fairly superficial still. Subtler and more far-reaching are the relationships I would place under two headings: 1, the return (and revenge) of nature; and 2, the sexual potency of nature. In both cases, nature becomes a creative and destructive agent in a deep, primitive relationship with man.

In Coffin's poetry nature constantly threatens to take back man's domesticated world of houses, barns, cultivated fields, orchards and pasture land. This return of nature can be a pleasant thing, or it can take on the more violent complexion
of revenge, but in either case it is clear that nature will eventually have its way, whether gradually or rapidly, openly or subversively.

The amicable return of nature appears in the opening stanza of “The Woodland Orchard”:

These apple trees were lost for good
When the little house which stood
Nearby to keep them safe and sound
Sank moldering into the ground
And the children went away.
The waiting forest won the day,
And came and took the orphaned trees
Upon its dark and kindly knees. (CP, 173)

Here is a place, Coffin suggests, “Where tame and wild for once forgot/ Their old hate,” (CP, 174) and yet, he concludes, “these are trees that have been lost;/ Here one draws a careful breath,/ This loneliness is so like death.” Death is, after all, an unconditional surrender to nature, as is implied in “Foxes and Graves,” a poem about the invasion of an abandoned graveyard by foxes, an invasion Coffin accepts as perfectly just: “There is nothing wrong about wild creatures coming/ Back home again, if people move away.” (CP, 310) But the graveyard conquered by foxes, like the orchard conquered by the forest, serves to remind man of his own frailty before the implacable return of nature.

In fact, man’s death is nature’s gain, as Coffin explains in “Man Sometimes Helps”:

Birds and beasts are glad when farmers grow
Like Winter on their hair and stiff of knee,
The rabbits move in through the broken fence,
The woodchucks take the cellar in staid glee,
Foxes take over the plots with slanting stones
Where the farmer hopes to lay his bones. (ABO, 39)

If people “dread” decay and death, says Coffin, the animals “rejoice.” Man’s dread of nature’s advance becomes inextricably linked with his sense of his own dissolution, and it is no wonder that nature’s return seems like a reviving of “old hates,” to be, in fact, nature’s revenge.

Two poems, in particular, capture the sense of dread man feels before nature’s threatened revenge. “One in a Darkness” describes one man’s losing struggle against a malevolent nature
that has choked his doorway with Queen Anne's lace, sur-
rounded his house with hooting owls, and sent "a thousand
subtle roots/ Creeping where his seeds were sown." (CP, 110)
In "The Haters" Coffin explains that, "It is by the cellar they
come first, / The dispossessed of earth your house stands on." 
(CP, 203) The "pale and pindling arms/ Of raspberry
plants" begin to work through the foundations, he says, and a
hump, as if from a rising giant, appears in the cellar floor. The
"dispossessed" make even the "tamed and friendly" potatoes
and onions allies in their "secret war" against man: "They
mean death./ You and your house are what these haters hate." 
(CP, 204)

With the death of man and the destruction of his house, 
nature's revenge is complete. But that is not the end, as Coffin
shows in concluding "The Haters." Now a new (or, in fact,
an older) force takes over — the primitive, vegetation spirits, 
the earliest and strongest gods:

You cannot trust the old green gods men left
Back in the glooms of time with altars bare,
They will have vengeance. Their weak, myriad hands
Will work about your walls until they fall
And mighty trees inherit your place.

Coffin is not, I think, simply being fanciful by recalling prim-
itive vegetation rites, for they still echo in the deepest part of
man's consciousness and shape many of his fairy tales, myths
and folkways. These rites spring from what Bronislaw Mali-
nowski calls "the idea of a certain mystic, impersonal power"
in nature, what the Melanesians call mana. Because nature
exercises or represents this power, man holds it in dread, but
also in awe; he fears it and worships it. And so it is in Coffin's
poetry.

2 Coffin believed that ancient practices and beliefs reverberate through the
ages, as the following passage from one of his lectures indicates: "I am more
and more coming to be persuaded to believe in what I call Folk Memory. 
I believe a man remembers and experiences in timeless and unfading colors
the outlines not only what happened to him in his remote bright childhood,
but a man goes back into the cumulative memory of those who begot him,
and he remembers through the brains of his ancestors ... A man lives
a hundred ancient lives in living his own." (The Third Hunger and The
Poem Aloud) [Denton, Texas, 1949], 40.

3 Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays (Garden City and New York, 
Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 19-20. Malinowski's treatment of this con-
cept is far subtler than my brief quotation indicates, and, of course, his
treatment is only one of many with varying points of view.
The extent to which Coffin involves his poetry in primitive responses to nature can only be appreciated after we have examined another man-nature relationship: the sexually revitalizing power of nature. But at this point we should at least note that Coffin’s reference to “the old green gods” in “The Haters” is not the only time suggestions of ancient magic and ritual appear in his poetry. In “Holy Well” Coffin describes an old well that has become “holy” by having “mystic power” and protecting taboos. The boy in the poem will not disturb the well because, “It was not right to do it;/ He did not know the reason, yet he knew it.” (ABO, 8) In “Totem” Coffin describes the carving of jack-o-lanterns. Every boy, says the poet, “cuts a face that comes from dim/ Forgotten ages where men could/ Help the sun and rain and good/ Powers challenge death and win.” (PSW, 26) The magical powers of “the old green gods,” which guide the boy’s hand, though he may not realize it, also control the act of a boy who carves his and a girl’s initials in a tree. “Somehow he knew,” Coffin says in “Names in a Tree,” “That he was doing a deeper thing than carve/ His name and a girl’s name in a tree.” (ABO, 98) He knew that their relationship was strengthened by the tree’s mana:

It was for keeps. She never could escape,
The long roots of the beech would bring up powers;
He had planted himself like seeds in her,
Their sons would come as surely as the flowers.

The “powers” that the boy evokes not only promise to make the relationship last, but find their expression in sexual imagery; for, by this magical gesture the boy has aligned himself with the eternally regenerative power of nature.

Coffin’s most mythical treatment of the sexual force in nature appears in “The Red Drummer,” a poem about the town girls who are drawn into the fields by a mysterious drumming that Coffin ascribes to an Indian god. In fact, the god is Dionysus. Coffin uses New England cornfields instead of Attic mountain

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4 In The Third Hunger, op. cit., 50, Coffin says that when a boy cuts his and a girl’s name on a tree, “that boy is dipping his hands in the warmest fire of folk lore. He is putting his hand into his remote ancestors’ hands.”
sides, and the ear of corn instead of the pine-cone tipped wand for the central sexual symbol, but there can be little doubt that one of “the old green gods” has brought Dionysian frenzy to New England:

No house can hold the girls, no mothers;
Laws or lamplight, books or brothers;
Girls dance with strange boys in the gloom,
And tall corn stands erect in plume.
The girls come homeward, red and wise,
They talk no more of drums or noise,
But carry in Spring their red new boys. (PBLB, 31)

Dionysus, god of sensuality and rebirth, reveals to these New England corn maidens his regenerative, sexual, power.

Such poems as “Holy Well,” “Totem,” and “The Red Drummer” depend in varying degrees on superstition and myth, in other words, on uncommon circumstances that show nature exerting supernatural power over men. There are other poems that do not call upon the uncommon or obviously magical to present much the same argument: that the return and revenge of nature brings into man’s world primitive powers, “the old green gods” who still control men’s lives. In these poems, too, Coffin pursues his analysis of nature’s sexual potency.

In “Potato Diggers” and “The Catch” men reach into the living stuff of nature — potatoes in the first poem, fish in the second — to touch a deep, subhuman level of existence and find nature’s sexual energy. “Potato Diggers” describes men “with levelled backs and hands like forward feet,” plunging their hands into the soil:

They have run the dark soil through their hands
And seen it whiten and resign its mysteries.
They have run their fingers through the earth
And felt out fruits which have the feel of flesh
And warmth of flesh, and left them heaped behind. (CP, 199)

Because Coffin likens these men to pre-human beasts — “They have been creepers/ On the ancient nursery floor” — one would perhaps miss the sexual implications were it not for the close parallels between this poem and “The Catch,” which makes the sexual significance more explicit.

In “The Catch” men bend over, their hands “dipped in the astounding white/ Of smelts and herring,” their “thighs spread
like the thighs of God/ Above the fish,” (CP, 192) while around them “the fecund tide/ Swells her bosom to her lover,/ The high moon, leaning cold above her.” The fishermen then draw upon this love affair for their own human love-making. The tide is to the moon as the fisherman’s wives are to their husbands:

... fishermen’s wives
Wait to mingle their warm lives
With strange beings cold as death,
With night and starlight in their breath,
Who have had their fingers curled
Around old secrets of the world.

The potato diggers, too, have handled the world’s ancient “mysteries,” and presumably they too will draw upon the fecundity of the white and flesh-like fruit when they return to their wives.

In both poems sexual implications are indirectly presented through analogy and metaphor, but in “The Inner Temple” Coffin is more (though not completely) explicit. Here we see man making contact with the earth and gaining sexual potency from that contact:

A man can get down there [on the earth] and savor
As all men need to do, the flavor
   Of being of the ancient race
   Of animals and know his place
Is properly on pungent clay.
And something holy in its way
   Will rise out of the earth beneath him
   And in a fresh, new garment sheathe him.
So when he will go indoors,
His wife will look up from her chores
   And wonder at his seeming new
As when their courtship was not through. (CP, 152)

Thus the farmer gains renewed sexual potency, the ardor of the young lover before courtship is over, and we notice too, that his new vigor comes from kneeling on the earth itself and merging with the sub-human, animal level of nature. The fishermen, the potato diggers, and the farmer-husband experience a kind of magical union with nature at a sub- or pre-human level in order to learn the “mysteries,” the “old secrets of the world,” and participate in “something holy.”
Two other poems present this magical union more briefly. "Six Boys in the Sun" describes "six small boys with legs spread wide," (ABO, 41), lying on a river bank fishing. Coffin first says that they are "tight to earth," then shifting the image, puts them "back on their older mother's knees," and finally, returning to the earlier image, says, "Earth was a globe of hot green joy/ Curved to the right curves of a boy." "She Was the Spring" presents a girl sitting on the ground, where she becomes "filled with earth's mysterious heat." (PSW, 24) When she rises, Coffin says, "It was as though she was, herself, the Spring!" This earth maiden clearly experiences the same sexual power, the "heat" of the burgeoning springtime earth, which appears as the boy's maternal and amorous earth, the fishermen's "fecund tide," the potato diggers' warm soil with its fleshy fruit, and the farmer-husband's "pungent clay."

What these poems argue, then, is that man returns — must return — to nature for his vital energy, and in so doing he partakes of a sub-human power shared by all nature's creatures. The argument becomes unequivocally clear in "The Ox-Pull at the Fair," in which Coffin depicts man and oxen in the united effort of pulling a stone-boat at the local fair. Urging his animals on, the man "leans like a man bent to caress," and, "He speaks an ancient language, half the brutes'/ Gutturals and words down at the roots/ Of life and of desire." (CP, 264) At the end of the poem Coffin links man and animal and defines the sexual nature of their common "desire":

This thing the farmers stand here to admire
Goes down deep years by thousands to desire
Old as the time when life and strength were one,
Deep as a man's begetting of a son. (CP, 265)

The mindless, non-individualized, primal origins of all life lie behind a man's "begetting of a son," and it is from the same source that man and animal draw their potency.

In two other poems Coffin rings significant changes on the nature-potency theme. In "The Stranger" a boy watches his father plowing, and sees him turn into a hard, "fierce" man who, with his "thighs apart . . . ripped up the sod." (ABO, 93) The violence of his plowing suggests a virtual rape of the earth, and lest we miss the sexual implications, Coffin makes
an analogy between the father's plowing and his relationship with his wife:

It was all strange and far away,
Yet the boy recalled a day
He saw his father bend and kiss
His mother and be a man like this.

Since the scene is presented through the son’s eyes, we can easily ascribe the sense of violence in the relationship between father and mother (and father and mother-earth) to the Oedipus Complex, of which this poem gives a perfect example.

The violent plowman-father is counterbalanced by a “Plowman Without a Plow.” In this poem, an old man, after thirty years of marriage, buys a farm, but he is too old to farm it, and now he “leave[s] the bed” at dawn and goes out into the field. The wife sees him

On the hill with something in his hand.
He let it fall, she saw it was plain dirt,
Yet something in the way he did it hurt.
He let it crumble through his fingers slow,
He watched it with his head bent over low.
When the last of all he held was gone,
He turned and walked uphill against the dawn,
And as the walker went, he seemed somehow
A plowman old and gray without a plow. (CP, 313)

Thus man must finally admit his human limitations, his defeat in the face of unlimited, undefeated nature. When nature deserts him, he must leave the marriage bed; he is impotent and alone. So man, in Coffin’s New England, ends his days.

To conclude a discussion of Tristram Coffin’s poetry with an image of man impotent and alone may seem a gross distortion of the poet’s work to those who believe Coffin to be an essentially affirmative poet, “a believer in life,” as he once called himself. Certainly it is true that many — I suppose, most — of Coffin’s poems are written by one who finds life easy to affirm. Yet it is also true that Coffin wrote about loneliness, impotence, and man’s degeneration. It is also true that he showed how nature wreaks its vengeance on man by destroying his civilization, reducing him to primitive worship of, and sexual thralldom to, nature. Still, I would argue that Coffin is “a believer in life,” but in a deeper and more dynamic sense than

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5 The Substance That Is Poetry (New York, 1942), 1.
that phrase, by itself, might suggest. To see how this is so, let us return to the general terms around which our analysis has grown.

What, finally, is the relationship between man and nature in New England, and how does Coffin view it? Clearly man is subservient to nature. Nature defines the limits and degree of his isolation; nature inevitably obliterates man's attempts to conquer and control it; nature takes on magical powers as man worships "the old green gods"; nature contains at its primal core the power of reproduction, the sexual energy man must have to survive. Nature shatters the rigid Puritan morality as surely as its slender tendrils undermine the foundations of a house. Its hot, pungent, earthiness obliterates cool, clean orderliness and straightfurrowed, weeded decency. Nature tempts the girls to orgies in the corn fields; it draws the young boys down tight against the hot curves of the earth; it offers its fleshy fruit to the potato diggers and plays second wife to the plowing farmer; finally, it deserts old men and leaves them plowless and alone fingering dry, seedless dirt.

Perhaps New England's — Maine's — rocky soil, harsh climate, and harsher Puritan-pioneer tradition finally drive men to throw it all over, to go back to "the old green gods," to embrace a primal life, a sexual, amoral existence man holds in common with the animals. In this sense, Coffin would seem to be carrying out his own rebellion against the Puritan old way of life in order to establish a pagan older way, the way of ritual and magic and the union of man and nature in a New England our Puritan forefathers would have condemned to the hottest fires of hell. This would make Coffin "a believer in life," indeed.