Not Man Apart: Ecocentric Personification in the Works of Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck

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Abstract
This essay probes the ecocentric dimension of the works of two quintessential California writers, Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck. While the representation of the Californian landscape in their writing has received much attention from critics, the non-anthropocentric vision often expressed in their works remained unnoticed for a long time. The primary objective of this essay is to examine the ways in which the authors use ecocentric personification to express their unconventional and sometimes even subversive views on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman world. The essay discusses different metaphors whose purpose is to affirm the unity and equality of all life forms. The representation of the earth as woman and woman as the earth is explored in particular depth, together with the (eco)philosophical implications of this strategy. It is also argued that ecocentric personification as a literary trope is used more competently by these two authors than by many other writers with Romantic leanings. It is the authors' erudition in biology and ecology that enables them to imaginatively express ideas that are deeply grounded in holistic science. Jeffers and Steinbeck can thus be legitimately described as literary precursors of the influential Gaia theory that was postulated by James Lovelock as late as the 1970s.

Keywords
Robinson Jeffers, John Steinbeck, ecology, environmentalism, ecocentrism, ecofeminism, ecocentric personification.

I. Introduction

Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck ranked among the most popular American authors in communist Czechoslovakia. Their books had a tremendous appeal, both to a general readership and to critics. Their stories, set on the margin of the Western world, had an almost otherworldly dimension in the eyes of Czech readers. This is no surprise given the fact that the publishing of American literature in Czechoslovakia was subject to rigorous ideological supervision. Despite their shared success in Czechoslovakia, Jeffers and Steinbeck were treated as representatives of two separate genres and worldviews. Nevertheless, no matter how distant from each other they may appear to be on the literary map, there are several zones of contact between their lives and works. An apparent parallel is to be found in the manner in which they represented the landscape of central California, their home region. But while their memorable descriptions of the region's environment were widely lauded, another, deeper layer of their work remained unexplored for a long time. What escaped the attention of most critics until recently is that nature not only figures as a backdrop to human drama in their writings; it often acquires the status of protagonist. Indeed, Jeffers and Steinbeck can be regarded as representatives of a distinctive alternative stream within American literature that is characterized by an ecocentric (as opposed to anthropocentric) vision of the world. This essay aims to examine the ecocentric dimension of both writers' oeuvre. It will primarily address the use of ecocentric tropes. Before probing the subtleties of the ecocentric level, I will discuss the more obvious environmentalist and ecological aspects of the writers' work.

II. Environmentalism

> Integrity is wholeness, the greatest beauty is
> Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of
> the universe.
> Love that, not man
> Apart from that [. . .][1]

> Each figure is a population, and the stones, the trees, the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man—the world *and* man—the one inseparable unit man plus the environment.[2]

Not Man Apart—these three words that appear in the title of the essay resonate with modern environmentalists. They have been deployed as a term of reference in environmentalist and ecophilosophical debates,[3] for they cogently express the ecocentric outlook. "Not Man Apart" has become a widely recognized motto owing to one of the most prominent figures of the US environmental movement in the 20th century, David Brower. As a passionate admirer of Jeffers, Brower stood behind the decision of the Sierra Club to publish a photography book accompanied by excerpts from Jeffers' poems. The resulting publication, titled *Not Man Apart* (1965), helped bring Jeffers to the attention of readers after decades of neglect. What is more, after founding Friends of the Earth in 1969, Brower selected *Not Man Apart* as the name of the organization's newsletter. It is interesting to note in this context that nowadays hardly anyone associates this phrase with Jeffers.

Both the cited passages were written in the 1930s, at a time when environmental concerns were overshadowed by social issues. The era of the New Deal, as well as the Second World War and the post-war period, were marked by technological optimism. In addition, the myth of America as a virgin land, an infinite space suitable for expansion, still had a powerful presence.[4] It was in this climate that Jeffers and Steinbeck articulated serious objections to society's obsession with progress and narrowly material growth. Jeffers bemoans that

> We have geared the machines and locked all together into interdependence; we have built the great
> cities; now
> There is no escape. We have gathered vast populations incapable of free
> survival, insulated

1 Robinson Jeffers, "The Answer," *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, vol. 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 536.

2 John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown* notebook (1932), Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, unpaged.

3 In "Environmental Consciousness in Modern Literature: Four Representative Examples," an influential essay reprinted in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Del Ivan Janik selects the lines from the poem "The Answer" in which Jeffers celebrates the "organic wholeness . . . not man/ Apart from that." The phrase "man apart," arguably derived directly from Jeffers, has been used as a widely understood term by many other ecophilosophers, including Peter Reed, Val Plumwood, and Arne Naess. The concept in question is present in their essays that were included in Nina Witoszek and Andrew Brennan, eds., *Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy* (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999).

4 This subject is discussed, for instance, in C. E. Gladstein and M. R. Gladstein's "Revisiting the Sea of Cortez with a 'Green' Perspective," in *Steinbeck and the Environment*, eds. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr., (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 161–175. It is also covered by Lloyd Willis in *Environmental Evasion: The Literary, Critical, and Cultural Politics of "Nature's Nation,"* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2011).

> From the strong earth, each person in himself helpless, on all dependent.
> ……..
> These things are Progress;[5]

Steinbeck echoes Jeffers' verses in his contemplation of the situation of Mexicans from Baja California which appears in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951):[6]

> The invasion comes with good roads and high-tension wires. Where those two go, the chance takes place very quickly. Any of the political forms can come in once the radio is hooked up, once the concrete highway irons out the mountains and destroys the "localness" of a community. Once the Gulf people are available to contact, they too will come to consider clean feet more important than clean minds. These are the factors of civilization and their paths [. . .].[7]

There is a noticeable tendency toward abstraction in the two writers' criticism of Western civilization. Both Jeffers and Steinbeck point out the growing disconnection between humans and their natural environment. In their respective ways, they expose the possessive and destructive attitude of man toward nature. Occasionally, their environmental lament acquires more concrete contours. While Jeffers considers the automobile a symbol of the intrusion of the "vulgar civilization" into idyllic Big Sur (e.g. "The Coast-Road"), Steinbeck's critique of the industrialized and restlessly (auto)mobile American society, increasingly alienated from the land, is epitomized by overmechanized agriculture. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the tractor driver, "a robot in the seat" who is "part of the monster" that has disassociated humans from the earth, is a symbol of the narrowly conceived notion of progress. The criticism of the exploitation of the environment by the technocrats forms a coherent thread throughout the work of both writers.

III. Ecology

It should be noted that this proto-environmentalist line of thought relies on the authors' deep grounding in natural sciences, especially in biology and ecology. Both Jeffers and Steinbeck considered scientific knowledge important for their writing and art in general. They were not merely well-read and self-taught in sciences. Jeffers studied biology, physics, astronomy and forestry, while Steinbeck's worldview was considerably influenced by a course in marine biology he took at Stanford University in 1923. Especially in terms of biology, they were exposed to and shaped by innovative theories whose common denominator was holism, interdisciplinarity and organicism. These currents within science were, to a large extent, a response to the overt specialization and atomization of modern science. In "Themes in my Poems," Jeffers offers the following assessment of contemporary science:

5 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 2*, 518.

6 *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (*LSC*) is the narrative portion of *Sea of Cortez* which was published ten years earlier. *Sea of Cortez* includes an exhaustive catalog of species. Although Steinbeck is listed as the sole author of *LSC*, largely owing to the marketing interests of the publisher, it is now safe to say that his friend Ed Ricketts made a considerable contribution, even to the narrative part. Steinbeck's log is informed by the diary Ricketts kept during their trip to the Gulf of California.

7 John Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (New York: Penguin,1986), 291.

> Science usually takes things to pieces in order to discover them; it dissects and analyzes; poetry puts things together; producing equally valid discovery, and actual creation. Something new is found out, something that the author himself did not know before he wrote it; and something new is made.[8]

Jeffers sees Darwin as the antipode to the dominant reductionist science of his time. He often alludes to Darwin, especially to his evolutionary theory and the all-permeating notion of interdependence. He also credits Darwin for returning humans into the natural realm. Steinbeck's affinity with the Darwinist approach is even more apparent. He imaginatively expresses the important principle of intra-species cooperation (as opposed to the widely publicized notion of struggle), which is investigated by Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871). The above-mentioned travelogue *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, and the actual journey it describes, is also modeled on Darwin's voyage aboard the Beagle. More importantly, the methodology of Steinbeck's research conducted in the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California), as well as the resulting account, are deeply indebted to Darwin: "And the modern process—that of looking quickly at the whole field and then diving down to particular—was reversed by Darwin. Out of long long consideration of the parts he emerged with a sense of the whole."[9]

Steinbeck was not only drawing from the 19th century naturalist tradition represented by Darwin; he was also influenced by the contemporary theories of two acclaimed ecologists, Warder Clyde Allee and William Emerson Ritter. It was especially Ritter's theory of superorganism that had a profound impact on the novelist's work. Steinbeck's frequent and well-documented contemplations concerning the so-called phalanx or group-man stem from Ritter's theory. The phalanx, a collective organism which is more than a mere sum of its constituent units, serves as an organizing pattern in Steinbeck's early novels, such as *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *The Grapes of Wrath*.[10]

Jeffers' scientific grounding also went beyond his knowledge and poetic application of Darwin's theories. As has been suggested above, the poet's attitude to science was ambivalent. This ambivalence is concisely expressed in the poem "Curb Science": "Science, that gives man hope to live without lies / Or blast himself off the earth: – curb science / Until morality catches up?"[11] What Jeffers criticizes here, and in many other texts, is the narrowly utilitarian tendency of modern science to control and master nature. His conception of science, which primarily seeks to know rather than control, is subversive by the standards of his time. He systematically questions the humanist bias of scientific endeavors and deploys the findings of disciplines including geology, astronomy and physics to displace man from the center. The same idea recurs throughout Steinbeck's work, including one of his last essays "Americans and the Future": "Perhaps we will

8 Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers, vol.4* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 416.

9 Steinbeck, *The Log*, 70.

10 The use of phalanx in Steinbeck's work is discussed by Kiyoshi Nakayama in "*The Pearl* in the *Sea of Cortez*: Steinbeck's Use of Environment," in *Steinbeck and the Environment*, eds. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr., (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 194–208, and by Richard Astro in *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973). Another noteworthy study related to this issue is Kathleen Margaret Hicks' "Consilience and Ecological Vision in the Works of John Steinbeck," diss., Arizona State University, 2003.

11 Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers,* vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 199.

have to inspect mankind as a species, not with our usual awe at how wonderful we are but with the cool and neutral attitude we reserve for all things save ourselves."[12]

IV. Ecocentrism

Ecocentrism is commonly defined as the antonym to anthropocentrism. It opposes the widely shared belief that humans are the pivot of the universe and that the value of nonhuman forms of life is determined by them. The term 'ecocentrism' is an abbreviated form of 'ecosystem-centered ethics'. The full name of the theory reveals that ecocentrism "is derived from both philosophical and scientific bases."[13] Indeed, this grounding in science, as is discussed above, represents a solid foundation on which Jeffers and Steinbeck built their ecocentric thought. In this regard, both authors went against the grain. As Benson eloquently states in his authoritative biography of Steinbeck *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (1984), with his non-anthropocentric approach, informed by ecology, the novelist was "entering an uncharted territory: in those days, it was an approach and philosophy endorsed by relatively few biological scientists; and as far as the literary world was concerned, it could have been a Martian religion. He didn't realize—nor would he have cared, if he had—that he was on the road to offending nearly everyone."[14] It is worth noting that the passages from *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* that are of greatest interest to ecocritics and ecophilosophers today were either criticized or, even more often, wholly ignored by the reviewers in the mid-20th century. The following lines rank among the innumerable passages in the travelogue that verbalize the author's ecocentric insights:

> [M]an is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to the whole reality known as unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things – plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.[15]

The same worldview is also represented in some of Steinbeck's best-known novels. It is incarnated by characters that are modeled on Steinbeck's closest friend, the biologist Ed Ricketts.[16] Those include Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle*, Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Doc in *Cannery Row* (1945), and Lee in *East of Eden* (1952).

12 John Steinbeck, *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*, eds. Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson J. Benson (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 392.

13 Bryan L. Moore, *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 5.

14 Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (New York: The Viking Press, 1984), 431.

15 Steinbeck, *The Log*, 257.

16 Ricketts' impact on Steinbeck has been documented by a number of scholars and studies such as Richard Astro's *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), Eric Enno Tamm's *Beyond the Outer Shores: The Untold Odyssey of Ed Ricketts, the Pioneering Ecologist Who Inspired John Steinbeck and Joseph Campbell* (New York and London: Four Walls Eight Windows,

Jeffers' ecocentric vision is known as Inhumanism. Although this position, most thoroughly formulated in *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (1948), may appear misanthropic judging by its name, a closer examination of the concept throws a different light on it. Jeffers explicates that Inhumanism means "a shifting in emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman significance."[17] In other words, the poet does not squarely condemn humanity; he merely censures excessive anthropocentrism. The Inhumanist perspective in Jeffers' poetry is present in the crucial texts of his early career. It is easily traceable in characters such as California in *Roan Stallion* (1925), Reverend Barclay in *The Women from Point Sur* (1927) and Clare in "The Loving Shepherdess" (1929). In the 1930s, Jeffers urges readers to "unhumanize" and "uncenter" their minds in several poems (e.g. "Carmel Point"). The fundamental unity and interrelatedness of all forms of life are the leitmotif of his work:

> Erase the lines: I pray you not to love classifications:
> The thing is like a river, from source to sea-mouth
> One flowing life. We that have the honor and hardship of being human
> Are one flesh with the beasts, and the beasts with the plants [. . .].[18]

V. Ecocentric personification

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the status of personification in literary texts. While important theorists in the past, including John Ruskin and Kenneth Rexroth, have voiced objections to personification, labeling it as a pathetic fallacy, many environmental writers consider personification to be a viable and indeed essential rhetorical device. Distinguished cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff and Mark Turner also regard personification as a legitimate means of metaphorical expression because it "permits us to use our knowledge about ourselves to maximal effect, to use insight about ourselves to help us comprehend such things as forces of nature [. . .] and inanimate objects."[19]

It should be pointed out that there are various types of personification. Romantic and Transcendentalist writers (e.g. Wordsworth, Emerson) often use human-centered personification which, while acknowledging the importance of nature, helps perpetuate the dominant anthropocentric worldview. They conceive of nature as a mirror that has the potential to heal and improve the human soul that has been contaminated by civilization. An even more anthropocentric version of personification is associated with popular American nature writers of the early 1900s, who were nicknamed 'nature fakers'. With little scientific expertise, they sentimentalized and fictionalized nonhuman creatures.[20]

This essay aims to explore the ecocentric variant of personification. In *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* (2008),

2004), and Peter A.J. Englert's "Education of Environmental Scientists: Should We Listen to Steinbeck and Ricketts's Comments?" In *Steinbeck and the Environment*, eds. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, and Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 176–193.

17 Robinson Jeffers, Preface to *The Double Axe and Other Poems* (New York: Liveright, 1977), xxi.

18 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 3*, 419.

19 Qtd. in Moore, *Ecology and Literature*, 41.

20 The "nature faker" controversy dragged on for four years (1903–1907). John Burroughs and even President Theodore Roosevelt were among its major participants. A detailed account of the controversy is to be found in Ralph H. Lutts' *The Nature Fakers: Wildlife, Science, and Sentiment* (Golden: Fulcrum, 1990).

Bryan L. Moore argues that "its (partial) scientific basis was not legitimized until Darwin and modern ecological science and environmental philosophy."[21] The noted American poet Galway Kinnell writes along similar lines in the dramatized dialog with another writer that is included in "On the Oregon Coast" (1985):

> We agreed that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poets almost
> *had* to personify, it was like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the
> only way they could imagine to keep the world from
> becoming dead matter.
> And that as post-Darwinians it was up to us to anthropomorphize
> the world less and animalize, vegetablize, and mineralize
> ourselves more.
> We didn't know if pre-Darwinian language would let us.[22]

Kinnell succinctly describes the multiple possibilities of ecocentric personification, whose ultimate goal is to manifest the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. Ecocentric personification is used to imaginatively enhance the idea that man is neither above nor apart from nature. Thus it has a considerable potential to subvert the prevalent anthropocentric outlook.

V.1 Reciprocity

As has been proposed above, ecocentric personification is meant to foster the sense of reciprocity and in doing so challenge the ontological boundary between the human subject and the nonhuman object. In the words of Frans de Waal, in common usage "semantic distinctions between animals and human behavior often obscure fundamental similarities."[23] By contrast, ecocentric personification foregrounds the shared characteristics.

The first type of reciprocal metaphor questioning the man-nature dichotomy sets the human body into an earthly frame. This "reverse personification" can be traced especially in the early works of both authors. In "Gale in April" the protagonist's "ribs were thick as the earth's, arches of mountain, how shall one dare / dare to live / Though his blood were like the earth's rivers."[24] In *The Women at Point Sur*, one of the female characters feels "unguessed continents of fortitude" within herself.[25] Reminiscences of the Whitmanian all-embracing Self are apparent here; however, Jeffers construes it in strictly natural terms. Concerning Steinbeck, his novel *To a God Unknown* (1933) is largely inspired by Jeffers' *The Women at Point Sur*. In the final scene of the book, as Joseph Wayne is sacrificing himself believing he will thus save the land from dying of drought, he "lay on his side with his wrist outstretched and looked down the long black mountain range of his body [. . .] He saw his hills grow dark with moisture. Then a lancing pain shot through the heart of the world. 'I am the land,' he said, 'and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while.'"[26] In this particular instance, Steinbeck is open to legitimate

21 Moore, *Ecology and Literature*, 35.

22 Galway Kinnell, *Three Books* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 180.

23 Qtd. in Moore, *Ecology and Literature*, 22.

24 Robinson Jeffers, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers,* vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 91.

25 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 298.

26 Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 183–184.

criticism on the grounds of pathetic fallacy. The whole story of Joseph Wayne is pervaded by mysticism and shows little connection with the ecological tenets of Steinbeck's thought.

Standard personification, by means of which the nonhuman world attains human qualities, is certainly more common in the works of both writers examined here. For Jeffers, ecocentric personification is a vitally important trope. He attributes human qualities to natural entities in many of his poems. It is especially mountains and rocks that he endows with life and even consciousness. He is aware that in the geological time frame, mountains and rock formations are far from static. He accentuates their dynamic nature by likening them to different parts of the human body (face, mouth, tongue, skull, back, limbs, etc.). The interface between geology and anatomy is thus one of the cornerstones of Jeffers' metaphorical strategies. Steinbeck also uses similar rock imagery in the aforementioned *To a God Unknown*, where outcroppings are described as the "bones of the earth,"[27] and in *East of Eden*, where the "topsoil [is] so thin that the flinty bones stuck through."[28] In "The Flight", Steinbeck pictures mountains as a "backbone." Steinbeck's use of personification is also inspired by Celtic pantheism, which exerted a noticeable influence on his early writings. The oak tree in *To a God Unknown*, whose "veins are cut" at the end, serves as an important symbol in the novel. Arguably it is the most powerful ecocentric metaphor, highlighting the interdependence of humanity and nature that can be found throughout Steinbeck's entire work. In the noteworthy study *Environmental Evasion: The Literary, Critical and Cultural Politics of "Nature's Nation"* (2011), Lloyd Willis addresses the issue of Steinbeck's anatomical treatment of the natural environment, arguing that the author along with his fictional characters "fix their environmental gazes upon metonyms of environmental health."[29]

V.2 Earth as woman, woman as earth

Before the mechanistic (Cartesian) attitude to nature began to prevail, especially in prehistoric societies, the earth was widely perceived as a female entity. Both literally and metaphorically, it was seen as a life-giving and all-embracing figure. The prominent environmental critic Carolyn Merchant considers the vanishing of this organic concept of the earth to be an underlying cause of the ongoing ecological crisis. In her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), she asserts that the perception of the earth as "a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings."[30] Curiously enough, the popular image of California, whose landscape Jeffers and Steinbeck represented in their works, bears a striking resemblance to this concept. One its best known manifestations is Diego Rivera's fresco *Allegory of California* (1931), which dates back to the same period as most of the texts discussed in this essay.[31]

In his writings, Jeffers associates the feminine with the natural. Some of his most memorable female characters (California, Maruca, Clare) express this association.

27 Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 145.

28 John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 9.

29 Lloyd Willis, *Environmental Evasion: The Literary, Critical, and Cultural Politics of "Nature's Nation"* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2011), 15.

30 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* 3

31 For more on Rivera's painting, see D. S. Sackman's "An Allegory of California," in *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1–13.

Especially California in *Roan Stallion* and Maruca in *The Women at Point Sur*, who are (not coincidentally) of indigenous descent, are relevant in this regard. Maruca is pictured as a "thick brown body [. . .] a giantess [. . .] female as moist brown earth."[32] A few pages further on, Maruca is portrayed as an earth-body, and feminine qualities are ascribed to the earth itself: "Milk the earth; those able to wait millenniums and these many green / centuries [. . .] ."[33] It is worth noting that the trope of the earth as woman was first used by Jeffers in the poetry collection *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924), which propelled the author to literary celebrity. For instance, in "To the House," he writes: "I am heaping the bones of the old mother / To build us against the host of the air; / Granite the blood-heat of her youth / Held molten in hot darkness against the heart."[34] In "Shine, Perishing Republic," an often-cited poem from *Tamar*, Jeffers stresses the cyclical nature and regenerative powers of the earth: "the fruit rots / to make earth. / Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and / decadence; and home to the mother."[35] In yet another famous poem, "Continent's End," Jeffers combines ancient mythology, geological time and evolutionary biology to depict the ocean as mother: "The long migrations meet across you and it is nothing to you, you have / forgotten us, mother. / You were much younger when we crawled out the womb and lay in the / sun's eye on the tideline."[36]

The land-as-woman figure also plays an important part in Steinbeck's writing. Once again, *To a God Unknown* is particularly pertinent in this respect. The quintessential westward journey of Joseph Wayne can be interpreted as a masculine quest into a feminine territory. Joseph is enchanted by the valley of Our Lady, where he settles. In the local woods, he is overwhelmed by the "curious femaleness about the interlacing boughs and twigs."[37] His affinity with the place culminates in the act of love he makes to the earth. In this novel, Steinbeck's heavy-handed, land-oriented symbolism is pervaded by sexual references. For instance, the scene in which Joseph and his wife enter the Valley of Our Lady is conceived as an act of penetration of a womb: "The mountain was split. Two naked shoulders of smooth limestone dropped cleanly down, verging a little together, and at the bottom there was only room for the river bed [. . .] This is our marriage—through the pass—entering the passage like sperm and egg that have become a single unit of pregnancy."[38] The influence of Jeffers' *The Women at Point Sur* on Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown* can be traced even when it comes to the trope of the earth as mother. In Jeffers's narrative poem, it is Maruca and another Native character, Onorio, who perceive the earth as a living feminine entity. In *To a God Unknown*, it is also Juanito, whose blood is half native, who expresses the same vision: "My mother said how the earth is our mother, and how everything that lives has life from the mother and goes back into the mother."[39]

Nevertheless it must be said that the feminine tropes of the land are not confined to a single novel. Womanly rolling landscape, "full green hills . . . round and soft as

32 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 266.

33 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 277.

34 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 5.

35 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 15.

36 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 16.

37 Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 5.

38 Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 53–54.

39 Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown*, 19.

breasts"[40] also figure in *The Grapes of Wrath*, whereas "rounded, woman-like hills, soft and sexual as flesh" line the roads in *The Wayward Bus* (1947).[41] In the sea-facing texts *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* and *Cannery Row*, the author occasionally refers to the vast watery expanse of the ocean as a mother from which we originated. This image and belief is reiterated in a 1966 article which Steinbeck wrote for *Popular Science*, where he predicts that humanity "may be driven back to our mother, the sea, because we are running out of supplies."[42]

On other occasions, Steinbeck imagined the whole planet as a single living organism with female characteristics. This almost ecofeminist perspective is most explicit in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, where he pictures the earth as Magna Mater. This reference is not merely founded on the archetypal image of the earth as a mother, but it is also grounded in the domain of science, namely in the organismal concept of the aforementioned W.C. Allee, which views the earth as a self-regulating organism.[43] The similarity of this imaginative treatment of the earth, informed by holistic ecology, to the Gaia hypothesis introduced by James Lovelock is striking. It is also worth noting that Lovelock called his hypothesis 'Gaia' on the advice of the famous man of letters William Golding, who saw a great imaginative potential in the term.[44] Like Lovelock in his influential Gaia hypothesis, Steinbeck also draws a picture of the earth and (home)land as wounded and laments that it "will not soon lose the scars of our grasping stupidity."[45]

V.3 Earth abused

As Annette Kolodny documents, the land-as-woman metaphor has a long tradition in American letters. In her *The Lay of the Land* (1975), which has become a classic of ecofeminism, Kolodny unearths the history of the metaphor that has been so deeply rooted in the American imagination.[46] In the context of the westward thrust, as the frontier was moving across the continent, the uncivilized territory was often conceived as virgin land. It was (mis)treated accordingly. Kolodny was one of the first scholars to point out the correlation between the abuse of women and the abuse of the land. Although she does not deal with Jeffers and Steinbeck in her book, their writings provide much material of relevance to this topic.

As far as Jeffers is concerned, the motif is clearly present in *Roan Stallion*, namely in the character of California, who impersonates the untamed earth. She is exposed to her violent husband, who exploits her sexually. Jeffers is more explicit in his description of the coastal region and its inhabitants: "Humanity reaping it and not loving it, rape not

40 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 385.

41 John Steinbeck, *The Wayward Bus* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 141.

42 John Steinbeck, "Let's Go After the Neglected Treasures Beneath the Seas," *Popular Science* 189 (September 1966): 86.

43 For more, see Joel W. Hedgpeth's "John Steinbeck: Late-Blooming Environmentalist," in *Steinbeck and the Environment*, eds. Susan F. Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr., (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 293–309.

44 However, the mythic origin of the name was the sole reason for fierce attacks from scientists. Lovelock later considered changing the name. For more on this subject, see Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

45 Steinbeck, *The Log*, 298.

46 This latent facet of the American imagination was highly publicized owing to Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

marriage."[47] The disharmonious relationship between man and nature and its devastating consequences are also the subject of the poet's lament in "A Redeemer":

> [. . .] houses of steel: using and
> despising the patient earth . . .
> Oh as a rich man eats a forest for profit and a field for vanity, so you came
> west and raped
> The continent and brushed its people to death. Without need, the weak
> skirmishing hunters, and without mercy.[48]

The metaphorical rape of the environment is even more frequent in Steinbeck's texts than in the writings of Jeffers. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck describes the robot-like men as they drive the tractors sowing the seeds: "Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, rape methodically, rape without passion."[49] Needless to add, in Steinbeck's work the metaphor does not have the subtlety that marks Jeffers' verse. Steinbeck chooses to stage an open confrontation between the mechanized civilization and the defenseless earth. His condemnation of the overfishing in Monterey Bay, which he voices in the opening chapter of *Sweet Thursday* (1954), falls into the same category: "The canneries themselves fought the war by getting the limit taken off fish and catching them all [. . .] It was done for patriotic reasons, but that didn't bring the fish back [. . .]. It was the same noble impulse that stripped the forests of the West and right now is pumping water out of California's earth faster than it can rain back in."[50] The conqueror mindset of the colonizers who undertook the mythic westward journey is even more harshly criticized by the author in his non-fiction. Toward the end of his life, he returns to this pressing issue once again with great vehemence in *America and Americans* (1966). He writes of his forefathers who cut the forests, "raping the country like invaders," left the topsoil "stripped and eroded with the naked bones of clay and rock exposed," and toppled even the ancient giant trees "leaving no maidens, no seedlings or saplings on the denuded hills."[51]

VI. Conclusion

As I have documented on the previous pages, earth-based imagery and related personification constitute an important ingredient in the writings of Jeffers and Steinbeck. Of course, this alone does not make the two authors unique in any way. Ascribing human qualities to nonhuman creatures and "objects" dates back to antiquity.[52] However, few writers of stature before them used personification so systematically in order to undermine the anthropocentric mentality that was dominant in the Western world. Their use of personification is not sentimental. On the contrary, it is firmly based in the latest scientific theories of the time, many of which gained in importance in the late 20th century. To

47 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 335.

48 Jeffers, *Collected Poetry 1*, 406–407.

49 Steinbeck, *The Grapes*, 49. A more detailed analysis of the motif of rape in the novel is provided by Sigridur Gudmarsdottir in "Rapes of Earth and Grapes of Wrath: Steinbeck, Ecofeminism and the Metaphor of Rape," *Feminist Theology* 18 (2010): 206–222.

50 John Steinbeck, *Sweet Thursday* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 3.

51 Steinbeck, *America and Americans*, 379, 381.

52 The history of personification is mapped thoroughly by Bryan L. Moore in *Ecology and Literature: Ecocentric Personification from Antiquity to the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

a certain extent, both Jeffers and Steinbeck were informed by the organicism of the belief systems of prehistoric and indigenous societies. It is this combination of the scientific and the spiritual/philosophical that adds credibility and force to their ecocentric tropes. Their metaphorical expressions of the interdependence of all life, which include the understanding of the planet as a self-regulating ecosystem, even predates Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, whose tenets have much in common with the views of the two authors discussed here.

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