

Women's Ways to Nature: Steinbeck's (Mock)Pastoral Diptych of Gardening (& Childless) Wives in *The Long Valley*

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I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe
in the perfectibility of man has no dedication
nor any membership in literature.

John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, 1962

The pastoral diptych that opens John Steinbeck's volume of short stories *The Long Valley* (1938) retells the shaping of a distinctly American response to an equally distinctly American landscape. The mocking allusions to the myth of *westering*¹ and frontier life invite a reflection on the contemporary degeneration of the pastoral encounter of man and wilderness, and suggest a future direction through a revision of the same impulse. The premises of Steinbeck's reflection go back to the first aporia in the transcendentalists' vision of the supposedly harmonious and functional relation of man to nature. In 1846, while approaching the top of Mount Katahdin, Thoreau experienced the insuperable difficulty of making Emerson's idealistic moments of the merging of the Soul with the Not-Me apply

¹ Steinbeck uses this word to define the "group-man" impulse of pushing westward in search of new chances of settlement in "The Leader of the People" (*The Long Valley* 224-25).

to a Nature that was in fact saying to man that this was not a place where he had been invited, nor was it intended for him as a space for habitation. While exploring wilder spaces in search of a confirmation of Nature's eloquence as a "book of Revelation," as it used to be in the pristine Puritan tradition, he came up against the insurmountable obstacle of the untenable position of the transcendentalist anthropocentric view. Faced with the radical otherness and autonomy of nature, he recognized, at the same time, a common plane on which a mountain top and our own bodies may co-exist:

It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not this Mother Earth we have heard of . . . the home, this, of Necessity and Fate . . . a force not bound to be kind to man . . . I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me . . . What is this Titan that has possession of me? . . . Think of our life in nature . . . the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?* (Thoreau 94-95)

Thirty years later, John Muir—an early advocate of the wilderness preservation movement in the United States—would overcome the impasse by advancing Thoreau's intuition that nature was *not* separate from the soul—as Emerson would have had it—to its obvious, and liberating, consequences: nature was not made for humans alone; what the earth does, even though it doesn't appear as benevolent to human eyes, is right (qtd. in Scheese 28). Thus, he gave Emerson's panentheism—the belief that God is at the same time immanent and transcendent (and benevolent)—a biocentric turn.

Muir had learned to know *wild* nature and love it for what it is by immersing himself in it, as he did, for months, in his famous "first summer in the Sierra" (the summer of 1869 in California's Sierra Nevada). His "hard pastoral" had begun earlier in the spring, and taught him to joyously embrace the *whole* of Nature: its most abrasive aspects, as well as its most sublime. In this way, he came to experience a momentary loss of consciousness of his separate existence, and a momentary blending with the landscape. He became "part and parcel of nature" (*Thousand-Mile Walk* 183), and the catalyst of the ecocentric vocation of American panentheism. Instead of assuming, as Emerson did, that man was divine, he saw that man was Nature, and that Nature was sacred. Yes, we may be in awe of our own body, as Thoreau had realized, with terror, on Mount Katahdin, but that's 'gorgeous.' This remark would have been endorsed by Whitman, who in turn had initiated a revision of Emerson's use of the word "Nature," which freely and consciously oscillated between the common and the philosophical imports of the term expounded by the sage of Concord in the introductory chapter to his seminal essay.² Whitman chose the commonsensical but correctly moved into it "our

² "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses;—in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our

own body," as one of the "essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf." He was thus able to adhere, better than his master, to the material half of the symbol. *He* was, in fact, the real poet of the two, and the bard that America, and Emerson, were awaiting.

Steinbeck's diptych of the gardening housewives in *The Long Valley* seems to restage the coming of age of an American biocentric consciousness. Elisa Allen is portrayed as the heir of the happy ecocentrism of John Muir. She comes first, as if Steinbeck had wanted to endorse that achieved maturity. Mary Teller, on the contrary, is portrayed as being still prey to a delusion of anthropocentric control. She comes second, as the memento of an adolescent, regressive, impulse. Elisa's position in the world is the healthier and embodies Steinbeck's vision of (and hopes for) what we would call in current theoretical terms a posthuman American consciousness, a relocation of the human within an ecocentric perspective purged of man's "fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism" (Wolfe xv).³ Prior to Steinbeck's writings of the thirties, this consciousness had been developing in the thoughts and works of Walt Whitman, John Muir, Jack London, William James and Robinson Jeffers.⁴

Steinbeck's early expression of an ecocentric worldview has already been pointed out, especially in the unimpeachable and eloquent formulations of the *Sea of Cortez*, where the writer and marine biology amateur articulated his theory of the "is-thinking" and of the "phalanx" or "group-man." What I am interested in exploring, for my part, is rather the reasons for Steinbeck's evident desire—or need—to portray two women who face each other in symmetrical poses as in the two matching tablets of a diptych. While *The Long Valley* is undeniably rich in female portraits, and in the portrayal of husband-and-wife relationships, Elisa's and Mary's portraits stand out as two sides of one conception: they seem to have been produced one after the other, if not conjointly,⁵ and to corroborate each other in the formulation of a correct relation of humans to their environment.

present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf. Art is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But his operations taken together are so insignificant, a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing, that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result." (Emerson 8).

3 The debate over the many interpretations of the posthuman is ongoing and fervent. I refer to positions such as those of Cary Wolfe, who conceives of posthumanism as "an intensification of humanism" (xv), and of Roberto Marchesini, who distinguishes between transhumanism, hyperhumanism, and a posthumanism that aims at rethinking identity in dialogical, relational and reciprocally hospitable terms.

4 According to Del Ivan Janik, this "posthumanism" was prefigured in D. H. Lawrence's "otherness," Aldous Huxley's "perennial philosophy," Robinson Jeffers's "inhumanism," and Gary Snyder's program of "reinhabitation." (qtd. in Rice 31).

5 They practically were: in his Introduction to the 1995 Penguin edition, John H. Timmerman writes that "The Chrysanthemums" was written between the late fall 1933 and late February

The opening two short stories of *The Long Valley* have also previously been compared. They are two stories centered on the vicissitudes of two young housewives from the Salinas Valley, both childless and devoted to gardening. They have been brilliantly investigated as satires of the degeneration of the mythic frontier life and of the idea of *westerling* (Busch), and—also brilliantly but a little reductively—as studies of the psychology and sexuality of strong women who strive to express themselves within the limited possibilities open to them in a man’s world (Mitchell). Various hypotheses about Steinbeck’s representation of the figure of the artist in Mary have been advanced (a particularly severe one by Arthur L. Simpson) but remain, I think, unresolved. What I will try to argue is that in depicting two opposite female figures representing *eros* and frigidity, fertility and barrenness, in the opening diptych of *The Long Valley*, Steinbeck was exploring a way out of the decadence of the *ideal* of *westerling* in his times by envisaging the idea of a civilizing art; an art that should return to its roots in the territory by going back again to the earth, the body, and a holistic view of life. Both Elisa’s and Mary’s ways of being in the world have a lot to do, in fact, with their need to express their creative powers.

In his perceptive and detailed study of Steinbeck’s satire of the cultural degeneration of the frontier myth, Christopher S. Busch makes a comparison not so much between the characters of Elisa and Mary, as between the settings and the characters inside the two stories, in order to demonstrate their dualistic quality. Within this useful perspective, “The White Quail” emerges as a modern, suburban, and mock frontier, where Mary Teller figures as a diminished yeoman attempting to create a perfect garden in the post-frontier West (apparently a borderland between a wilderness and a Crèvecoeurian “middle region,” 83), and Harry figures as a diminished hunter. If “The White Quail” portrays the loss of the physical capability and expansionist vision of the West’s pioneers, “The Chrysanthemums” represents the degeneration of the idea of *westerling*. The antitype, or degenerate, type, in this tale, is not the married couple (settler and hunter), but the tinker who comes to the Allens’ farm from the road on an old, canvas-topped spring-wagon resembling a prairie schooner, and crosses Elisa’s existence as an alluring, illusionary meteor of mythical *westerling*. Hence a contrast is built not only between original types and modern antitypes, but also between modern antitypes and modern attempts to re-embodiment the original type;

1934, “The White Quail” between late May and early June 1934 (xvii). According to Roy S. Simmonds, the first incomplete draft in the manuscript in the Pascal Covici-John Steinbeck Collection at the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin fixes the date on which Steinbeck began to work on the story as Wednesday, January 31st, 1934 (104). A further complication is the existence of two published versions that seem to have proceeded along separate paths, for a while undisturbed, as William R. Osborne has noted: the first appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1937, the second in the collection *The Long Valley* the following year. Elizabeth E. McMahan reports that Steinbeck indicated that the *Long Valley* text should be considered the correct version. McMahan and William V. Miller have also pointed out that it was Steinbeck who revised the version for *The Long Valley*.

in other words, Elisa Allen herself. In Busch's interpretation, Elisa stands out as the imperfect but able heir of the American *westerling* legacy, because of her connection to the land through the tending of her life-affirming garden, and because of her fascination with the pioneers' spirit of freedom and adventure, which is what makes her vulnerable to the tinker's materialistic and manipulative behavior. In fact, she is the authentic heir behind the mock-heir. The tinker emerges as the inevitable result of a wilderness that had been transformed into myth when it ended with the closing of the frontier and that had, in any case, been earlier damaged by the reversion of the pioneers' drive from spiritual to material concerns. Elisa, however, is the result of the realization of American literati that if the wilderness had to end (or had never existed), it could be replaced by a conscious cultivation of *wildness*: an interior craving for an unlimited and unknown space, finally freed from greed.

Marilyn H. Mitchell likens Elisa's and Mary's situations, from which, however, she sees their personalities evolve differently. Both women struggle with society's view of what constitutes masculinity and femininity, and both, as a result, develop confused, bisexual identities reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's female characters, with which Steinbeck was familiar. But while Mary reacts to her sexual frustration with frigidity and an autoerotic response, Elisa demonstrates a healthy sensuality.

What I find noteworthy, in Mitchell's reading, is that she intuits Mary's etherealized, subservient role in respect of the portrayal of Elisa's earthly, human beauty, and she remarks on the different styles in which, for the effect of efficacy, the characters are depicted and the stories told. What makes the diptych particularly valuable in the collection, I believe, is precisely the fact that the complementary nature of the two characterizations is emphasized by the difference in the narrative styles of the two stories. This difference is functional in the rendering of the heroines' opposite ways of inhabiting their world, the apparently bucolic setting of the Salinas Valley. A large part of the aesthetic success of the diptych lies precisely in the flexibility of style to content—by which I mean Steinbeck's ecocentric position—and to authorial position—by which I mean Steinbeck's attitude toward his two female protagonists. Moreover, the aesthetic effect of his stylistic diversity provides not only variation, but also the incremental efficacy whereby the author delivers his message.

Elisa's humanity does need a warm, three-dimensional embodiment, as Mitchell suggests, while Mary needs to be "a virtual caricature of the selfish, castrating female who inspires animosity" (156), although I think that there is more to her than that. In the same way, Elisa's humanity does need a naturalistic depiction for her own, earthly portrayal, and a fabulous, ethereal delineation for Mary's as a defining contrast—although I would rather use the terms "realistic" and "allegorical." The fact is that it is reality that colors the portrait of Elisa Allen and that ultimately reveals Steinbeck's position in respect of his two heroines. Steinbeck participates in Elisa's emotions, while he diagnoses Mary's neurosis.

He feels with Elisa and reasons about Mary. His symbols are polysemous in “The Chrysanthemums,” and monosemous in “The White Quail.” We’re sure that both the garden and the white quail are Mary—because she tells us so. We can never be sure what the chrysanthemums stand for, although we can take it in trust that they are at least a gift from the earth’s biota, Elisa herself (with her own life-affirming gift), and her hypothetical children. If we accept that Steinbeck’s stylistic choices are a means of injecting reality into his framework, and we consider that these stories are also—perhaps *mainly*—about art, we can suppose that the diptych is Steinbeck’s way of probing the relation of art to reality. Shades of meaning, and subtle differences, become essential. For Mary, nature ultimately means reality; but it is a reality that she is compulsively trying to control by barring chaos, sorrow and death—in other words, life—from her experience. For Elisa, nature means life. Hers is a life that she embraces totally, with all its errors, pain inflicted or imagined, imperfect relationships, and endings. Mary’s garden is a place of beauty without life, while Elisa’s garden is a place of beauty throbbing with life. Mary is in quest of immortal, statuary beauty. Elisa is cultivating living beauty in its myriad, transient forms.⁶

The diptych device—which is an antithetical metaphor, where differences are accentuated over analogies in order to reveal new properties—is a powerful aesthetic tool, unleashing new meanings each time it is operated. If Mary is defined in conventional feminine terms as “pretty,” Elisa has an “eager and mature and handsome” face, which denotes masculine strength and sense of purpose. If Mary’s orgasmic response is elicited by the sight of the white quail, which she equates with her own purity, Elisa’s is elicited by the illusion of sharing her life-affirming power with the tinker. If Mary uses nature as a means of self-expression, Elisa is a fount whereby nature can express itself. Mary denies that certain aspects of nature *are* nature in order to defend her aesthetic ideal (notable is this respect are the dog she obliges her husband to give up and the cat she wants him to kill because they threaten her garden and its privileged plumed guests); Elisa acknowledges the whole of nature as a biotic system to whose survival she contributes as one of its elements. Her “planting hands” work in harmony with the earth. Her fingers “never make a mistake. They’re with the plant. . . . They know” (8). In sum, Mary and Elisa face each other as portraits of the *egocentric* versus the *ecocentric* artist.

Arthur L. Simpson maintains that “The White Quail” portrays the humanly destructive effects of “a subordination of life to an art which takes its sole value and reason for being as a unique expression of the artist’s private vision.” (11) Mary aspires to be the Romantic, isolated artist who objectifies herself by projecting her personality onto her garden and the white quail, thus completing a movement “out of life and into art” (14). If we assume this to be true, then in the person

⁶ This is why Mary’s perfection is in fact a perversion of the natural order: the artificial alteration of the natural process of survival of the fittest that must guarantee the immutability of the order on things by art(ifice) (Meyer 13).

of Mary, Steinbeck is exposing the dangers of artistic aspiration at the expense of life, and the diptych device leads us to think that Elisa is the alternative model he is proposing. One tablet represents an art that comes from the artist's mind, isolates him/her, idealizes reality and kills life. The other, an art that is generated in experience, is an act of sharing which perhaps romanticizes but never forgets reality, and nurtures life. It is an art that comes from things and breeds things, like Emerson's poetic language in "Nature," and like Elisa's "gift with things": the "planters' hands" she has inherited from her mother, that can stick anything in the ground and make it grow, because they know "how to do it." (3)

Steinbeck's exploration of a regenerated conception of art in *The Long Valley* diptych is an attempt to emancipate American culture from its degenerative turn. An art that nourishes a shared sense of harmony between man and his environment is the renewed promise of a democratic and civilizing ideal. As in classical civilizations, it reflects a conception of beauty that belongs to the polis and is daily perceivable by all its inhabitants. For Elisa, beauty belongs to her everyday work with the earth and with the land. Her collective unconscious tells her that it is truth and that it is also good, in a way that has been lost to Mary, but it is also a reminder of a unique American tradition. Steinbeck's *Long Valley* front diptych resumes the American Renaissance proto-pragmatic view of art as the way to practical, concrete knowledge, a journey of discovery that serves life through an uninterrupted relation with experience. *This* American art is knowing and doing, or knowing by doing. It doesn't know what it will find, but when it does find something, it plants a new element there and "adorns nature with a new thing," (Emerson 450) each time reality stirs imagination inside an individual. In this sense, Steinbeck's art is expressive in the most original and fruitful way that American literature has known since the writings of Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson and their heirs.

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