Monstrous Ecology: John Steinbeck, Ecology, and American Cultural Politics

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In the collection of essays, *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (1997), a range of scholars establish that Steinbeck was an environmentalist. They remain strangely uncomfortable with their assertion, however. Warren French, for instance, asks, “How green was John Steinbeck? Did he simply pay lip service to environmental preservation or did he work effectively toward mitigating eco-damage?” (282). Similarly, John H. Timmerman concedes that “Steinbeck’s ethical action is the work of revelation: to make readers mindful of our despoilation of the land” but remarks that “in regard to a specific program to rectify that course, however, this ethic, at least as delineated in *America and Americans*, is found wanting” (312). Joel Hedgpeth seems disappointed that “Steinbeck is always apologizing for saying bad things and reassuring us that he still loves us all” (306), and Eric Gladstein and Mimi Reisel Gladstein are unhappy that Steinbeck stops short of excoriating an environmental abuse when he “does not want to brand the Japanese fishermen or Mexican officials who permitted the dragging [of the ocean floor] as criminals” in *Sea of Cortez* (169).

Beyond simply diagnosing Steinbeck as an ecologically minded writer who did indeed waffle when it came to environmental activism, how else might Steinbeck’s relationship to ecology and environmentalism be investigated? The most immediately obvious ways to move forward, it seems, would be to change the mode of critical inquiry from one of diagnosis to evaluation and to broaden the focus of such inquiry until it allows recognition of the complex ways in which environmentalism interacts with other key elements of Steinbeck’s work. In the spirit of such a methodological shift, the purpose of this article is to investigate the ways in which the three critical concepts of environmentalism, ecology, and culture consistently interact through the mediator of monstrosity throughout Steinbeck’s oeuvre. Investigating the ways that monstrosity mediates the interactions of environmentalism, ecology, and culture constitutes one way of escaping a diagnostic approach to Steinbeck’s environmentalism that ultimately offers a much broader understanding of how Steinbeck viewed the workings of American mass culture, why his ecological worldviews and environmental activism stopped where they did, and exactly how high the stakes were for potential radical environmentalists in the mid-twentieth-century United States.

Monstrosity and Monstrous Figures

Near the beginning of *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962), Steinbeck writes that his purpose in traveling across the continent is “to rediscover this monster land,” repeatedly using...
“monster” as a metaphor to represent largeness and mystery (6, 24). This simple invocation of monstrosity, however, is hardly the author’s first engagement with the subject or indicative of his deep understanding of the concept. In actuality, Steinbeck’s use of monstrosity reveals a rather surprising familiarity with its historicity and its deep connection to politics, in the sense of both broad state/civic governance and in the negotiation of smaller interpersonal relationships. Steinbeck engaged monstrosity, in fact, as early as 1933 in *To a God Unknown*, with a remarkable grasp of how monstrosity has functioned historically. A significant portion of the novel’s plot is haunted by the Renaissance belief that monstrous birth defects—“children born with tails, with extra limbs, with mouths in the middle of their backs”—are caused by the wayward imaginations of expectant mothers (99).3 In addition to his recognition of its historical tradition, Steinbeck’s treatment of monstrosity’s politics almost perfectly demonstrates that “monsters are . . . political beings” who are “chosen with deliberation to do quite specific narrative and social work,” including the clear mapping of the “edge[s]” and “normal center[s]” of social groups and the strengthening of the “communal body” through “killing the monsters—in as public and showy a way as possible” (Ingebretsen, “Monster-Making” 26).4

Steinbeck’s clearest exhibition of monstrosity as a type of sociopolitical regulatory device is probably *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The story confronts monstrosity in the sense of both physical aberrations and abstract, deployable political constructs. Lenny, of course, is an anomaly—monsters, after all, are not born but created discursively within communities—who possesses superhuman strength, works like a machine, and lacks normal human capacities for judgment and restraint. With the exception of George, who is capable of seeing him as he is (a human being who means no one any harm), Lenny is a monster to the culture in which he lives and must ultimately be “staked” (Ingebretsen’s term), or ceremonially killed, by the dominant culture of the book in order to eliminate a threat to the purity and virtue of womanhood (although the purity and virtue of Curley’s wife are highly suspect) and restore the appearance of human beings as entirely self-controlled figures living within universally understood codes of conduct.

While Lenny himself comes to be declared monstrous, Lenny and George together constitute a more abstract social monstrosity in *Of Mice and Men*’s ranch culture. They share an exclusive homosocial relationship for which they are called to answer throughout the course of the story. In murdering Lenny privately, interestingly enough, George not only denies the larger society the public killing that re-establishes community and reaffirms conceptions of normalcy, deviance, and the consequences of deviancy, but he also extricates himself from the dire problem of his relationship with Lenny. In killing Lenny and allowing the community to think that Lenny attacked him, George proves to the rest of the community that his bond with the man was not closer than that allowed by the community’s unspoken codes of normal heterosexual male behavior.

**Monstrous Cultures**

As Steinbeck uses figures and notions of monstrosity in his fiction, he also works with the other side of the coin—the cultures in which these monstrosities are created. In most of Steinbeck’s early fiction, the cultural core is local. *Tortilla Flat* (1935), while written as a deliberate glorification of a social class and way of life that lie outside of national norms, focuses entirely on a fringe community and culture—that of the *paisanos* who live on the outskirts of Monterey. *To a God Unknown* (1933) is largely limited to the workings of a large family and a small valley community, and *Of Mice and Men* concerns itself with the goings-on of one particular ranch. With *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), however, Steinbeck clearly increases his scope. Rather than offering a story, like *Tortilla Flat*, that quietly offers a counterpoint to a mainstream culture that never actually becomes a topic
of discussion in its narrative, in The Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck creates a narrative that overtly confronts the national problem of the Dust Bowl and moves its characters across half the continent. The Joads maintain a system of core cultural values that privilege agrarianism, independence, and toughness, but they face an increasingly frightening and increasingly more powerful culture of technology, progress, and capitalism that is advanced by faceless conglomerates (the business forces that displace them from their farm) and by cyborg men who, merged with tanklike tractors, literally drive the family from its land. After The Grapes of Wrath, the cultural core that Steinbeck engages is consistently national in scope and understood as profoundly materialistic, consumptive, wasteful, and antagonistic toward any form of individuality. Characters who exist outside of this core—visionary and prophetic characters like Tom Joad and Jim Casy—moreover, live precarious lives on a cultural border that is vigilantly patrolled and violently defended against subversives and radicals.

The different levels of political engagement displayed in Tortilla Flat and The Grapes of Wrath also exist in Cannery Row (1945) and Sweet Thursday (1954), two novels set in the same place and inhabited by essentially the same cast of characters. While Cannery Row, set in pre–World War II Monterey, offers a group of characters quietly resisting progress and capitalism under the shadow of the fish canning industry, Sweet Thursday explicitly engages the dominant hegemonic national culture of postwar America and exposes this culture as one that uses notions of monstrosity to control its borders. This intricate combination of culture and monstrosity appears eloquently in a conversation that Doc holds with the seer, a prophet character who lives as a hermit on the beach. After hearing of the seer’s way of life, Doc comments,

“I’m surprised they don’t lock you up—a reasonable man. It’s one of the symptoms of our time to find danger in men like you who don’t worry and rush about. … I don’t know why they don’t put you in jail. It’s a crime to be happy without equipment. … The doctrine of our time is that man can’t get along without a whole hell of a lot of stuff. You may not be preaching it, but you’re living treason.” (61)

Through negations—explanations of what the seer is not—Steinbeck outlines the characteristics of America’s cultural core. The seer does not fit into the mainstream because he is reasonable; therefore, mainstream American culture is not reasonable. He does not fit in because he is not materialistic, he does not need stuff; mainstream American culture, in this assessment, is therefore profoundly materialistic. The most interesting element of these comments is not that Steinbeck, through Doc, damns the core values of American culture as wayward, but that he describes the aberrant seer as endangered because of his difference and his power of speech. Steinbeck understands that although the seer may not be committing a codified crime by living outside of cultural expectations, he can be punished simply because his way of life is incomprehensible to those around him. It is only because he is silent, “not preaching,” it seems, that the seer has not been branded monstrous and killed in the name of preserving the status quo of progress, materialism, and conformity.

Steinbeck’s fiction paints a startlingly clear picture of how the author understands American culture to work, but his nonfiction reaches an even higher level of directness and vitriol as he describes a mass public that is directly and deliberately manipulated through the use of constructed political monstrosities that are as predictable as vampire or mummy monstrosities in gothic/horror fiction. In the “Genus Americanus” section of America and Americans (1966), he writes, “the stalking horror is ‘Communism,’ with its thread of confiscation of private wealth, and ‘Socialism,’ which implies that they might be forced to share their wealth with less fortunate citizens” (364). More than simply presenting Communism as a “stalking horror,” Steinbeck explains that these fears do not simply exist but are deployed by “leaders,” who “are surely screwballs,” against
“any reform movement” with a “stated purpose [that] is invariably patriotic—they promise to preserve the nation by techniques which will inevitably destroy it” (364). It is this system of constructed ideological/political monstrosities readily available for the use of those like Joseph McCarthy (Steinbeck names McCarthy later in the essay), who police the United States’ cultural hinterlands, that brings Steinbeck to write, in “I Am a Revolutionary” (1954),

The so-called masses are more lumpen now than ever. Any semblance of the emergence of the individual is instantly crushed and the doctrine of party and state above everything has taken the place of the theory of liberated men.

The victim of this savagely applied system is the individual. Individuality must be destroyed because it is dangerous to all reactionary plans because the individual is creative and creativeness outside the narrow pattern of the status quo cannot be tolerated. (90)

Monstrous Ecology

If we wish to understand Steinbeck’s hesitancy to become an environmentalist, I ask that we do it in this context—understanding that he viewed the mass culture of the United States as a “lumpen” mass violently committed to the preservation of “a status quo” dominated by capitalism and consumption, and understanding that he clearly viewed any expression of stark difference as a dangerous undertaking that exposed one to the mark of monstrosity. The Log from the Sea of Cortez (1951), which contains Steinbeck’s longest, most focused treatment of ecology and seems the perfect place for him to develop an environmentalist position, presents ecology in a constant and tension-filled juxtaposition with the cultural norms of the United States. Rather than developing an overt environmentalism, however, Steinbeck repeatedly places ecology and environmental reform in the dangerous category of the monstrous. He carefully describes dominant American culture and continues to meditate upon it as he carries out an ecological study that he knows this culture will certainly not understand, and possibly find intolerable.

Steinbeck’s picture of American culture arises largely through his description of Monterey, the expedition’s starting point, and San Diego, the Western Flyer’s southernmost port of call in the United States. In his treatment of the first of these key locations, Steinbeck explains that it was extremely difficult to charter a boat because the vessels were owned by “Italians, Slavs, and some Japanese” who believed in and understood only one thing—sardine fishing—and were deeply suspicious of anything outside of this narrow pursuit (7). “The owners were not distrustful of us,” Steinbeck writes, “they didn’t even listen to us because they couldn’t quite believe we existed. We were obviously ridiculous” (7, emphasis added). Steinbeck does, of course, find the Western Flyer, but its captain grants the charter because he is “used to [such] nonsense”; “he was willing to let us do any crazy thing that we wanted so long as we … didn’t mix him up in our nonsense” (8, emphasis added). Before ever leaving port, Steinbeck repeatedly reinforces the notion of ecology as an aberrant pursuit in the eyes of American culture. Here, ecology is not a phenomenon that threatens aristocratic or management classes invested in industry and economic progress. Even for ethnically diverse working-class fishermen, the idea of an ecological expedition is much worse than merely nonsensical or ridiculous; it is politically dangerous. None of them wants to be involved with it at all—after all, what kind of sardine fisherman goes off on an ecological expedition?—and when Steinbeck finally does find a captain, it is only under the stipulation that he not be involved with the ship’s mission in any way.

If the difficulties of chartering a boat in Monterey were frustrating and revealed the exasperating economic single-mindedness of one particular, if representative, group of people, San Diego represents a frightening, dangerous, and aggressive nation. Instead of fishermen and fishing boats, Steinbeck encounters robotic, unthinking sailors
of the United States Navy and frighteningly sleek, incredibly destructive military vessels:

All about us war bustled, although we had no war; steel and thunder, powder and men—the men preparing thoughtlessly, like dead men, to destroy things. The planes roared over in formation and submarines were quiet and ominous. . . . The port of San Diego in that year was loaded with explosives and the means of transporting and depositing them on some enemy as yet undetermined. The men who directed this mechanism were true realists. They knew an enemy would emerge, and when one did, they had the explosives to deposit on him. (35–36)

Although the entrance of the United States into World War II shortly after Steinbeck made these observations may justify such a military buildup, Steinbeck’s description of San Diego shows us a paranoid culture poised to obliterate arbitrarily defined enemies and controlled by frighteningly inhuman “military mind[s]” who think neither about the massive power of their weapons nor the people destroyed by them (35). When the Western Flyer returns to San Diego at the end of the Log, Steinbeck suggests that the place is alarming for more than its role as a military installation; it also represents a tremendous hardened system of organization endowed with the power to assign value. He writes that “when at last we came back to San Diego the customs,” another arm of the militaristic bureaucracy speedily preparing for war, “fixed a value on our thousands of pickled animals of five dollars,” thus utterly devaluing the work accomplished during a six-week expedition that traveled over four thousand miles (84).

Steinbeck writes that after the Western Flyer left San Diego, “the great world dropped away very quickly. We lost the fear and fierceness and contagion of war and economic uncertainty,” but the narrative he offers tells quite another story (173). Many of Steinbeck’s discussions about Mexico, in fact, feature meditations upon three groups of people—“Mexicans,” “Mexican Indians,” and plain old “Indians”—that, far from treating these figures fairly in their own right, actually belie a deep anxiety about American mass culture and its relationship to the environment and environmentalism. Steinbeck’s tendency to superimpose his own anxieties about American culture onto the Mexicans in his narrative is evident before the Western Flyer ever arrives in Mexico. It becomes particularly pronounced when he writes, “it seemed to us that we should be armed with permits” because

[t]he work we intended to do might well have seemed suspicious to some patriotic customs official or soldier—a small boat that crept to uninhabited points on a barren coast, and a party which spent its time turning over rocks. It was not likely that we could explain our job to the satisfaction of a soldier. It would seem ridiculous to the military mind to travel fifteen hundred miles for the purpose of turning over rocks on the seashore and picking up small animals, very few of which were edible; and doing all this without shooting at anyone. (23, emphasis added)

Steinbeck, it seems, has only the vaguest ideas of what he will find in Mexico, and in this passage, he paints the country with the same language that he uses in the subsequent twenty pages to describe the Americans in Monterey and San Diego. In Monterey, he uses the same word, ridiculous, to describe how fishermen perceived his expedition; in San Diego, he repeats the phrase military mind to describe the mindset of that place, where he also finds plenty of mindless patriotism embodied in customs officials and soldiers.

As the Log moves into the Gulf of California and Steinbeck actually comes into contact with actual Mexicans themselves, Steinbeck does indeed group the people he meets into categories that are always, to some extent, fluid—“Mexicans,” “Mexican Indians,” and “Indians.” Although these categories are shifty and loosely defined, they do nonetheless come to represent different things to Steinbeck. He uses the first moniker, Mexicans, to describe three groups of people: those among a vast group of people living south of the United States who are tremendously different from citizens of the United States, those
living relatively European/Western lifestyles in the more urban areas visited by the Western Flyer, and, the most unmistakable, those representing the Mexican government who are always identified by their government-issue sidearms.

Despite the multiplicity involved in “Mexicans,” this group often serves a purpose that has little to do with anything Mexican at all—as a stand-in for a hegemonic United States mass culture. Nowhere is this more clear than during the Western Flyer’s approach to Cape San Lucas, the expedition’s first stop in Mexico. Here, Steinbeck turns an interaction between men (certainly “Mexicans,” for all their connections to guns and industry) and cormorants into a parable about the relationship between ecology, radical politics, and regulatory practices of hegemonic culture. In this story, a normal ecological process—birds pursuing prey—becomes a monstrosity because it inconveniences human beings. Steinbeck describes men on the coast shooting cormorants because the birds are dispersing baitfish that have been drawn close to shore (and therefore very convenient to fishermen who want to catch them and use them for bait) to eat “the entrails and cuttings” discarded by a tuna cannery (48). In Steinbeck’s dramatization of this situation, by disrupting the status quo, the cormorants become something larger than birds to the fishermen: “they are considered interlopers, radicals, subversive forces against the perfect and God-set balance on Cape San Lucas. And they are rightly slaughtered, as all radicals should be” (48). Likewise, the fishermen also adopt an inflated role. More than people trying to feed themselves and their families, they are men who do not understand ecological principles, who cannot see beyond their economic self-interests to the larger, interconnected whole of the situation, and who become cultural Brahmins preserving the order of their world by murdering the deviant.

Steinbeck’s description of this situation may be accurate—the Mexicans of the story may have understood the birds as “radicals” and subversives—but the language and the rhetoric he employs again point toward his concerns about American, rather than Mexican, culture. It is identical to what he uses, in his nonfiction, to describe political “screwballs” and idiotic “lumpen” masses, and, in his fiction, to describe the precarious lives of aberrant ecologically minded individuals like the seer in Sweet Thursday and Joseph Wayne in To a God Unknown.

As his treatment of the cormorant-shooting suggests, Steinbeck finds his observations of “Mexican” daily life compelling, but his interactions with “Indians” raise a different set of problems than those inspired by “Mexicans.” The differences between these groups—“Mexicans” and “Indians”—are extremely tenuous, particularly considering that Steinbeck often uses a third term that obviously complicates the Indian/Mexican binary, the implications of which never become entirely clear: Mexican Indians. Part of the difficulty of reading Steinbeck’s Indians arises from the fact that more characters enter the Log as “Indians” or “Mexican Indians” than as anything else. They are absolutely ubiquitous in Steinbeck’s image of the Gulf of California, and at various points in the narrative, it becomes very hard to determine whether Steinbeck does indeed exclude these figures (which are everywhere in the text) from the category of “Mexican.” Ultimately, however, Steinbeck does maintain the distinction; “Indians” are much more impoverished than “Mexicans,” they are clearly subservient to “Mexicans,” they are shown living only on the outskirts of towns and villages where “Mexicans” live, and they live much closer to the earth, largely as fishermen, than do “Mexicans.”

Largely because of their poverty, perceived simplicity, and closeness to the natural world, the mere presence of these “Indians” forces Steinbeck to constantly reflect upon the purpose of the expedition and outsiders’ perceptions of it. He writes that “we had known that sooner or later we must develop an explanation for what we were doing which would be short and convincing. It couldn’t be the truth because that wouldn’t be convincing at all . . . [so] we developed our story and stuck to it thereafter. We were collecting curios, we said” (83–84). While the men collect specimens at La Paz, “Indians,” who flock into tidal pools with the men while they are collecting,
finally ask the “embarrassing question,” “what do you search for?” (92). Steinbeck considers a range of answers but eventually settles on the prepared lie:

We search for something that will seem like truth to us; we search for understanding. We search for that principle which keys us deeply into the pattern of all life; we search for the relations of things, one to another, as this young man searches for a warm light in his wife’s eyes and that one for the hot warmth of fighting. These little boys and young men on the tide flat do not even know that they search for such things too. We say to them, “we are looking for curios, for certain small animals.” (92)

While they are hardly ecologists, Steinbeck’s assumption that the Indians would not understand “the truth” behind the expedition’s project may be flawed; these people do, after all, live close to the land, often in subsistence fashion and under the shadow of massively destructive forces (the Japanese fishing fleet, which I will discuss later) that roam the borders of their fertile and sustaining ecosystem. Why does Steinbeck immediately assume that these people would reject “ecological understanding” as a “reason” behind their expedition? Is the language barrier prohibitive? Does he simply believe these people to be dotards?

In a move that mirrors his treatment of “Mexicans,” instead of investigating the “Indians’” potential ecological understanding, Steinbeck quickly asks a question that ultimately brings him back to problems in the United States: “How can you say to a people who are preoccupied with getting enough food and enough children that you have come to pick up useless little animals so that perhaps your world picture will be enlarged?” (84). While this seems like an honest, and quite insightful, recognition on Steinbeck’s part, it is again unclear whether the problem he sees before him is that of Mexico or the United States. Ten pages earlier, Steinbeck writes that “Some time ago a Congress of honest men refused an appropriation of several hundreds of millions of dollars to feed our [American] people” (74). The reappearance of this concern about food and basic survival suggests that the problem of explaining ecology to “Indians” whose basic needs are barely met is not really an exclusive problem of Native Americans, but at least in part a return to the problem of presenting ecology to figures like the Monterey fishermen in the United States.8

The anticipated and actual questions of the “Indians” never end; they haunt Steinbeck throughout the text. Pondering the problem of the mission’s purpose, Steinbeck writes,

To our own people we could have said any one of a number of meaningless things, which by sanction have been accepted as meaningful. We could have said, “We wish to fill in certain gaps in the knowledge of the Gulf fauna.” That would have satisfied our people, for knowledge is a sacred thing, not to be questioned or even inspected. But the Indian might say, “What good is this scientific knowledge? Since you make a duty of it, what is its purpose?” We could have told our people the usual thing about the advancement of science, and again we would not have been questioned further. But the Indian might ask, “Is it advancing, and toward what? Or is it merely becoming complicated?” (172)

This imagined conversation between himself and his crew, his own culture, and the culture of the “Indians” is fraught with problems that all point to ecology’s perceived economic and utilitarian uselessness. If Steinbeck’s analysis of American culture in the Log, America and Americans, and the rest of his nonfiction tells us anything, it is that the “sacredness” of “useless” knowledge and the “advancement” of a science that does not lead to the production of material stuff hardly retains any value in the dominant American culture of the day. In this sense, “our people” is clearly an idealized and disingenuous construction that Steinbeck wants to exist, even though he has little faith in it. If we believe in his assessment of American culture as entirely practical and thoroughly dedicated to material progress, then his suggestion that he could justify ecology in the United States is purely false. “The Indian” of this particular passage is equally problematic as a

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complex blend of ideologies. His criticism of science may truly reflect a Native American, nonindustrial, antimodern outlook; as an idealized object of reflection rather than a living, breathing figure engaged in conversation, however, “the Indian” also functions as a device that allows Steinbeck an outlet for his own anxieties about ecology as a legitimate science. In addition to both of these possibilities, however, the comments of “the Indian” also reflect a pragmatic, production-and-progress-driven American culture that Steinbeck clearly does not include in his figuration of “our people.” In this light, the Indian’s questions may also be interpreted as questions that Steinbeck’s own progress-driven culture might ask: To what purpose can this knowledge be applied? What can it produce? What is it advancing toward? Is this a useful body of knowledge, or does its line of inquiry circle endlessly inward through an already isolated body of data?

Steinbeck never achieves any satisfactory answer to the purpose of the Gulf expedition, and at the end of the Log, he ultimately abandons any attempt to explain its real value when he writes, in a tone of resignation, “Here was no service to science, no naming of unknown animals, but rather—we simply liked it. We liked it very much. The brown Indians and the gardens of the sea, and the beer and the work, they were all one thing and we were that one thing too” (224).

Despite Steinbeck’s inability to describe it, the voyage of the Western Flyer does seem to have a very distinct purpose, even if it is unspeakable. In the Log’s introduction, Steinbeck writes that the intent of the voyage was to “collect and preserve” the animals “of the littoral”—a very succinct statement of intent—but he also reveals that simultaneous to their acts of preservation, “Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimpboats [were] dredging with overlapping scoops, bringing up tons of shrimp, rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region” (2, 3). The destructiveness of this shrimp-fishing fleet looms over the whole of the Log. It is important enough in Steinbeck’s recollection of the expedition to appear in his introduction, but then it disappears, only to resurface two hundred pages later as a “large destructive machine . . . committing a true crime against nature and against the immediate welfare of Mexico and the eventual welfare of the whole human species” (206–07). The positioning of the destructive Japanese fishing fleet at the beginning of the work and near its end casts its net over the whole text and suggests that the purpose of Steinbeck’s expedition, though he cannot say it, is to see and preserve the Gulf of California before it is thoroughly destroyed through this exploitation. The voyage is a type of environmentalist intervention in the wrecking of the natural world.

Throughout the Log, Steinbeck presents ecology as a concept incomprehensible to both Americans and Mexicans and as a pursuit that allows people who understand it—Steinbeck, Ed Ricketts, and eventually, The Western Flyer’s entire crew—to escape the rushing, materialistic, and consumptive capitalist system of the United States. Ultimately, however, we have to wonder why Steinbeck—an author, a communicator by trade—cannot give ecology and the values that it engenders a clear, unequivocal voice. What prevents his description of environmental exploitation from ever reaching the level of environmental activism?

In John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist, Richard Astro suggests one answer in his discussion of the Log as a collaborative project between Steinbeck and Ricketts and in his investigation of the pair’s similar but different philosophical positions. Most Steinbeck scholarship acknowledges Ricketts’s deep philosophical influence on Steinbeck, just as most discussions of the Log mention that Ricketts was deeply involved in the construction of the Log. Astro, however, explains that it is a mistake to presume that Steinbeck’s philosophical outlook was the mirror image of Rickett’s. Through a close textual analysis of Rickett’s earlier writings, Astro argues that the worldviews of Ricketts and Steinbeck were different in several critical ways, and he suggests that Steinbeck included in the Log passages that were written exclusively by Ricketts.
out of respect for his friend despite their philosophical differences. The chief point of difference between the worldviews of Ricketts and Steinbeck concerns “non-teleological” thinking. Astro writes that Ricketts’s “non-teleological thinking is an open-ended approach to life by the man who looks at events and accepts them as such without reservation or qualification, and in so doing perceives the whole picture by becoming an identifiable part of that picture” (38). Steinbeck’s problem with this, not surprisingly, lies in its insistence upon acceptance and reservation; he viewed the ideal of nonaction as one of metaphysical indifference,” and “consistently put the highest premium upon action, conflict, and change” (Astro 57).

Astro points out that Ricketts profoundly influenced Steinbeck’s writing from To a God Unknown through the rest of his career. The extreme closeness of Ricketts to the writing of the Log (it was literally a collaborative project written by both men), however, presents a series of very specific problems, the most perplexing of which concerns Steinbeck’s decision to work Ricketts’s discussion of nonteleological thinking into the Log’s fourteenth chapter, “Easter Sunday.” This inclusion, as Astro acknowledges, makes it unclear just how highly Steinbeck valued Ricketts’s philosophy (how resistant could he have been to it if he included it?), and it makes it extremely difficult to understand how Steinbeck negotiated the differences between his own worldview and that held by his friend. To boil Steinbeck’s treatment of ecology and environmentalism down to a conflict with Ricketts, however, would oversimplify the issue. It is bigger than a relationship between the two men, and it extends, in the body of Steinbeck’s work, far beyond Ricketts’s death in 1948. The sections of the Log that most directly address the relationship between ecology and the masses, after all, are not those that may be pinned down to Ricketts (with the exception of the section dealing with the Japanese fishing fleet). The inability to make regular people understand ecology, the embarrassment of explaining to Mexicans the purpose of collecting useless animals, the juxtaposition of the ecological expedition with the military industrialism and consumption of American culture—all of this comes from Steinbeck.

Even more than his relationship with Ricketts, Steinbeck’s hesitancy to boldly present ecology or to argue against the poor treatment of the natural world seems related to a thread of characters and political criticisms that permeate his work. It is linked to Lenny, the seer, and Joseph Wayne (pagan-pantheist protagonist of To a God Unknown); to Steinbeck’s joint understanding of American culture, ecology, and environmentalism; and to his awareness of monstrosity as a tool for cultural manipulation. As limited as it is (it may preserve representative organisms, though it cannot save species from extinction at the hands of industry), the body of Steinbeck’s work suggests that the type of preservative mission carried out by the Western Flyer is nearly the only type of intervention that an individual can surely survive. He tells us that politicians stand on watchtowers awaiting the appearance of any radicalism that challenges established hegemonies, that they have ready-made rubrics of monstrosity to cast over such radicals, and that they can effectively summon the “lumpen” masses to crucify beasts of potential change. He tells us, through Father Angelo in To a God Unknown and through Doc in Sweet Thursday, that monstrous radicals without voices pose no threat to culture at large, but that when they possess a public voice, they are intolerable.

Criticism has long recognized Steinbeck’s interest in ecology (Peter Lisca acknowledged it in 1958 in The Wide World of John Steinbeck), and since Steinbeck and the Environment, it seems that his environmentalist perspectives are generally accepted even if they also seem to fall short of true activism. If Steinbeck did not become enough of an environmental activist, it may mean, ironically, that the man who ultimately finds hope in a bumbling, mistake-prone American culture in America and Americans also understood that very culture as one that would have recognized environmentalism—if he presented it as vehemently as twenty-first-century readers and scholars would have liked him to—as a monstrosity and would have attempted to kill it in the name of preserving the consumptive, exploitative status quo.
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Note

1. Although the lines are often blurred between ecology and biologist Ed Ricketts. was a collaborative project of Steinbeck and his friend and marine

2. While I recognize the problems involved in using America[n] as an abbreviation for “The United States of America,” especially when discussing a variety of nationalities and cultures that span the continents of the Western hemisphere as I will later in this article, I use America here and throughout the article as the most graceful way to incorporate ideas related to “The United States of America” into my writing.

3. These fears are cultivated by Rama, a mystical matriarch who becomes a sort of duenna to Elizabeth, a young expectant mother. Marie-Hélène Huet explains Renaissance notions of monstrosity in great detail in Monstrous Imagination.

4. To borrow the title of one publication, *Monster Theory* has proved a rich field for literary and cultural studies since the early 1990s. The definitions of monstrosity that Ingebretsen uses here are foundational assumptions from which an array of scholars work. See, for instance, Botting, Cohen, Halberstam, Huet, and Valerius. Ingebretsen has also published the ideas he presents in “Monster-Making” in book form: *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*.

5. This association of voice with recognized cultural and political monstrosity also appears in *To a God Unknown*. Steinbeck develops his protagonist, Joseph Wayne, as a “Christ of nature” who is perceived as a religious monstrosity of radical potential to those around him (Astro 88). Joseph senses the presence of his father’s spirit in an oak tree under which he builds his home, and he comes to associate the life of the tree with that of the land as a whole. He holds conversations with the tree and, though he refuses to describe them as such, makes offerings to it. In a final sacrificial act performed to heal the land, Joseph commits suicide, saying, in his final moments, “I am the land . . . and I am the rain. The grass will grow out of me in a little while” (184).

Near the end of the novel, Father Angelo, the Catholic priest of the closest village, recognizes that because he places the condition of the land over the condition of his own soul, Joseph could easily come to be seen as a monster to the community in which he lives and meet the culturally imposed death of saviors and prophets if he became recognized as a radical: “Thank God he has no will to be remembered, to be believed in.” And, in sudden hereesy, “Else there might be a new Christ here in the West” (177). As in *Sweet Thursday*, it is not radicalism per se that exposes one to the brand of monstrosity—it is the adoption of a radical voice, or “message.”

6. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* is the narrative portion (published alone in 1951) of *Sea of Cortez* (published in 1941), which was a collaborative project of Steinbeck and his friend and marine biologist Ed Ricketts.

7. With my quotation marks here, I intend to call attention to the fact that Steinbeck’s classification of these people is arbitrary and problematic. Although I would like to allow my quotation marks in this sentence to stand as a single qualification for each of my sub-

8. Here and elsewhere in this article, when I use Native American, I do intend to move beyond Steinbeck’s restrictive language to signify a much larger category that applies to the indigenous populations of the Americas as a whole.

Works Cited


