



REVIEW

Petr Kopecký: *Robinson Jeffers a John Steinbeck: Vzdálení i blízci* [Robinson Jeffers and John Steinbeck: Distant and Close]. Brno: Host, 2012, 227 pp.

Petr Kopecký's comparative study of these two notable American writers successfully demonstrates the virtues of an ecocritical approach that brings back the examination of the role of place in literature. The author has been working in this field for many years and, apart from scholarly articles, he published *The California Crucible: Literary Harbingers of Deep Ecology* (Ostrava UP, 2007, with a new edition by LAMBERT Academic Publishing in 2013), a book that explores the connections between the works of five California writers – John Muir, Mary Austin, Robinson Jeffers, John Steinbeck, and Gary Snyder.

As the title of the work under review suggests, Kopecký does not rush into writing a study of literary influences and does not assemble a thematic catalogue of similarities; he pays equal attention to the differences in their poetics and to their environmentalist perspectives and achieves a well-balanced, in-depth comparative analysis. Rather than merely recycling the material he used in his previous book, he expands and deepens the study of Steinbeck and Jeffers by means of an interdisciplinary approach – he applies myth criticism to the study of landscape representations, ecology and literary environmentalism, and ecophilosophy. Through his imports from other approaches Kopecký helps to enrich the conceptual framework of literary studies.

The book has a well-conceived structure; a general introduction is followed by chapters dealing with biographies, the setting of California, the topological structure of the place, the ecological context, the ecophilosophical perspective, and personal contacts and influences, and the book is rounded up with a chapter on the Czech reception of the works of the two writers.

The introduction briefly explains the choice of the two particular writers and delineates the focus of the book and the role of nature in their lives and in their works. Then it sets up a theoretical framework with a brief outline of ecocriticism, which provides the main methodological perspective and analytical tools. The chapter might have been more extensive, especially in view of the scant knowledge of this field the Czech reader has, but it still manages to provide a basic orientation.

The second chapter offers brief biographies of both writers, including basic information about their main literary works and achievements. I like the author's idea that an ecological perspective is playfully maintained even at the level of the titles of the sections in this chapter – the titles borrow metaphors from the world of nature (The Sediment, The Tides of Inspiration, Roots and Shoots, Harvest, etc.).

The third chapter establishes the sense of place from literary, historical, and natural science perspectives and reveals the unique features of California. For the reader it is always interesting to establish the connection between a place and the writers because the place comes alive with literary associations for them and the writers are placed in a particular location, in this case places such as Monterey and Carmel. For many readers it must come as a surprise that Carmel was a meeting place

not just of the famous Californian writers such as Steinbeck, Robinson Jeffers, Jack London, and Mary Austin, but also of Sinclair Lewis and Theodor Dreiser, Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Richard Brautigan, and Henry Miller.

Kopecný's literary analysis proper begins in Chapter 4 with his explication of four major topoi, lowlands, mountains, the ocean depths, and frontiers. A mythical approach is certainly in place here because both writers were actively seeking mythic implications, and, as Kopecný convincingly proves elsewhere in his book, they strove hard to restore the dimension of the sacred to California's landscape.

The most valuable contribution of Kopecný's book rests in his carefully documented search for ecological aspects of the works of the two writers and for connections between science and literature because very few literary critics care or are able to enter the frontier area between the two radically different discourses. It is necessary to mention that even this rather narrow field has been mapped, as Kopecný honestly demonstrates, and therefore there is not much space left for an individual contribution, but his synthetic work in this field is nevertheless quite impressive. Kopecný knows his Steinbeck and Jeffers intimately, as well as the relevant criticism, and thus is able to find some fresh openings. I especially admire his interpretation of the community in the Monterey trilogy as a model ecosystem, a view based on Steinbeck's own comment in *Sweet Thursday*, based on the image of the net. His apologetic interpretation throws some light onto the dark pessimism of Jeffers's later poetry and does much to help the reader understand Jeffers.

The chapter on the ecophilosophical approach is of no less interest, even though it may recycle some of the arguments and facts used before. What I appreciate is the conceptual grid he has designed to identify and interpret the agenda of the works under discussion: no separation, breakthrough, anti-anthropocentrism, reciprocity. To these concepts he added a treatise on the use of personification that reveals an ecocentric value orientation.

A special bonus is the last chapter on the Czech reception of the two writers, who, each in his time, enjoyed privileged attention. The well-researched chapter is helpful as a case study of the role of American literature in the communist regime.

The book looks nice, thanks to the cover art and book layout by Ondřej Chorý, and is neat inside, thanks to the careful editorial work of Milan Macháček.

In sum, Kopecný's book opens up new horizons for readers who know little about ecocriticism and ecophilosophy, and for those who do already know something about the area, it can still offer a well-informed comparative study of the life and works of two important and thematically still relevant American writers in a clear, well-ordered manner. His interdisciplinary approach is refreshing and thought-provoking.

Michal Peprník

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