

# John Steinbeck's "Spiritual Streak"

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John had a spiritual streak that never left," Elaine Steinbeck, the author's widow, observed late in 1999. Often thin, that streak could widen to something deep, abiding, and essential to his whole emotional and intellectual life. While it may not be entirely possible to capture a streak by dividing it, I'm going to try to approach the subject of John Steinbeck's spirituality from different angles, from "anecdotes, quotations, events," Steinbeck's own method in his impressionistic portrait "About Ed Ricketts," a 1951 essay about his closest friend. "Of course, some of the things will cancel others," Steinbeck observes, but "the essence lies somewhere" (xi).

## I. GROWING UP WESTERN

"I think rebellion man's highest state." (qtd. in Benson 69)

In 1902, the year Steinbeck was born, Salinas, California, population 3000, was a cow town, as much a part of the West as any of central California's raw hamlets. Swaggering landowners commanded large swatches of some of the most fertile land in California. Salinas hosted a yearly rodeo. "Tradition was strong in Salinas," Steinbeck reflected in a 1955

essay on his hometown. "Salinas was never a pretty town. It took a darkness from the swamps" ("Always" 58). Steinbeck disliked the place. Like the young Bernard DeVoto, Wallace Stegner, and Willa Cather, he defined himself against his ugly, conventional—he would add smug and hypocritical—hometown. What Wallace Stegner observed about Western writers is true also of Steinbeck: their "whole process of intellectual and literary growth is a movement, not through or beyond, but away from the people and society they know best, the faiths they still at bottom accept, the little raw provincial world for which they keep an apologetic affection" (171). Steinbeck's apologetic affection surfaced reluctantly and intermittently in his work; in life, he energetically rejected Salinas proper—he left at seventeen, came home for only a few months when his mother had a stroke in 1933, and throughout the rest of the decade tagged as "Salinas thinking" the rigid and violent mentality of California's Associated Farmers.

But deeply felt, as Stegner acknowledged, were the few abiding, bedrock faiths of such small towns—that Steinbeck playfully acknowledges in his novel about the Salinas Valley, *East of Eden* (1952):

The church and the whorehouse arrived in the Far West simultaneously. . . . surely they were both intended to accomplish the same thing: the singing, the devotion, the poetry of the churches took a man out of his bleakness for a time, and so did the brothels. The sectarian churches came in swinging, cocky and loud and confident. . . . each for all its bumptiousness brought with it the same thing: the Scripture on which our ethics, our art and poetry, and our relationships are built. . . . And they brought music—maybe not the best, but the form and sense of it. And they brought conscience, or, rather, nudged the dozing conscience. (217)

Throughout his life, Steinbeck felt the persistent tug of his early Episcopalian training, training he rejected in its institutional form but embraced in substance, a fundamental belief that this world meant more than physical substance. And the Episcopalians, among them his devout and determined mother, gave him the Bible and a conscience—an

unflinching conviction that all of humanity deserves a fair shake.

Writing about organized religion, however, can evoke in Steinbeck a tone of wry humor—or outright rejection. The undergraduate tour de force, “Saint Katy the Virgin” (published in 1936 and later included in *The Long Valley* [1938]), delicately skewers sainthood in the Catholic church. In *Tortilla Flat* (1935), the paisanos’ inconsistent faith is lightly satirized: thieves all, they nonetheless revere the church, and cannot steal Pirate’s money if it is earmarked for a candlestick in honor of St. Francis. Steinbeck’s own favorite story about his childhood among the Episcopalians mines the same satiric vein. In one of his travel articles for *Newsday* in 1966, “Letters to Alicia” (Harmon 57–59), as well as in *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) he tells of his childhood mishap when an acolyte at the church in Salinas:

There’s something very dear about a church you grew up in. I know every secret corner, secret odor of St. Thomas’s. . . . I must have been deeply printed with the sacredness because I remember every desecration, and there were plenty of them. I think I can go to every place where my initials are scratched with a nail. When Danny Taylor and I punched the letters of a singularly dirty word with a pin in the Book of Common Prayer, Mr. Wheeler caught us and we were punished, but they had to go through all the prayerbooks and the hymnals to make sure there weren’t more.

Once, in that chair stall under the lectern, a dreadful thing happened. I wore the lace and carried the cross and sang a beefy soprano. Once the bishop was officiating, a nice old man, hairless as a boiled onion, but to me glowing with rays of holiness. So it was that, stunned with inspiration, I set the cross in its socket at the end of processional and forgot to throw the brass latch that held it in. At the reading of the second lesson I saw with horror the heavy brass cross sway and crash on that holy hairless head. The bishop went down like a pole-axed cow and I lost the lace to a boy who couldn’t sing as well, a boy named Skunkfoot Hill. (*Winter* 112–13)

Indeed, authentic religious observance can elicit from the writer both

humor and sincere—not sentimental—respect. Scenes of religious acceptance are scattered throughout Steinbeck’s fiction—Father Ramon forgiving Pirate for his dogs’ presence in church; Father Angelo in *To a God Unknown* (1933) allowing the peasants their pagan festivals, willing to “give everybody a little penance” the following Sunday (186); Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) abandoning his ministry yet restlessly seeking another pulpit that will reach “the people”; the ancient Chinese scholars pondering the meaning of the Hebrew *timshel* in *East of Eden*. Such characters’ honesty of purpose, however, is balanced by the fine scorn Steinbeck reserves for religious hypocrisy, smugness, and rigidity. A small monograph, *The Wrath of John Steinbeck* (1939), records an emblematic episode in Steinbeck’s early life. Stanford classmate Robert Bennett relates the story of nineteen-year-old John’s visit to his mother’s church in Berkeley. That Sunday the minister preached that “the soul is a creature that wants food in order to its satisfaction as truly as the body!” to which the young and restless visitor responded: “Yes, you all look satisfied here, while outside the world begs for a crust of bread or a chance to earn it. Feed the body and the soul will take care of itself.” This was, noted Bennett, “a challenge from St. John” that caused his mother to be “visibly disturbed” and the minister to invite John to the pulpit: “Young man, if you think you can preach a better sermon than I, come on up here and let us hear you!” “John didn’t flutter an eyelid,” recalls Bennett, “but returned with quiet wrath, “I don’t think much of preaching. . . . Go on . . . you’re getting paid for it.”

But as writer “St. John” Steinbeck did indeed preach better sermons, and one sermonic strand rails against oppression: “And this I must fight against,” Steinbeck writes in *East of Eden*: “any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about” (132). Throughout Steinbeck’s fiction, church and zealous churchgoers stifle the soul of the individual or, in his labor trilogy, the self-determination of a group. Certainly one of Steinbeck’s most characteristic themes is his rejection of hypocrisy and complacency. In towns like Salinas, self-sufficiency bred self-absorption, a distortion of any faith that embraced humanity. These “churchgoers”

Steinbeck rejects, women like the stern Emalin Hawkins in "Johnny Bear," who would rather her sister die than disgrace the family honor with an illegitimate pregnancy; men like Mr. Baker Banker in *The Winter of Our Discontent*, who attends church and then ruthlessly attends to his own wealth. Being married in church becomes deadly for Joseph Wayne: "Here in the church I've thought there lay a beauty if a man could find it, but this is only a doddering kind of devil worship" (*To a God* 49). His brother Burton "kept himself from evil and he found evil in nearly all close human contacts" (22). The evangelical Mrs. Sandry in *The Grapes of Wrath* predicts the same doom for Rose of Sharon that she herself lives daily. In *East of Eden*, Aron Trask, under the tutelage of a minister, is obsessed with purity and stifles any truly human impulses. The indomitable Lisa Hamilton, with a "finely developed sense of sin . . . suffered bravely and uncomplainingly through life, convinced that that was the way her God wanted everyone to live" (11-12).

In short, to grow up Western was, for Steinbeck, to grow away from the stolid beliefs of his middle-class parents whose Victorian sensibilities Steinbeck largely rejected. But Steinbeck couldn't shake a fundamental respect for conscience wherever he found it: in Tom and Ma Joad, the Chinese Lee, "Doc" Ricketts, and Sam Hamilton, "one of those pillars of fire by whom little and frightened men are guided through the darkness," as Steinbeck writes in *Journal of a Novel* (1969). "The writers of today, even I, have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and god [sic] knows it is destroyed often enough," he continues. "But the beacon thing is that sometimes it is not . . . [;] the great ones, Plato, Lao Tze, Bhudda [sic], Christ, Paul, and the great Hebrew prophets are not remembered for negation or denial. . . . It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage" (115). Steinbeck did just that.

And to tell his stories, he turned often to the most important book of his childhood, the King James Version of the Bible. That book clearly lifts and consoles the human spirit: "Do you then not think this is a divine book written by the inky finger of God?" Samuel Hamilton asks Lee, Adam's Chinese servant in *East of Eden*. "I think the mind

that could think this story was a curiously divine mind” is Lee’s reply—one, I would suspect, fairly close to Steinbeck’s own response (302). For Steinbeck, the Bible was a richly suggestive source, a beacon as well as a kind of “pretext” for his own stories. Biblical myth enriches most of his works—the Joads, like the exiles from Exodus, journey to the promised land in *The Grapes of Wrath*; Kino and Juana “fall” into knowledge in *The Pearl* (1947); the “framework” for *East of Eden*, the author writes in his journal, “roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel” (90); and the passion of Christ marks Ethan’s fall and redemption in *The Winter of Our Discontent*. These novels contain the remembered glory of the book Steinbeck absorbed as a child, the biblical tales that set out so lucidly man’s troubled steps through the world.

Finally, John Steinbeck, writer, absorbed the stately measures of the King James verses, as so many passages from *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, lend testimony:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks, and the ripe fruit. . . . and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (449)

For the writer who said that he had the “instincts of a minstrel rather than those of a scrivener,” biblical cadences helped shape his prose (Steinbeck and Wallsten 19). As story, as symbolic source, and as text, the Bible was Steinbeck’s ur-text.

## II. THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

*To a God Unknown* “is a parable, Duke, the story of a race, growth and death. 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 indescribable unit man plus his environment.” (“To a God Unknown” Notebook)

If Steinbeck wrestled with church doctrine, he had no quarrel with nature, and throughout his life he found both a visceral and spiritual connection to the land. At an early age, notes biographer Jackson Benson, the foundation of Steinbeck's "rich inner life" was "a special relationship he developed with nature. . . . Over and over again in looking back on his childhood, Steinbeck uses such words as 'secret,' 'special,' and 'magical'" when remembering nature (29). In the words of Barry Lopez, John Steinbeck "brings together the human heart and the land" (71). Lopez urges us to consider two primal landscapes: external landscapes—our relations to the land, to oaks, to the whirl of night frogs—and interior landscapes, often shaped by the places where we reside.

Like some of America's greatest writers—Henry David Thoreau, William Faulkner, Willa Cather—Steinbeck made his childhood haunts vividly real. He charted them in each of his books and in the letters or journals he wrote as "warm-ups" to the day's writing. Steinbeck wanted his prose to recapture what he termed a "child's world . . . of colors more clear than they are to adults, of tastes more sharp. . . . I want to put down the way 'afternoon felt' and of the feeling about a bird that sang in a tree in the evening" (qtd. in Benson 325–26). The lucidity of the "child's vision" was key to the composition of *The Red Pony* (1937), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *East of Eden*. It means, in part, that he asks readers to pay respectful attention to an external landscape—as do children. He invites readers to look: "Orange and speckled and fluted nudibranchs slide gracefully over the rocks, their skirts waving like the dresses of Spanish dancers," he writes in 1945 in *Cannery Row* (31). Passages of stark natural beauty are found in every Steinbeck novel, sentences that record the rapt attention he paid to the natural world.

But to see with precision was only a part of what nature meant to Steinbeck. To see beyond the physical to an underlying pattern was equally essential:

There are good things to see in the tidepools and there are exciting and interesting thoughts to be generated from the seeing. Every new eye applied to the peep hole which looks out at the world may fish in some new beauty and some new pattern, and

the world of the human mind must be enriched by such fishing.  
 (“Foreword” vi)

Steinbeck asks his readers to shift perspective, much as Emerson suggests that his readers understand that nature yields more than simple beauty: “a man looking at reality brings his own limitations to the world,” Steinbeck writes in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951). “If he has strength and energy of mind the tide pool stretches both ways, digs back to electrons and leaps space into the universe and fights out of the moment into non-conceptual time. Then ecology has a synonym which is ALL” (72). This all-encompassing vision embraces the union between humans and nature.

American literature is full of conquest narratives—John Smith as Virginia cavalier, Natty Bumppo as pathfinder, Ernest Hemingway as marksman. But for John Steinbeck, nature is not a commodity, the woods not for felling, animals not for slaughter. For his is not a man-centered but a holistic universe, with humans seen as another species bound intimately to the places where they dream of rabbits, drink, love, suffer, and catch frogs. Characters in Steinbeck’s California novels, whether alone or in communities, are intimately connected to places. In *Tortilla Flat*, the paisanos inhabit a liminal space—on a hill above Monterey, flanked by forests behind; it is also their social space. They drink beneath trees, sleep in ditches, and stalk treasure or Pirate and his dogs in the forest; they also buy or barter or steal wine at Torelli’s in town. Marginality is their social and physical terrain. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, “the people” are introduced by their connection to the land. At the end of the opening chapter, men’s worried hands “were busy with sticks and little rocks,” and throughout subsequent chapters a male figure repeatedly draws figures in the dust—or drags his heels just as the turtle’s feet drag through the dust. Oklahomans—Steinbeck’s original title for his manuscript—belong to that blasted land where “grandpa fought the Indians,” where Uncle John “jumped over a feeny bush as big as a piana,” and where Muley Graves’s father “got gored to death by a bull. An’ his blood is right in that groun’, right now” (65–66). These stories connect the people to the place. In each of Steinbeck’s California novels, environment similarly shapes inhabitants, and Steinbeck repeatedly demonstrates that bond. Lennie and George are trapped—and

are always seen in tight, enclosed spaces. In *Cannery Row* Mack and the boys are survivors—and dig into the Palace Flop House like the tenacious hermit crabs they are compared to. Steinbeck's is a vision of ecological connection, of humans' interdependence with nature and one another. "Our own interest," he writes in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, "lay in relationships of animal to animal. If one observes in this relational sense, it seems apparent that species are only commas in a sentence, that each species is at once the point and base of a pyramid, that all life is relational" (256–57). This connectedness becomes a kind of spiritual urgency in Steinbeck's fiction—to show how humans find sustenance in a particular environment.

Intermittently, nature becomes for Steinbeck more than beauty and transcends such life relationships. For him, as for Emerson, nature enfolds spirit. He writes to a friend in 1930:

Modern sanity and religions are a curious delusion. Yesterday I went out in a fishing boat—out in the ocean. By looking over the side into the blue water, I could quite easily see the shell of the turtle who supports the world. I am getting more prone to madness. . . . I for one and you to some extent have a great many of the basic impulses of an African witch doctor. (Steinbeck and Wallsten 31)

What he playfully alludes to here is exhaustively explored in the novel he was writing that same year, *To a God Unknown*, a saga of man's relation to nature, god, and truth. Certainly the grandest of Steinbeck's spiritual seekers is Joseph Wayne, the hounded protagonist of this curiously rich and suggestive novel. He's a pantheist who finds in nature a place to create a dynasty—the Valley of Our Lady near Mission San Antonio—and the wonder that tallies with the unknowable in man, the mysterious rock, the man on the cliff who sacrifices an animal nightly in homage to sunset and uses his own bloodletting to bring the rain. For Joseph Wayne, nature teems with reproductive energy and creative force. His feeling is akin to what Steinbeck may have felt as a child, when "John's tree" in Pacific Grove was "my brother and then later, still playfully, I thought of it as something rather closer, a kind of repository of my destiny" (Steinbeck and Wallsten 31). *Travels with Charley* (1962) contains a similarly mysterious reflection on trees when

he visits the redwoods:

From my earliest childhood I've felt that something was going on in the groves, something of which I was not a part. . . . there's a breathing in the black, for these huge things that control the day and inhabit the night are living things and have presence, and perhaps feeling, and, somewhere in deep-down perception, perhaps communication. (146)

Wayne also feels this kind of primitive response to nature. Steinbeck writes in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* that "it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcry which is one of the prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricable to all reality, known and unknowable" (178). "Our Father who art in nature," concludes Chapter 3 of *Cannery Row*.

Steinbeck recalls in "About Ed Ricketts" that his friend and mentor called this spiritual longing "breaking through coming out through the back of the mirror into some kind of reality which would make the day world dreamlike. This thought obsessed him. He found the symbols of 'breaking through' in Faust, in Gregorian music, and in the sad, drunken poetry of Li Po" (lxii). The notion of "breaking through" explains what Steinbeck means by the vision of the Chinaman's eyes in *Cannery Row*, or Doc's discovery of the drowned girl in the tide pool, or Henri the painter's dream. All are moments of transcendence—a flicker of spirit. "There are streams in man more profound and dark and strong than the libido of Freud. Jung's libido is closer but still inadequate," Steinbeck tells a friend in 1933 (Steinbeck and Wallsten 87). As a young man, Steinbeck launched a spiritual quest, seeking answers in mythology, Jungianism, ecology, Hinduism, holistic thinking, and the Arthurian legends. Restless and curious, he never ceased probing the connective threads of the elusive human spirit. He occasionally felt such spiritual transcendence in daily life. Elaine Steinbeck recalled his saying:

"Mary's spirit comes to visit me there" [at the bottom of Kerry Peninsula]. He would walk part of every day alone . . . and John al-

ways said: "Mary's spirit joined me."

### III. EMPATHY AND ACCEPTANCE

"I don't know what faith is." (Jim Casy)

At age ninety-five, a grade school classmate of John Steinbeck's told this story:

If John could talk you into doing something, he delighted in that, especially if it got you into trouble. You wouldn't think John could show compassion at all. He was surly. He never laughed but he was always there to help somebody. He was always standing up for this one boy that the other kids picked on. One day, I asked him why. He said, "When you're down, someone's got to help you." That was John. I've never forgotten that. (qtd. in Noble 9)

That was John—empathetic, with a lifelong concern for little people: Lennie, Rose of Sharon, Kino, and Ethan Allen Hawley. This empathy sustained his faith in mankind as a whole. Even during World War II he didn't lose faith. He wrote to editor Pascal Covici, in January 1941:

Maybe you can find some vague theology that will give you hope. Not that I have lost any hope. All the goodness and heroisms will rise up again, then be cut down again and rise up. It isn't that the evil thing wins—it never will—but that it doesn't die. (Steinbeck and Wallsten 221)

Steinbeck believed that somehow goodness would prevail, however faintly voiced—as is Adam Trask's deathbed whisper of forgiveness in *East of Eden*. For that iron faith he was sometimes called naive, most vigorously when he wrote *The Moon Is Down* (1942). He was accused of being "soft" on Nazis because he did not portray them as characters of unmitigated evil; he was said to be naive because he felt that democracy would triumph. Steinbeck's aim, however, was always to help people understand one another, in loneliness, despair, hunger, and

entrapment. “In every bit of honest writing in the world,” he wrote in the late 1930s, “there is a base theme. Try to understand men” (“Long Valley” Notebook).

This may be why readers love Steinbeck: he connects. A Hindu newspaper noted recently:

. . . the ideas expounded by Steinbeck [have] close affinity to Indian thoughts expressed by seers such as Swami Vive-kananda. Steinbeck strikes a deep chord in every one of us when he advocates tolerance, love, understanding and compassion as the necessary tools to fight the woes of the modern age. (“Relevance” 1)

And one way Steinbeck shows this spiritual empathy is in enfolded various beliefs and positing a variety of strategies for survival. In nearly every Steinbeck novel is a character modeled on Steinbeck’s friend Ed Ricketts who accepts what is, and who practices “understanding acceptance” (Log 112). Ricketts schooled John throughout the 1930s and 40s in a kind of nonjudgmental approach to life. The Ricketts character exhibits a consistently admirable honesty of purpose and broad acceptance in Steinbeck’s fiction. Each story acknowledges what “is”; each embraces what Steinbeck and Ricketts termed “nonteleological thinking,” a concern “not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually ‘is’—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*” (Log 112).

As a nonteleological observer, Steinbeck recorded the complexities and contradictions of human need. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, the sacred and the profane coexist—Casy enters the novel as an preacher singing spiritual words to the popular song “Yes Sir That’s my Baby.” Tom tells Ma that “I never could keep Scripture straight sence I read a book named ‘The Winning of Barbara Worth’” (117). The impulse to embrace the sacred is as strong as the appeal of the profane. In *To a God Unknown* Juana prays and chants ancient remedies; the priest will let the people rout and dance in the mud—knowing that in the morning he can administer the sacraments. Steinbeck places man be-

tween the intermittent yearning for spiritual guidance and the keen appreciation of the profane, between, as he said in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, "the tidepool and the stars" (73). The biblical underpinning of the Joads' culture exists side by side with Granpa fumbling at his drawers and Al tomcatting. Throughout, Steinbeck conveys love and tolerance for human foibles, compassion for suffering and loneliness. His is the spiritual beacon of connection.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Elaine Steinbeck mused late in 1999: "There was always a spiritual quality to John . . . he did not feel that he had to go to church on Sunday, he didn't. But when he went, he acted like an active church goer." She continued, "People with any intellectualism may not believe in Adam and Eve. . . . When we went to Turkey to see the ark on high ground, John said, 'I'm sure there was an ark here; probably a lot of arks.'" A lot of arks, a lot of historical input to create a tale of mythic scope. "There was no dogma to John Steinbeck," Elaine asserted. But when in Rome "we went to see the Pope." And as John was dying he said, "If there's a god, and I think there is. . . ." Then later, "Nobody should be buried in alien soil. . . . I want an Episcopal funeral and I want my body there," back home in Salinas.

John Steinbeck was a deeply spiritual man. His work is laced with the spirituality of nature, with startling moments of insight, and with unflagging compassion for the loneliness and exhilaration of the human condition.

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