





The Portable  
**STEINBECK**

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AND INTRODUCED BY  
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## INTRODUCTION

More than a quarter of a century ago, when my father was making selections for the first Viking *Portable Steinbeck*, he wrote of his friend John Steinbeck, whose publisher he had been since 1935: "We can enjoy him. His great, intuitive feeling for folklore, his magnificent use of the vernacular, his use of simple themes, and his poetic rhythms recall to me the Homeric spirit in American prose." The gusto of Homer and of Whitman is indeed here, along with the thoughtfulness of Emerson, that philosophical presence which more and more readers have been finding woven into the sturdiest strands of American literature. A humor sometimes sly and often carelessly robust finds its way onto Steinbeck's pages too, along with other qualities so diverse that perhaps the best that the editor of this *Portable* can do is to describe some of the satisfactions that John Steinbeck's work provides and then try to include samples that inform, satisfy, and frustrate the reader into wanting more.

One begins with the sense (I quote my father) that "literature, when creative, is an expression of the joy of living." With his words, I can explain my own choice of the following selections: "They stimulated my imagination, and stirred emotions and thoughts within me which I was glad to have." Now, why they did so is largely a subjective matter. Each of us enjoys an author for many reasons, most of them having more to do with what we bring to his works than with what the works may

themselves offer. But I want to try to say why I think that John Steinbeck provides satisfactions not so much unique as, rather, uniquely perceptible in his writings. Primarily, I find in those writings a focus of interest more implicit than realized in the very early works, then gradually emerging into sharpened consciousness until it becomes a matter of articulated intention in the "log" that Steinbeck kept for 1951, during the composition of *East of Eden* (1952), the book he then saw as the culmination of all that he had previously done. Steinbeck wrote in that daily "log": "Very few people ever mature. It is enough if they flower and reseed. . . . But sometimes . . . awareness takes place—not very often and always inexplicable. There are no words for it because there is no one ever to tell. This is a secret not kept a secret, but locked in wordlessness. The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness."

The sense that some sort of "awareness" has taken place is precisely what Steinbeck's best work—perhaps what most good writing—leaves with a reader. Without trying to push this admirable definition of the art of writing to the limits of its applicability, one can advance the suspicion that Steinbeck's memorable characters linger in one's imagination primarily as they struggle toward various sorts of "awareness." Still, the directions of the struggle are so various that one can understand why earlier reviewers and critics were at a loss how to approach Steinbeck's work. Not only was there lots of it, but it seemed to be heading in too many, and too contradictory, directions at once to be contained within any viable critical frame. To be sure, certain recurring elements in the fiction have been identified and explored. A concern for common, human values, for warmth, love, and understanding, leads to

a view of Steinbeck the sentimentalist. The social relevance of his writing reveals him as a reformer. His tender evocation of the land itself, his celebration of its fertility and of his characters' concern for the bringing forth of life, implies an interest first called "primitive" and then seen as "mythic." His capacity to make both his characters and his country come alive has been traced to his increasing mastery of vernacular as counterweight to the sonorous, almost mystical, rhythms of his frequently incantatory language. Finally, his explicit discussion, in *Sea of Cortez* (1941), of what he called "non-teleological thinking" confirms what for many has been the primary motif of his fictional writing, his conception of man as a biological mechanism, purposeless as well as animal-like. The proponents of this view of Steinbeck find in the half-witted Lennie (*Of Mice and Men*), the retarded Tularecito (*The Pastures of Heaven*), and the moronic Johnny Bear (*The Long Valley*)—the three most frequently cited—an obsession with human approximations of the animal. Others, equally struck by the pointed absence of didactic moralizing, have seen in the stories and novels a pseudo-scientific concern to record without judging ("is-thinking" was to become a Steinbeck synonym for "non-teleological thinking"), to present specimens simply for the reader's contemplation.

These and other insights into Steinbeck's work are necessary and useful; they alert one to the many currents of feeling and implication that run through the books. One other way of approaching this flow would be to examine some of the people Steinbeck has created, and to see how he has gone about "unlocking" the wordless secret by forging his own particular language of awareness. The selections in this Portable may help the reader to begin this rewarding process.

After sketching the pathetic disillusion of Henry Morgan, in *Cup of Gold* (1929), as he comes to recognize but not to accept his betrayal of his early dreams of conquest and understanding (a kind of story that the author was to tell with immensely greater impact in *The Winter of Our Discontent*, more than thirty years later), Steinbeck introduced his readers to his own imaginatively possessed territory of the Salinas Valley in California, and to the characters—also his own—that would come to inhabit it in increasing variety and complexity. "Deep down it's mine, right to the center of the world," says Joseph Wayne of the land he has just bought at the start of *To a God Unknown*.

Of the kinds of awareness that Steinbeck's stronger characters bring to their confrontation of life, this sense of an intimate and even overpowering connection between man and land becomes the most pervasive, the most elemental. Even unaware characters feel it, all unknowingly, so that Grandpa Joad, comic relief and all, is said to have died as soon as the Joad caravan leaves the Oklahoma farm where he had his roots, although Grandpa's body breathes until long after. The rhythm of the seasons makes the texture of *The Grapes of Wrath*; what potentially is simply an "angry" book is as much a paean to the succeeding seasons and their effect upon the physical terrain as it is a compassionate presentation of the lives of oppressed Okies in California. The land wildly blossoms in springtime (or else unnaturally does not), quietly gestates during the summer, yields its harvest in the fall, and then lies bare and dead during winter, only to give birth once more. So, too, the lives of Steinbeck's people are presented not simply as a complex pattern of action and desire, but also as variations on the simple pattern that Eliot's

Apeneck Sweeney tersely identified as "birth, copulation, and death."

The imagery of sexuality in Steinbeck's books generally derives from the progression of the seasons as it influences the implicitly related fertility of the soil and desire of the characters. The *paisanos* in *To a God Unknown* copulate ecstatically in response to much-needed rain; the inevitability of sexuality in *The Grapes of Wrath* is like that of any other natural succession: "Might as well stop the fall from comin', and might as well stop the sap from movin' in the trees." And in the same integrated way, Ma comforts Rose of Sharon, pregnant in the midst of death, with the assurance that "bearin' and dyin' is two pieces of the same thing." Jody's Red Pony lives through its mother's death, the human emotions encasing both events being—once more—"two pieces of the same thing."

But the awareness of nature and of nature's processes that Steinbeck's fiction engenders in a reader remains secondary, although poignant and vital. The people, the characters, even more than the soil, the rocks, and the trees—one cannot speak of Steinbeck's "landscape," for the word's connotations of superficiality belie the psychological weight that the author imparts to the natural environment of his stories—live in a reader's imagination not only because of what they do but because of what they feel, and because of their struggles to understand their own unique positions upon the earth. This uniqueness emerges as a function not so much of their psychological and spiritual identity as of their participation in the lives of other people and simultaneously in their own destinies. Steinbeck's main characters in the early books repeatedly feel themselves to be somehow "different" from others, and the reader



sees this difference as existing not at all in their isolation—which is what they themselves see—but rather in their oceanic sense of involvement with all humanity. Only as they become aware of this sense of community do they cease to feel so tortured, so alone, so painfully unique; yet it is this very communion that, for the reader, sets them apart from the mass of men who feel readily enough their own self-important loneliness but who cannot break through the walls of narcissism that keep them from being, instead of merely seeing themselves as being, specially important in the universe.

This seeming paradox, this state of feeling that combines lonely aloofness with a burgeoning sense of communal participation in the human race, Steinbeck implies as early as *Cup of Gold* and articulates in *To a God Unknown*, where Joseph Wayne wants, without quite knowing it, to be himself the whole, the all, the giver and guardian of life. Searching for water to save his thirsting cattle in a time of drought, he comes upon an old man who sacrifices "every night some creature" to the setting sun, as if the sun could not go down without the old man's controlling magic. "This man has discovered a secret," Joseph said to himself. "He must tell me if he can." But neither the old man, nor anyone else, can put the secret into words; it is the first avatar of that awareness "locked in wordlessness" that flickers through all of Steinbeck's work. The old man can say only, "I do this because it makes me glad."

Unaware himself, but deeply in touch with the cycle of the sun, the old man has found a peacefulness that, simple-minded and even imbecilic, haunts Joseph for the rest of his life. Even as he dies, giving his own blood in dark propitiation of the unknown God that can send the rain, Joseph thinks of those nightly offerings. The reader, on the other hand, is not attracted to the old

man's mystical nature-worship, whose ritual has no words. Too much is symbol; not enough has been made human. The problem confronting Steinbeck here at the start of his career—a problem that he solved and partially solved in many books, but that returned to trouble him in such unlike works as *The Moon Is Down* (1942) and *Burning Bright* (1950)—is that of finding ways for his characters to reveal levels of their experience and awareness that people do not naturally put into words. Human beings, as Steinbeck was to emphasize specifically in *East of Eden* (1952), have consciousness, choice, and awareness as animals do not. Yet people are also animals. How create a full sense of the human without overstating it, and without bellying the ignorance and the reserve of the shy animal behind the articulate man? So at Joseph Wayne's wedding, the new father-in-law speaks as surely few, if any, men have ever spoken: "It's because you're stronger than I am that I hate you. Here I'm wanting to like you, and I can't because I'm a weak man." As Joseph points out, no weak man could bring himself to say what McGregor has said—but then, neither could any sort of man at all. Not until Doc Burton and Jim Nolan of *In Dubious Battle* (1937) does Steinbeck find a way to present persuasively the insight and awareness of articulate, knowing people.

But meanwhile, *Tortilla Flat* (1935) provided a short cut through the problem by presenting very simple people—Danny and his *paisano* friends—whose range of awareness is narrow without being unbelievable. Although some critics have refused to enjoy life on the Flat, offended by the author's refusal to hew mercilessly to a consideration of "social conditions," most readers have found rare satisfaction in the characters: fully aware of undercurrents of feeling and motivation, their

awareness emerges both realistically (that is, convincingly) and completely. Through dialogue, through perfect rendition of the spoken language, Steinbeck makes his reader believe in the world of petty chicanery, mildly corrupt poverty, loyalty, and unambitious gusto that is Tortilla Flat. The humor of the book lies primarily in the rationalizations that reveal the very awareness of motive that the characters pretend to hide. Pilon, deciding to steal Big Joe Portagee's pants, indulges in mental gymnastics that exemplify much of the book's flavor: "If, with one action, he could avenge Danny, discipline Big Joe, teach an ethical lesson, and get a little wine, who in the world could criticize him?" Big Joe, having stolen Danny's blanket, must himself learn how it feels to be robbed. Pilon will trade the pants for wine. Fooling no one, least of all himself or the reader, each character reasons in similar fashion about such things as the gaps in Mrs. Morales's fence, through which chickens may be encouraged to slip, a bottle of wine that might endanger the health of a friend, or the rent that—if paid—might corrupt a kind landlord.

But the complex human qualities emerging through the story's Arthurian overtones, as well as through *The Pastures of Heaven* and *The Long Valley* (both written earlier in the 1930s, despite the publication date of the latter), suggest that the simplicities of humanity could not subsume the author's total interest. Even *Of Mice and Men*, the first of Steinbeck's experiments in constructing a novel in as close to dramatic form as possible, allowed neither the preoccupation with direct presentation nor the limitations of the idiot, Lennie, to hold the impact of the story to that of simplicity starkly rendered. Slim, whose "ear heard more than was said to him, and [whose] slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought," becomes the

only character to sense the reciprocity in the relationship between George and Lennie, and thus continues the sequence of Steinbeck's isolated and aware men that Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle* and Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* most successfully exemplify. This type brings into focus the major impact of Steinbeck's work during the 1930s.

The social issue, of course, is crucially relevant; it is no coincidence that *In Dubious Battle* concerns a strike of California fruit-pickers and that *The Grapes of Wrath* had its origins in *Their Blood Is Strong*, a series of articles Steinbeck did for the *San Francisco News* in 1936, so titled when it was published in book form in April of 1938. For the book he added an "Epilogue" that boils with controlled indignation. The last sentence of this grim description of what California was doing to the Okies anticipates the vintage from the grapes of wrath: "Must the hunger become anger and the anger fury before anything will be done?" Steinbeck the man cared deeply about the immediate social issues of corporate tyranny and the material lot of migrant workers. But, without attempting to account for the motives of the man, the books themselves present with equal vividness the loneliness, the capacity for choice, and—in Tom Joad—the development of the character whose awareness evades articulation but infuses a felt quality into his life. The "sad-eyed" Doc Burton, detached observer, who says, "I simply want to see as much as I can, Mac, with the means that I have," believes not at all in the "cause," the strike of the workers, but in men: "I guess I just believe they're men, not animals." Jim Nolan's development from socially "useless" involvement with suffering people into a man with the capacity to "use" people for the purposes of the group counterpoints, especially in the brutality of

Jim's death, Doc's notion that "the end is never very different in its nature from the means."

Jim dies for his cause, illuminating in his death not only the mob behavior of "group man" but also a human being's capacity to choose his destiny. Tom Joad, two years later, goes on to develop his sensitive awareness of people into an involved responsibility, predicated upon Tom's acceptance of Jim Casy's discovery that "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of." Like Doc, Tom seeks understanding. Like Jim, he has the capacity for involved sacrifice; but his sacrifice is not self-destruction, nor is his understanding distant observation. The qualities of that understanding emerge with special clarity through the episode in which Tom shares breakfast and then finds work with a small family, an event presented almost word for word in "Breakfast," a first-person fragment that appeared in *The Long Valley*. Apart from the sheer joy that it generates in a reader, "Breakfast" makes apparent what were to become the warmly human facets of Tom Joad that appear to have merged with the cool intelligence of Doc Burton to form characters in a number of subsequent books, among them *The Moon Is Down* and *Cannery Row*. The reader will discover, however, that the differences between Tom Joad's experience and that of the narrator in "Breakfast" clarify Steinbeck's emphasis, the felt thought behind the work, even more sharply than do the similarities. Both passages emphasize the impact of having work to do, upon the feelings, especially the pride, of people. This psychological facet of work informs all of *The Grapes of Wrath* and is spelled out explicitly in the first part of Chapter 14. Tom Joad's participation in these feelings, as well as in the total experience of the family with whom he shares breakfast, contrasts with the narrator's separation from

the family and from any anxiety about finding work, and from the joy in doing it. One sees here how the writer's own feelings in real life, moving and powerful in themselves, become unimportant and seem almost trivial when subsumed by the fuller, because richly imagined, context of the fictional Tom Joad in the novel. This seemingly slight excerpt from what were really working notes for the novel, a distillation of the author's own experience and observation, therefore fixes with some precision the direction and force that feelings about work and about commitment take in Steinbeck's writings with *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In both these novels, despite the rhythms of social action and of seasonal change, the primary emotional counterpoint is that between "group man," the organism that has a life independent of its members, and those individuals who have, or who struggle toward, awareness, while retaining their communion with and commitment to the life of the group, which itself derives significance and satisfaction from the work that people do. The awareness at issue here is by no means to be mistaken for a merely verbal intellectualism. But even though it cannot be reduced to words, even though education and social status appear in these works as absolute obstacles to achieving it, neither is it made to seem the natural heritage of any hypothetical "common man." Perhaps here is the most invigorating paradox behind all the books Steinbeck has written. On one hand, the democratic assumption that all men are potentially of the psychological and social elect does battle—generally embodied in conflicts between characters—with the equally egalitarian sense that all men share a basic, animalistic nature, more buried in some than in others but always to be found. On the other hand, the elitist assumption that only some men can understand their

dilemma, their situation, and by understanding it affect it, becomes embodied in the characters who struggle to order with their minds the chaos of feeling and matter that they encounter. "Sometimes . . . awareness takes place."

John Steinbeck's initial achievement was to present not only the land, with the people and the social forces that make life upon it so engrossing and sometimes so terrifying, but also the struggle of individuals toward the awareness "locked in wordlessness." That casual entry into the "log" for 1951 does seem to be not only an accurate summing up of what the author had previously been doing but also a clear anticipation both of the work it accompanied and of the author's subsequent work. Yet a distinction must be made. John Steinbeck seems to turn away from the man whose awareness is a matter of discovering himself to be in harmony with a universal world spirit, Preacher Casy's "one big soul," and to become concerned instead with characters who can find within themselves the power to free themselves from the conditioning of unthinking experience in order to choose deliberately actions which they know to be right. *East of Eden* itself consists primarily of an effort to explore a special kind of awareness, that of Lee, and a special kind of unawareness, that of Kate. The other characters arrange themselves along a spectrum of which these two form the extremes. Kate can only use people; she has no sense that emotions are "good" for anything besides exploitation, a lack that blinds her to the very existence of a full humanity. Lee, on the other hand, knows both in feeling and in thought what heights—and depths—man is capable of experiencing. Through exposure to and reaction against the two of them, various members of the Hamilton and Trask fam-

ilies receive an education in what it can mean to be human.

This humanity defines itself through a felt connection between responsibility and freedom, and through the exercise of both. The social outrage behind *The Grapes of Wrath* comes back again and again to impersonal "conditions"; there is no one responsible, no one a dispossessed farmer can shoot. But in *East of Eden* people make their own fate, if they choose to; and if they choose not to, the responsibility is their own. It is not that Steinbeck's people in the later books are more aware than are their predecessors; rather, they are aware in different ways. "You don't know what you're a-doin'," mourns Preacher Casy as he is struck down. "You can call sin ignorance," explains Lee. Both sorts of unawareness, the psychological as well as the social, result in failure to accept—in Cathy-Kate's case, even to perceive—any responsibility for the effect of one's actions on one's fellows. By presenting Kate as a genetically conditioned freak (a "monster," he calls her), John Steinbeck manages to suggest irresponsibility of an almost casebook quality, an infantile megalomania that seems plausible enough in the light of World War II but still difficult to reconcile with the worlds of Steinbeck's earlier work. "I think you will find that Cathy as Kate fascinates people though," wrote Steinbeck in his "log" for March 30, 1951. "People are always interested in evil even when they pretend their interest is clinical. And they will mull Kate over. They will forget I said she was bad. And they will hate her because while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us. It won't be because she is foreign that people will be interested but because she is not." Kate becomes totally isolated from the rest of the book's hu-



manity because she lacks all awareness that she can be connected to others either in Preacher Casy's sense of participation in common experience or in Lee's sense of freely chosen responsibility.

Any interested reader can develop further, for himself, this particular perspective on John Steinbeck's works. Certainly an awareness of the author's concern for awareness is part of the enjoyment in reading these stories. Even a grim confrontation with school segregation—see the “Cheerleaders” in “Southern Troubles,” from *Travels with Charley* (1962)—manages to raise implications for all humanity through an implicit concern for the qualities of experience as human beings perceive it, each in his own way. But another aspect of the satisfaction gained from reading Steinbeck lies in his frequently humorous tone. Curiously, most readers would not immediately think of Steinbeck if they were asked to mention American humorists. Mark Twain suffered from having his deeply felt insights received as humor only; it may well be that John Steinbeck has equally suffered—or possibly his readers have—from a widespread misapprehension that he is at all times serious to the point of solemnity. If “The Affair at 7, rue de M——” can satisfy only the science-fiction buff, or if its parody of Poe obscures its other excellences from any reader, then, I suppose, the frog-hunt from *Cannery Row* must be read as a sociologically significant depiction of middle-class fantasies in conflict with classless realities—which, to be sure, it is, but one pities the reader who can follow Mac and the boys without experiencing more than an observer's intellectual curiosity. Most delicious of all may well be the delicate irony of the Thanksgiving in Texas, from *Travels with Charley*: are those Texans really deca-