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Untitled Piece

John Steinbeck

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“UNTITLED PIECE” BY JOHN STEINBECK

EDITOR’S NOTE: The following typescript was donated to the Center for Steinbeck Studies by Elaine Steinbeck. I recently catalogued it with another typescript, also called “Untitled Piece,” which was published as “Atque Vale” in the *Saturday Review* in July, 1960 as well as in *America and Americans and Selected Non-fiction* (2002). I assume that both were written at the same time, perhaps in February, 1960, when lunch counter sit-ins were organized in scores of southern cities. Steinbeck’s return to the United States after several months in England may have been one spark that contributed to his obvious dissatisfaction with the state of America. As he wrote to Adlai Stevenson in November 1959: “Back from Camelot, and, reading the papers, not at all sure it was wise...there’s the violence, cruelty and hypocrisy symptomatic of a people which has too much, and the surly, ill-temper which only shows up in humans when they are frightened” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 651–52). In March 1960, when he was working on *The Winter of Our Discontent*, he wrote to James S. Pope, Editor-in-Chief of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*: “I don’t suppose you would be interested in some Old Curmudgeon pieces. I’m in the middle of a book...but there is always that early morning when cantankerousness is the better part of valor” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 663–64). Let’s assume that the Old Curmudgeon wrote “Untitled Piece” one cold winter morning, a satiric plea for equality that reflects, in spite of language that today causes some difficulty, Steinbeck’s genuine belief in racial justice. That stance is clear also in

his 1944 defense of his filmscript for Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*: "While it is certainly true that I wrote a script for *Lifeboat*, it is not true that in that script as in the film there were any slurs against organized labor nor was there a stock comedy Negro.... [I]nstead of the usual colored travesty of the half comic and half pathetic Negro there was a Negro of dignity, purpose and personality. Since this film occurs over my name, it is painful to me that these strange, sly obliquities should be ascribed to me" (Steinbeck and Wallsten 266).

"UNTITLED PIECE" JOHN STEINBECK

If the southern part of the United States were not making such devoted efforts to solve racial differences and misunderstandings, I, an open and confessed outsider, would not think of putting in my oar. But such efforts are being exerted by southern people, and changes for the better are taking place slowly but inevitably. This is generally admitted.

One thing does bother me, however. I am assured by some southern friends that the Negroes were perfectly happy and the problems all solved before the interference of northern crackpots, agitators and communists. And the fact that I am guilty of the first three charges makes me a little timid about offering the following suggestion and perhaps interfering with the native happiness and contentment of the southern Negro people.

No southerner will deny that there was a time when Negroes were kept down by force, fear and reprisal. I am told that the difference even got into mathematics, the Negro pound being less when he bought than when he sold.

When the law of the land was changed to grant that Negroes are and should be equal, it caused an emotional earthquake. But there are vastly intelligent and humanitarian people in the south who understood that very many of their fellow citizens had convictions which came pretty close to being prejudices. Such people were going to be hard to convince.

And so these thoughtful ones developed an expedient which might even be called a noble experiment. It is known as Equal but Separate and its practice is known as Segregation.

In effect this method prescribes that Negroes and whites living in the same communities should have equal rights, facilities, comforts and advantages but that they should not have them together.

I am assured by southern friends that in some communities the schools for Negroes are not only equal but superior to the white schools—that the back end of a bus is just as good as the front end.

This being so, you would have thought the Negroes would be delighted with the arrangement. I have known many Negroes quite well and never one who wanted to be where he was not wanted and welcome. You would think that if they had equally good schools, restaurants, public toilets, if the Jim Crow cars were equally comfortable, Negroes would be as happy and contented as they were when they had nothing. But they aren't.

Here we run into semantic difficulties just as confusing in race relations as in politics or religion. If a white man, individually or in a group, tries to better himself, he is ambitious, forward looking and half a dozen equally desirable adjectives. A Negro doing the same thing is uppity, pushing and if you don't watch his inch, he'll take a mile.

John Steinbeck, 1960s.

That's the difficulty in writing the suggestion I will get to pretty soon. Its meaning changes depending on who the reader is.

Now given the equal but separate experiment, you would have thought the problem solved. But no. In Alabama there have been boycotts of buses by Negroes. In Arkansas, near civil war; in several other southern states, legislators have preferred to have no education rather than education with Negroes. And now we have the lunch counter difficulty. And why? Because Negroes insist on going to white schools, riding in white railroad cars, eating at white lunch counters. And this in spite of assurance by my southern friends that Negro schools, cars and public toilets and lunch counters are equally good and in many cases better than those set aside for whites.

This seems to me very unfair of the Negroes and quite unlike any Negroes I have known. I think they should be shown their error. And for this reason I offer a suggestion to the white people of the south which might solve the whole thing.

Since Negro and white schools are equal—let the students switch schools in a body. Let the whites move to the backs of the buses, enter the comfortable Jim Crow cars, eat at the Negro lunch counters, use the Negro toilets in railway stations, turning over their own equal and sometimes inferior facilities to their opposite numbers. That would show the Negroes the error of their ways.

Of course in Little Rock as elsewhere, there might be a few white children more interested in education than in social status. These really should be permitted to stay where they are. Only the most prejudiced Negroes would take offense—northern crackpot, agitator Negroes, probably.

I offer this suggestion as a break in the deadlock. Once the Negroes found that the white schools were no better than their own in equipment, teaching facilities and opportunities for advancement, most of their complaints would be meaningless. They might even let a few white children come back without rioting.

I hope I have not given the impression that racial prejudice is the exclusive property of white people. My friend, Nunnally Johnson, a liberal Georgia confederate, has recently had his feelings deeply hurt. He applied for membership in the Pullman Porters' Union and was rejected on racial grounds.

And I hope this suggestion in no way indicates any lack of respect and admiration for the large and growing number of

intelligent and responsible and unrelenting southerners—white and Negro—who have done and are doing so much to prove that the problem is not unsolvable. The gradual but sure improvement is proof that they are not working fruitlessly.

But they have a racial road block which is best illustrated by the following story.

A few years ago I had a Negro man working for me. He cooked, gardened, drove my car and kept my books. In the Navy he had been a chief petty officer, which means that if he had been white he would have been at least a four striper.

One night in a bus station my employee came upon an elderly, prejudiced and angry Negro, as full of hatred as any deep-south-bomb-throwing white.

My man said, "You really hate those old down south people, don't you?"

"I sure do," said the other. "And they hate me."

"You wouldn't forgive them, would you?"

"I sure wouldn't and neither would they."

My man sighed deeply. "Both of you got to die before we can get anywhere," he said very quietly.

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WORKS CITED

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