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JOHN STEINBECK: THE POSTMODERN MIND IN THE MODERN AGE

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THE JOHN STEINBECK WHO BEGAN WITH THE SPIRITUAL, mystical, and symbolic *To a God Unknown* (1933) and ended with *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charlie* (1962), and *America and Americans* (1966) was a man and a writer come full circle. Slapped around by critics with a Modern mindset, young Steinbeck staggered, bruised and discouraged, away from his early inclinations. It would be a gradual healing, but regaining his sea legs, he would launch into efforts that would be much more realistic and more to the likings of the critics and readers of what we now recognize as the last decades of the Modern era.

But the Steinbeck who remained confined by that realism preferred by the Modern critics, and the pressures of his literary peers, began to emerge once more in his later life and works. This Steinbeck, however, would be disillusioned and more cynical. Still convinced in his soul that science, materialism, and a consumer attitude toward the environment carried in its flowering the seed

of destruction, he would plead for a new approach (a non-teleological one) to research and a more urgent view of community as a force that could be the planet's and society's salvation.

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Rather than reflecting the attitude of escape from "societal bonds," as Thomas Mann had

identified as an objective of a Modern mind, or the attitude of detachment and non-commitment that Maurice Beebe includes in his list of Modernism's traits in literature, Steinbeck's writing grieves the loss of community and pleads once more for the connectedness of us all and the earth that sustains us.

Had he lived two more decades, it is likely that Steinbeck would have experienced the coming together of some new kindred minds as the postmodern readers, thinkers, and critics came to the table. As it was, this postmodern mind in a Modern age experienced the despair of feeling that "we're all, or most of us, the wards of the nineteenth-century sciences which denied existence of anything it could not reason or explain...and [that] meanwhile a great part of the world was abandoned to children, insane people, fools and mystics, who were more interested in what is than in why it is" (Steinbeck, *Winter* 75).

A concise overview of the major assumptions of the Modern mindset may help focus on the criteria taken for granted as "right" ones by Modern thinkers, including many of Steinbeck's critics. A movement, the birth of which many historians place at the beginning of the Enlightenment and others as far back as the Renaissance, is not simple to summarize. But certainly what Jürgen Habermas refers to as the "project of Modernity, formulated in the eighteenth century" (62), had as its goal some identifiable intentions which placed knowledge and the human cognitive potential to access it at the center of the Modern world view. Stanley Grenz summarizes the Enlightenment project very succinctly in his insightful *A Primer on Postmodernism*, and from his summary several earmarks of the Modern mind might give a basis for this discussion.

First is the assumption that "knowledge is certain, objective and good," followed by the belief that knowledge is "accessible to the human mind." Third, Grenz observes that "the demand for knowledge, then, sends the modern inquirer in search of a method of demonstrating the essential correctness of philosophic, scientific, religious, moral, and political doctrines," and "places many aspects of reality under the scrutiny of reason and assesses it on the basis of that criteria." The Enlightenment project also assumed that knowledge is not only certain and hence rational, but also objective and dispassionate, claiming to be able to "view the world as unconditioned observers" (4).

Because knowledge is assumed to be good, rational, objective, and dispassionate, science is viewed as the savior that will rescue humanity from the ills of society as well as its vulnerability to nature. The future is, therefore, viewed as optimistic. The Modern mind considered as suspect views that would “curtail autonomy” and individual freedom and those that seem to be “based on some external authority other than reason and scientific [factual] experience.” As Grenz summarizes, “The modern ideal champions the autonomous self, the self-determining subject who exists outside any tradition or community” (4).

This mindset, of course, encompassed not only science itself but all of culture, with a tendency to make a “science” of art, literature, architecture, politics, and the behavioral sciences. There tended to emerge formulas for what was “good” in every aspect of life and that “good” had to be measured by objective, realistic, and dispassionate criteria. There was the widespread assumption that structures give meaning —language itself being such a structure—and that literature at its best provides “categories that help us to organize and understand our experience of reality” (Grenz 6).

But as science failed to cure all the ills of society and to free us of our vulnerability to nature and as societies the world over did not get better and better, empirical thought and individual autonomy began to slip as the formula for fulfillment. And by the 1970’s, certainly—though the seeds of deconstruction were sprouting long before what was to be labeled “postmodern” would begin to disassemble the formula approach—a new view would begin to emerge.

In real life experience Modern individualism, autonomy and personal freedom had too often produced isolation, loneliness, estrangement, and the disintegration of community. The science that was to free humanity from vulnerability to nature and solve medical, societal, and governmental problems was beginning to be questioned as a savior, as pollution, toxin-generated illness, and stress-induced diseases began to emerge as threats. At present the disillusionment with the Modern promise has blossomed into a recognizable era with some identifiable (though not easily definable) sensibilities commonly known as postmodern. As Lance Olsen warns in his article, “Cyberpunk and the Crisis of Postmodernity,” postmodern “is a mode of consciousness (and *not*, it should be emphasized, a historical period) that is highly suspicious of the belief in shared speech, shared values, and shared

perceptions that some would like to believe form our culture but which in fact may be no more than empty, if necessary, fictions" (143).

Modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom had by year 2000 precipitated deep-rooted skepticism, and the formulas for everything and the structures to house them began to be deconstructed and disassembled. Fluidity, unfixed boundaries, and the absence of definable distinctions began to emerge as earmarks of the postmodern mindset. In the face of this new consciousness, it may be a temptation of the Modern mind to simply adjust a few methodologies in an effort to go on functioning in the postmodern world. But as Bill Readings so insightfully cautions:

Make no mistake. Post-modern thought is not just a tweaking of the modern approach. It is not just Modern becoming innovative. . . . innovation seeks to make a new move with the rules of the language game 'art,' so as to revivify the truth of art. Paralogism seeks the move that will *displace* the rules of the game, the 'impossible' or unforeseeable move. *Innovation refines* the efficiency of the system; whereas the paralogical move changes the rules in the pragmatics of knowledge. (73)

Nearing a decade into the new millennium, there are a few sensibilities emerging that hint at some directions in postmodern thinking. First, there is a suspicion of anyone who has all the answers, wants to make life into a formula, or attempts to press all things into systems and dogmas. Rather, there is an openness to divergent ideas, philosophies, and approaches, and a willingness to live with paradox and proceed with contradictions unresolved.

There is a waning of emphasis on individualism (and, thus, also on isolation, independence, and personal self-reliance) and an increasing awareness of the need for community. Relationships take precedence over systems and formulas, and a realization seems to be emerging that we do not exist as autonomous individuals, but that all things are connected, not only divergent human cultures and conditions but nature and the cosmos as well. There is an emphasis on interaction and interdependence even if not in traditional roles.

There is also an appreciation of diversity, a willingness to live with a wide variety of global ethnicities, to appreciate other histories and to listen to other viewpoints. Unlike the Modern assumptions, there is a willingness to consider valid those experiences that do not come from dispassionate empirical sources, as, for example, art and music as subjective experience, ethnicity and diversity in design, and mixtures of styles, periods, functions, and materials in architecture.

The postmodern culture is no longer certain that the human mind is capable of apprehending all truth or all knowledge or that, even if it could, knowledge can solve all problems. Rather, there is a willingness to embrace the mystery, live with paradox, and accept that we are only a part of the great soul of the universe and beyond. There is a willingness to accept that not all truth can be known by *any* means and that some “knowing” may well come from non— or supra—rational sources.

In the arts as in life, there is in the postmodern world a willingness to blend forms, deconstruct formulas, and mix styles to realize a new thing. In fact, there is a resistance to the whole concept of boundaries and an emphasis on exploration without assumptions or categorizing. The postmodern debate is impossible to define because definition is itself a rejected structure. But Henry Giroux gives a clue as to the themes of this debate:

Master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of the canonical and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a “war on totality” and a disavowal of all encompassing, single, world-views; rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk-art forms are proper objects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science and freedom have incurred deep-rooted skepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralized and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history

is spurned as a unilinear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realization of freedom. (1)

In religion and history, as well, there is a distrust of recent traditions and cultural definitions, but a strong interest in things ancient—rituals, symbols, and practices that pre-date the Modern era and, indeed, pre-date any culture's inventions. In his epilogue to *The Truth About Truth*, Walter Anderson writes:

We are beginning to see all manner of things—values and beliefs, rituals, ideas about childhood and death, traditions, interpretations of history, rituals, ethnicity, even the idea of culture—as invention. . . . It is central to an emerging understanding of the human condition, and also a central part of a new global culture which is, in a sense, a culture about cultures. (241)

There is a reaching for a discovery of some new thing about our own reality, rooted in what Václav Havel calls self-transcendence, a

transcendence as a hand reached out to those close to us, to foreigners, to the human community, to all living creatures, to nature, to the universe; transcendence as a deeply and joyously experienced need to be in harmony even with what we ourselves are not, what we do not understand, what seems distant from us in time and space, but with which we are nevertheless mysteriously linked because, together with us, all this constitutes a single world. Transcendence as the only real alternative to extinction. (238)

Students of John Steinbeck's works will readily recognize in these emerging post-modern sensibilities many corresponding Steinbeck themes, philosophical leanings, and approaches to both writing styles and human and natural research. These themes and approaches are most clearly reflected in the very early *To a God Unknown* and in the later *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* and *America and Americans*, though they are underlying convictions in all of his works, both fiction and non-fiction.

The firm belief in the connectedness of all things—both human and natural—and the view that community is necessary to survival, recurs throughout Steinbeck's work. Viewing human connectedness not as organization but as organism, and

organisms as a part of a larger “tide pool” of all life and nature, Steinbeck resisted the efforts of both liberal political activists and conservative structuralists to force him into their political molds and to use his work as propaganda for their objectives. His conviction that what we as individuals do to the Lennies of our world directly affects us all drew the ire of Modern reviewer Stanley Edgar Hyman, who, wanting Steinbeck to use his pen as a social reformer, claimed to have lost interest in his work after *Of Mice and Men* and went on to call *Cannery Row* “merely an insipid watering-down of Steinbeck’s engaging earlier book *Tortilla Flat*” (Benson 188).

But Steinbeck saw the connectedness as something larger than political parties or even cultures. Indeed, he saw the systems themselves as drawbacks to greater discovery, be they the pre-supposed systems of identifying sea life in the Sea of Cortez, religious dogma that could take precedence over relationship in a family, or stylistic categories and writing formulas that prescribed what the pen was permitted to do to wield the power he knew it had.

Before he had ever tasted success as an author, Steinbeck wrote to a Stanford classmate, A. Grove Day (who also aspired to be a writer and who evidently exalted the producers of a clean, well-punctuated, and perfectly spelled manuscript as exhibiting the “manners” of the “printed word”): “I have no interest in the printed word. . . . I put my words down for a matter of memory. They are more to be spoken than to be read. I have the instincts of a minstrel rather than those of a scrivener. . . . when the sounds are all in place, I can send them to a stenographer who knows his trade....” (*Letters* 19). Much later Steinbeck would call the purveyors of form over substance “catalogers” and hold out for an approach he called non-teleological thinking. He urged an acceptance of what *is*—“Is-thinking”—without presuppositions or prescribed expectations so that human beings could “break through”

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to a new thing. In *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck wrote, "Let's see what we see, record what we find, and not fool ourselves with conventional scientific structures . . . not be betrayed by this myth of permanent objective" (1).

In his three stages to "Breaking Through," Steinbeck well could have been writing in one of the recent collections of postmodern thinkers. First, he advocated an awareness of the connectedness of living and non-living things, an "all-embracingness." This, he believed, necessarily entailed an appreciation of the whole organism and of each cell's function in that larger whole. Second came the realization that even the whole organism is not the whole story. There are conditions that don't fit; the prescribed cataloging, systems, theories, and pre-held hypotheses become paralyzing. There is needed a new way of thinking that reserves judgment and makes room for contradictions. One must accept only what *is* without cataloging. Third would come what he called an overwhelming experience of "Breaking through the crust," a realization of a grand and paradoxical "big picture"—a new thing. Here Steinbeck speaks of a "deep and participating understanding, the 'all-truth'...."

COVER ART FOR *To a God Unknown*,
CREATED BY STEINBECK'S FRIEND, MAHLON BLAINE.

(*Log* 162), a sort of Emersonian larger life, a mystery one could only embrace, not reduce and categorize. This approach, though not discussed directly as a philosophy until the *Log*, is bubbling to the surface from Steinbeck's earliest writing.

In *To a God Unknown* the intimate connectedness of Joseph Wayne and the land, the "knowing" that somehow John Wayne's life force was one with the life of the great tree, the "birthing" in nature, the family, the paisanos, and the spirit—were all a part of some larger truth and grander life. The blending in the story of ethnicities and histories, of what Burton considered acceptable in his narrow reading of Christianity with the ancient customs and rituals, of things deeply spiritual with things natural and earthy, of the symbolic with the realistic was all consistent with what would later emerge as Steinbeck's unique philosophy of literature and of life. "We have found something here, all of us," Joseph thinks to himself as he watches the dancers at the fiesta and feels the throbbing rhythm of the paisano dance coming from the earth into his body. "In some way we've come closer to the earth for a moment. . . . Something will come of this. It's a kind of powerful prayer" (*To a God Unknown* 91).

With a Modern critic's mindset, John Ditsky would later ignore this "larger thing" as powerful as prayer and try to fit this story into a literary classification as a "dynasty theme" genre. "*To a God Unknown*," he would write,

is a double example of Steinbeck's failure to learn a lesson, as he abandons a successful approach to dynastic themes [as in *The Pastures of Heaven*] in favor of an uncontrolled handling of an unfamiliar one. In its disproportion between image and symbol and plot and character as formal entities, this novel's failure evidences Steinbeck's real sort of sentimentality: excessive reliance upon Nature as force and presence to the exclusion of other agencies of realistic character motivation. ("Faulkner Land" 16)

What Ditsky failed to recognize was that the mold into which he was trying to force *To a God Unknown* had been broken, and not only Joseph Wayne but Steinbeck himself had, indeed, found something there. Something *would* come of it. In a journal he later gave to Carlton A. Sheffield, Steinbeck had written of this novel:

The story is a parable, Duke. The story is of a race, growth, and death. Each figure is a population, and the stones, the trees, the muscled mountains are the world—but not world apart from man—the world and man—the one inseparable unit, man plus his environment. Why they should ever have been misunderstood as being separate I do not know. (Sheffield 195)

Judged by the Modern critic, however, this assessment did not elicit a positive response. As late as 1995 in his introduction to a new edition of *To a God Unknown*, Robert DeMott writes that “his propensity for writing parables has ensured Steinbeck’s

popular success, but has hurt his reputation in the highest reaches of the critical academy; parables and fables, the argument goes, are not serious art” (xiii).

But the blurring of delineations and the blending of expectations would be an earmark of Steinbeck writing in every way. His very postmodern mixing of the ancient with the contemporary, the blending of realism and the metaphorical, the marrying of science and intuition, the combining of styles and forms—all make him an innovator hard to judge by Modern criteria. As DeMott also observes in his introduction to Steinbeck’s *Working Days: The Journal of The Grapes of Wrath*, “Steinbeck pushed back the accepted

boundaries of traditional realistic fiction and redefined the proletarian form” (xxiv).

Steinbeck refused to conform to the modern expectation that writers survey the world from an objective vantage point and not intrude into the work emotionally. His knowledge of his subject matter was not dispassionate. In fact, he seems often to identify with his characters so much that he experienced in his own life

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what he was writing. While writing the scenes in *The Grapes of Wrath* that dealt with the funeral of Grampa, he wrote in his journal:

And I am terrified that through illness or something the work may stop. When the first draft is done, it will be all right because someone could read it even if I passed out of the picture. . . . But once this book is done I won't care how soon I die, because my major work will be over. Today comes the funeral in the night of Grampa. . . . It must be good and full of fullness and completion. And that feeling must go into it.
(*Working Days* 41)

When Steinbeck was working on revisions of *To a God Unknown*, there was a pine tree in his yard in Pacific Grove that he had planted when he was very young. He and the tree had grown up together, and he grew to think of it first as a brother then later as what he called a "kind of repository of my destiny." The limbs grew large enough to endanger the house and needed to be cut. But Steinbeck wrote, "I have a very powerful reluctance to do it, such a reluctance as I would have toward cutting live flesh. Furthermore, if the tree should die, I am pretty sure I should be ill" (*Letters* 31). This very subjective and intuitive reaction would parallel the scenes in *To a God Unknown* that vitally connected Burton's slashing of the tree roots with the death of the land. By modern definitions, such symbolic ties between literature and life continue to be severely criticized as sentimental and melodramatic.

Later, after the intense stress of writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, with his personal life in disarray because of his disintegrating marriage to Carol, and the world systems in chaos as well, Steinbeck turned to the tide pool, as Robert DeMott observes, "not as a replacement for the world of men, but rather as a place to heal his vision, to begin again at the bedrock of observation" (*Working Days* 105). Steinbeck wrote in a letter to Sheffield that he found the tide pools "easier to understand than Stalinist, Hitlerite, Democrat, capitalist confusion, and voodoo. So I'm going to those things which are relatively more lasting to find a new basic picture. I have a conviction that a new world is growing under the old" (*Letters* 193). Indeed it was.

Steinbeck bucked the boundaries of definitions of all kinds. "Groups," he wrote in 1933 to Carlton A. Sheffield, "have always been considered as individuals multiplied. They are not so. They are beings in themselves, entities" (*Letters* 76). From that early questioning of definition, what would emerge would be a lifelong turning from the Modern passion for individualism and autonomy to an awareness of the necessity for community. His theory of "group man" would be the fiercer side of his belief in the cosmos in the tide pool that would become the driving theme of *In Dubious Battle*, *Cannery Row*, and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. As Kiyoshi Nakayama so insightfully points out in his article, "Steinbeck and Japan," *Group Man*—like Emerson's *all-soul* concept—is Steinbeck's "fundamental world-view of mankind and the universe. It underscores the fact that men and women want to live together and decently with the people around them," Dr. Nakayama writes. "A human cannot live alone; he/she needs friends, love and a feeling of togetherness" (129).

SADLY, CRITICS OF STEINBECK WHO WERE WISE ENOUGH TO SEE VALUE IN WRITING THAT DID NOT FIT THE MODERN FORMULAS SEEMED TO APOLOGIZE FOR LIKING WHAT THEY READ.

Steinbeck's restless search for a form to fit a new emerging consciousness recurs again and again in his works, journals, and letters about them. He toyed with stories as song, with what he called the play-novel, with science as poetry, and with travelogue as fiction. He blurred the lines between forms and at times performed as both author and character, character and critic, critic and performer. Though the critics were very uncomfortable with his inconsistency in form as strictly defined by Modern criteria, Steinbeck seemed uncomfortable with conforming to the established

forms and their boundaries, often calling the novel form itself "clumsy."

Even Steinbeck's affection for Arthurian themes seems to indicate that from the beginning he believed ultimate objective truth to be not an attainable conquest subject to the weapons of the human mind, but the pursuit of an "illusive ideal," as Ditsky once called it. The knights who shared that pursuit—be they the society of *Cannery Row*, the community of displaced Okies headed

for the promised land of the West, or a dysfunctional family led by Joseph Wayne who mated with the land to save her—were not scientists conquering with rational knowledge a subduable formula, but seekers around a table sharing their experiences to gain enlightenment about a truth larger and grander than human minds could ever know.¹

It is regrettable that Steinbeck is not here to observe the questioning of Modern critics' assumption that only unsentimental, objective, realistic, and statistically formulated consistencies are the highest good—in writing as in other kinds of expression. As Suzi Gablik observes in *Has Modernism Failed?*, while Modernism was “ideological at heart—full of strenuous dictates of what art could and could not be”—postmodernism is “much more eclectic, able to assimilate and even plunder, all forms of style and genre and circumstance, and tolerant of multiplicity and conflicting values” (73).

Sadly, critics of Steinbeck who were wise enough to see value in writing that did not fit the Modern formulas seemed to apologize for liking what they read. Roy S. Simmonds in his 1980 critical essay about *America and Americans*, after a discussion of the book's flaws, admits that “because the man's sincerity shines through so clearly, we appreciate just how painful it must have been for him to tell unpalatable truths, those self-evident truths, he has here set down on paper for us all, Americans and non-Americans alike” (25).

Steinbeck himself seems to have been certain that a whole new mindset had dawned, or, at least, the door was closing on the old. In *America and Americans* he writes:

We have not lost our way at all. The roads of the past have come to an end and we have not yet discovered a path to the future. I think we will find one, but its directions may be unthinkable to us now. When it does appear, however, and we move on, the path must have direction, it must have purpose and the journey must be filled with a joy of anticipation, for the boy today, hating the world, creates a hateful world or tries to destroy it and sometimes himself. We have succeeded in what our fathers prayed for and it is our success that is destroying us. (42)

He is more than hinting at least at two postmodern realizations to come: one, that the so called “success” as a result of our material,

scientific, societal progress has not brought success in affairs of the heart, and two, that the paradox and ambiguity Steinbeck was perceiving and which was leaving him feeling unsettled and somewhat pessimistic, was a paradox postmodern minds would learn to live with and even accept as a part of the unsolvable mystery of life simply to be embraced, not dissected. "I am not young," he wrote, "and yet I wonder about tomorrow. How much more, then, must my wonder be about my people, a young people. Perhaps my questioning is compounded of some fear, more hope, and great confidence" (142).

Fear and confidence, questioning and hope are part of the paradox of life, of what *is*. "There are mysterious things which [can] not be explained if man is the final unit," Steinbeck wrote more than seventy years ago to Carlton A. Sheffield. Perhaps there is both hope and fear in living with the awareness that "species, including our own, are only commas in a sentence." Indeed, we *are* only a part of the bigger story we find ourselves in.

NOTE

¹ There are three enlightening discussions of Steinbeck's forms and themes in relation to postmodern sensitivities: Chris Kocela's "A Postmodern Steinbeck, Or Rose of Sharon Meets Oedipa Maas"; Steven Mulder's "The Reader's Story: *East of Eden* as Postmodernist Metafiction,"; and Louis Owens' "Mirror and Vamp: Invention, Reflection, and Bad, Bad, Cathy Trask in *East of Eden*." See "Works Cited" for full bibliographical information.

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