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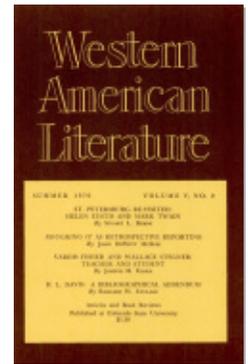
In Defense of “Westering”

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In Defense of "Westering"

In his recent article on Steinbeck's "The Leader of the People" Donald E. Houghton offers some provocative insights about Jody and generations but is misleading in his interpretation of Grandfather's "westering." Professor Houghton finds Grandfather's explanation of the meaning of "westering" to be "an unfortunate, confusing, and unnecessary digression which tears at the emotional and thematic unity of this story." He finds the passage ambiguous and suggests that if it were cut out, the story would be tightened and "difficulties and confusions disappear."¹

Professor Houghton finds most of these "difficulties and confusions" in the association of "westering" with Steinbeck's recurrent treatment of "group man." Grandfather does speak of the western movement as a "crawling beast," an image used earlier in *In Dubious Battle* when the strikers smash through a barricade of police and vigilantes. In that context, Doc Burton's reservations about group man, its savage, destructive power, are persuasive; but the context is quite different in "The Leader of the People." Looking ahead to *The Moon Is Down*, Professor Houghton connects the "crawling beast" of wagon trains with the "herd men" who follow the Fuehrer, the ultimate leader of the people.

Here is a serious confusion of contexts. While Hitler was in command of the Third Reich when "The Leader of the People" was published in 1938, World War II had not yet broken out; and it is hardly legitimate to find Steinbeck projecting forward from Grandfather's talk of groups and leadership to the Nazi occupation of Norway that had not yet occurred. But if one is to find analogies with *The Moon Is Down*, he should observe that the novel contains two groups and two kinds of leadership. In opposition to the "herd men" who conquer the country, the townspeople also act as a group, unregimented but spontaneously cooperating in resistance to terrorize and sabotage the invaders. Except for

¹Donald E. Houghton, "'Westering' in 'Leader of the People,'" *Western American Literature*, IV (Summer, 1969), 124.

the Quisling, Corell, the free citizens act as one man. Corell's response is to advise the Nazis, "When we have killed the leaders, the rebellion will be broken."² The issue of leadership thus focuses not on the Fuehrer but on Mayor Orden, who insists that his people "don't like to have others think for them," that "authority is in the town" and not in any individual, and that he simply carries out the collective will of the community.³ His position echoes Grandfather's when the latter says, "I was the leader, but if I hadn't been there, someone else would have been the head."⁴

The genuine leader for Steinbeck is not one who seeks or seizes power but one who represents the community. In *Sea of Cortez*, Steinbeck noted: "Non-teleological notion: that the people we call leaders are simply those who, at the given moment, are moving in the direction behind which will be found the greatest weight, and which represents a future mass movement."⁵ This is the sort of leadership Grandfather had and the sort Emiliano Zapata acquires in Steinbeck's screenplay *Viva Zapata!*, in which Zapata tells the campesinos shortly before his death, "About leaders. You've looked for leaders. For strong men without faults. There aren't any. There are only men like yourselves. . . . There's no leader but yourselves."⁶ Though the Nazis do order Mayor Orden's death in *The Moon Is Down*, Dr. Winter observes, "They think that just because they have only one leader and one head, we are all like that . . . but we are a free people; we have as many heads as we have people, and in a time of need leaders pop up among us like mushrooms."⁷ In *The Moon Is Down*, it is the benevolent, grandfatherly Mayor rather than the absent Fuehrer or the Nazi commander Colonel Lanser that Grandfather resembles. He is certainly not a power-mad individual; and he seems, in fact, to have few qualities of leadership left except a residual dignity.

In *In Dubious Battle*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Viva Zapata!*, Steinbeck condemns the manipulation of organized groups. Genuine organization must come from within and express the soul, not be imposed from without by coercion. The difference seems to be

²John Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down* (The Viking Press, New York, 1942), p. 171.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 36, 41.

⁴John Steinbeck, *The Long Valley* (Viking Press Compass Books, New York, 1956), p. 302.

⁵John Steinbeck, *Sea of Cortez*, in collaboration with Edward F. Ricketts (The Viking Press, New York, 1941), p. 138.

⁶John Steinbeck, *Viva Zapata!*, unpublished screenplay, shooting script final, May 16, 1951, 20th Century-Fox, p. 109.

⁷Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down*, p. 175.

between the people as a sort of family of man and group man regimented for contrived political purposes under an artificial orthodoxy. Peter Lisca finds the Norwegians of *The Moon Is Down* to be efficient "'leaderless' people whose leaders are, like Grandfather, but expressions of the body politic."⁸

It is not so much the loss of leadership that Grandfather laments to Jody but the disappearance of "westering," which "was as big as God," but which "has died out of the people."⁹ If he finds the group experience to be a crucial part of this "westering," it is rather that of the Norwegian resistance than of the Nazi invaders. Mac observes in *In Dubious Battle* that, "Men always like to work together. There's a hunger in men to work together. Do you know that ten men can lift nearly twelve times as big a load as one can? It only takes a little spark to get them going."¹⁰

If the spark is "westering," what does it signify? If Steinbeck does not spell out the answer, it may be because it has for so long been a basic human drive and experience. It is as old as Ulysses, the restless wanderer who (in Tennyson's words) has "become a name:/ For always roaming with a hungry heart," who even in grandfatherly old age "cannot rest from travel . . . to rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!" and who finds it "not too late to seek a newer world. . . ./ To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/ Of all the western stars. . . ." In the American experience, "westering" is the spirit of Daniel Boone and Natty Bumppo, of Thoreau's desire to find some "forever new and unprofaned part of the universe," of Huck Finn's to escape the restraints of "sivilization." When Grandfather laments that "Westering has died out of the people. Westering isn't a hunger any more," there need be no mystery. Grandfather is not thinking of anything like Hitler but of the passing of the frontier and its freedom. It is appropriate to connect his complaint with Willa Cather's requiem in *A Lost Lady*:

The Old West had been settled by dreamers, great-hearted adventurers who were impractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood strong in attack but weak in defense, who could conquer but could not hold. Now all that vast territory they had won was to be at the mercy of men like Ivy Peters, who had never dared anything, never risked anything. They would drink

⁸Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, N. J.), p. 119.

⁹Steinbeck, *The Long Valley*, pp. 302-3.

¹⁰John Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* (Random House Modern Library, N. Y. n.d.), p. 61.

up the mirage, dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous, easy life of the great landholders. The space, the color, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest.¹¹

Thus Bumpo has been succeeded by Babbitt. Grandfather belongs to Miss Cather's courteous brotherhood, whereas Jody's father Carl Tiffin is often a sour and domineering man.

"Westering" may be dead in subdivisions, but as Robinson Jeffers wrote, "corruption/ Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's feet there are left/the mountains." Even they are not immune to pollution and exploitation. Glendon Swarthout writes:

. . . we moved west to worship new gods, but we have fashioned them in the images of the old. We litter, we telephone-pole, we billboard, we bulldoze, we doom the very things which urged us here, beauty and space and nature's truth. We cry the phoenix, rising from its own ashes, but emulate the bird which fouls its own nest. We justify our crime by saying that if we do not commit it, those who follow us will. And when we are done, we will flee elsewhere, to another frontier. But there is no elsewhere any more. We know it, we break our hearts, but we cannot stop, for we have chosen to make a living in the New West rather than a life.¹²

Professor Houghton is right when he says that Jody learns "that when one generation cometh, another passeth away,"¹³ but "westering" is for Grandfather the crucial experience of his generation; and his trying to explain it to Jody is not a digression that should be cut but the basis of the generation gap. The end of the frontier has been a continual frustration to the Odyssean element in us, and the relevance of Grandfather's statement can be seen in a series of movies of the 1960's dramatizing the plight of those who become displaced when the frontier closes behind them—*The Misfits*, *Lonely Are the Brave*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. It would seem that Grandfather's message has not been entirely misunderstood after all.

¹¹Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1923), p. 106.

¹²Glendon Swarthout, *The Cadillac Cowboys* (Random House, New York, 1963), p. 161.

¹³Houghton, *loc. cit.*, p. 124.