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## John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: representing a people that is missing

Among other problems, John Steinbeck's 1939 masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* raises the question of the way the novel should be read. Perhaps a better manner of putting it could be: who are its readers? The answer we will give to this question has important implications. One thing at least is perfectly clear. The book describes the trials undergone by migrants who fled the South Western plains at the time of the Dust Bowl. A lot of them went to California and were there given the pejorative label of 'Okies' owing to the fact that a number of them originated from Oklahoma, as indeed did the fictitious Joad family to which about half of the book is devoted. Did John Steinbeck write for these 'Okies'? Maybe we could summarize our point by saying that everything depends on the way we construe the preposition 'for'. The novelist never imagined that his readership would be found among families of agricultural workers in California, or elsewhere for that matter. Migrants were barely able to read and write. Indeed the only book they usually had in their homes was a Bible. One anonymous family in the novel is an exception as they also (symbolically) possess a copy of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. John Steinbeck wrote 'about' these migrants for a different sort of readers who had to be made aware of the intolerable situation that had arisen in California. It may however be also argued that in another way the writer wrote 'for' the 'Okies'. In other words, he lent them his pen as they could not write themselves, let alone be published. To some extent, he became their voice.

Such indeed could be one of the main functions of literature: to speak 'for' a people. (It will remain to define more precisely what is meant by the word 'people'.)

There is no doubt that Steinbeck could only conceive his novel for educated people who had both time and money to read it. He wrote to convince readers who hopefully would then — after having read the book — perform certain actions. We reach here however the limits of our study, that is the pragmatic dimension of fiction. Only a extremely minute fraction of Steinbeck's actual readers probably translated into reality some of the insights they discovered in the book. It is of course obvious that very few of them were in a position to wield some sort of political power. In addition, real readers are human beings and all human beings are as it were by definition different from each other. To simplify, let us say that we are all strange mixtures of singularities both good and evil, of liberalism and conservatism, etc. Consciously or unconsciously, some readers accepted fully or partially the very abstract moral and political implications of what happens in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Others did not. We will never know and the investigation that follows accordingly mainly concerns Steinbeck's book.

What is the meaning of the novel? Actually, the question has to be rephrased if we wish to determine what that meaning consists in. Where is the meaning of the book? It is unquestionably in the novel, as without the book, the question of its meaning would be irrelevant. The meaning whatever it is will have to be produced from the thousands of small details that make up *The Grapes of Wrath*, from their arrangements and the links we can establish between them, as well as from the implications we can derive from them. There is therefore a second answer to the question of where the meaning of the book is situated. It is in the minds of the readers who produce it, starting from the

actual words of the book, selecting or neglecting details, undergoing the influence of their moral and political choices and prejudices. Readers of course have to reconstruct the plot of the novel. They also have to devise values, produce systems of oppositions, discover implications. More generally, readers have to generalize, something that is all the more true in the case of Steinbeck's novel as 16 out of its 30 chapters do not concern the Joad family. These so-called 'intercalary' chapters oblige us to consider that the book is not about a single family, but that we are dealing with a more general social and political problem. Can we go a little further? Our minds never stop producing abstractions: at a more general level, the problems addressed in the book concern America as a whole, that is to say that there have always been other groups of underdogs such as the Indians (alluded to in the novel and victimized among others by... the Joads), African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, etc. The novel provides us with intellectual grids and systems of values that are conceivably relevant in a great many contexts Steinbeck probably never suspected. *The Grapes of Wrath* still has readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they live in America, but also in Europe, Asia, Africa, etc. Transferring Steinbeck's ideas to the contexts with which these new readers are familiar certainly makes sense to them. That is the central question this paper will be concerned with: what does John Steinbeck tell us about ethics as well as about politics, as — as we will see see — our ethical principles cannot be separated from underlying political choices?

If we are to believe a famous pronouncement, the author was perfectly aware that reading is undeniably a very complex process and he seems to allude to the ancient art of hermeneutics which goes back at the very least to the Middle Ages. He said that "five layers" can be found in the

novel. He also added that the reader “won’t find more than he has in himself,” which seems to suggest that ultimately what really matters is the way each reader individually relates to what he or she discovers when he or she reads the book. If one prefers, the true meaning of *The Grapes of Wrath* is to be found in the conjunction of the details of the book and of my true self. Steinbeck doesn’t enlarge on what those five levels exactly represent. Maybe we should return to the old medieval hermeneutic techniques which classically distinguished (only...) four levels. Read in this way, the novel can be considered in ascending order: (i) *literally*, as a book about a particular family, the Joads, and the way they react to their victimization in Oklahoma, on route 66, and finally in California; (ii) *allegorically* (a word that probably could be replaced by ‘intertextually’ in modern English), as a book that repeats Biblical patterns, such as for instance the Exodus out of Egypt, — which give it a more universal meaning; (iii) *morally* (and we’d like to add politically as, unlike our pre-Renaissance ancestors, we no longer live in a world in which history doesn’t seem to exist) as a book about America as a whole, its fundamental values, what’s wrong with them, what new attitudes could be promoted, and, more generally, its past and its possible future; (iv) *anagogically*: this non religious book admittedly is not about the ultimate Christian problem of the salvation of our soul, but we may probably adapt the category and consider that it is about problems of identity and that it raises the age-old question of what it means to be a human being. This fourth ‘layer’ is consequently more general than the others as it certainly concerns not only American people but also all kinds of readers across the globe. If finally one insists on a ‘fifth’ level, as Steinbeck apparently suggests, we will propose that the book is also about me, that is to say about what is most specific about the thousands of ways I am different

from the others, and also about what my possible relationship to the others could and should be. That is the way I have decided to interpret the quotation by Steinbeck who indeed leaves a large possibility of choice. It is thus our belief that the novel is mainly about ethics.

In Chapter 13, the writer seems to address the problem again when he has Jim Casy say, "It means more than the words says." Casy is referring to a line from an anonymous poem — presumably by William Blake — he has just quoted. The problem is important. In that particular chapter, the Joad family buries Grampa by the side of the road. They try to find a quotation from the Bible and they hesitate between three verses before deciding upon one that "might's well mean somepin." Their problem here is to find something true to say about Grampa. In both cases, the meaning is not to be found in the poem or in the Biblical passage. In other words, the problem is not to read a quotation correctly (supposing that that were possible), but to read ourselves. We have to look upon it as a problem of implications: what can these words tell us about Grampa and ourselves? We know that the funeral is not a religious funeral. Indeed there is nothing Christian about it as Casy is no longer a regular preacher. Words, language, cultural and religious references are only important in so far as they offer us an insight about our situation and the possibilities that our future holds for us.

That is the way I propose to read *The Grapes of Wrath*. Possibly the book could be classified in the old tradition of the Jeremiad, so well illustrated in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century by the Puritans. Something has happened to America, an intolerable situation has developed, traditional morality has been betrayed, and therefore we must reestablish the dignity of our people. Obviously, Steinbeck is not advocating going back to the values defended by the Puritans — or even to the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, or

even Karl Marx —, but he is clearly telling his fellow-citizens that America has reached a dead end and that the country has to change its priorities. Put it differently, the novel can be read as a mixture of present and future. The present is what is described. It is what is unbearable. On the other hand, the future is not described. What will Tom Joad and his sister Rose of Sharon do after the novel ends? We will never know. All we know is that, according to the author, it will have to be different from the present. More specifically, it is not described because it is not yet written. Tom and Rose of Sharon are still part of the present, even if they have begun to invent a different sort of future. By definition, the real future concerns the novel's readers. We have to recognize that we are moral and political agents in our communities, in the United States or abroad, in 1939, but also today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Such seems to be John Steinbeck's conception of art. Art and literature can be characterized as what resists. They resist evil, slavery, humiliation, etc. They also resist repetition, the repetition of status quos in particular. At the same time as they help invent values for the future, they also invent their own form. *The Grapes of Wrath* is not just a realistic novel about the plight of a family. It is an extremely original work of art that unites the story of a family and the fate of a whole community. In other words, it is not just about individuals. It is a social and political pronouncement. In his book, Steinbeck repeatedly uses the word 'people.' (One surely remembers Ma who declares "We are the people" at the end of the novel.) *The Grapes of Wrath* is about the invention of a new people. And, in the same way as the book represents the creation of a new form, it also heralds for Steinbeck the rejection of old, outdated frames of reference such as puritanism, capitalism, jeffersonism, communism, etc. The book is thus an invitation for us to write a different and better future. One consequence of this

is that we have to accept that John Steinbeck was a thinker, almost a philosopher, something a great many of his critics since 1939 have seemed not to be aware of. I also propose to take Steinbeck's ideas very seriously.

The family was first

John Steinbeck's way of thinking is first and foremost perceptible at the level of the plot, more precisely when we observe in what particular manner the characters' attitudes to the family evolve. People change, they learn, at least some of them... Roughly speaking, we can distinguish three successive stages and readers are invited to evolve in their minds with the characters. Of course, it is only an invitation, not an obligation. The novel reveals possibilities we are free to follow depending on our conscious and unconscious choices. Besides, only a few of the novel's characters go the whole way to the end of the third stage.

Stage one could be called selfishness. Literally, characters are only interested in their own selves, as if the others and the outside world did not really matter. At the beginning of the book, Tom Joad offers an excellent example of this stage. He is only concerned with two things: alcohol and prostitutes. He meets Jim Casy, who drinks some of his whiskey and confesses that for him too sex with women was an absolute necessity. Casy has started to change though. He has given up his activity as a preacher, which implies that he has also renounced sex. (After each religious meeting he held, he used to systematically sleep with one of the women attending). Tom's educational process will start later. For the moment, as he says, "I'm still laying my dogs one at a time" (Ch. 16). His life is a pure present revolving around himself. His sister, Rose of Sharon as for her is characterized by the unrealistic dreams of middle class comforts she has discovered in the



magazines she has been able to lay her hands on. For the moment, she doesn't seem to have an identity of her own. She identifies to a number of objects that she (mistakenly) believes would make her happy: a small apartment for herself, her husband and the baby when it is born, an icebox, etc.

Stage two coincides with the recognition that family is essential. Family here means the sort of extended family the Joads constitute, not the small nuclear unit Rose of Sharon keeps dreaming about. Uncle John is included, as is Jim Casy. For most of the book, once the Joads have left their farm, the car becomes synonymous with that new enlarged family. Ma indeed knows how difficult and also necessary it is to keep the family together and to fight back its enemies: natural enemies such as death that kills the dog and then the grand-parents the moment they leave the farm, but also human enemies: alcohol, sex, and money when these things are considered in an individualistic manner. Tom stops drinking, but Uncle John doesn't and he becomes a potential danger for the group; Tom and Al give up girls, though for different reason (Tom will become some sort of prophet, whereas Al gets married and starts a family of his own with Aggie); curiously enough, money is also a danger for the unity of the family and Ma gets extremely angry when some of the members suggest staying behind on Route 66 in order to make some money and catch up with the group later. Admittedly some people like Connie or Noah desert the family for various reasons (and Uncle John is often tempted to do the same), but the Joad family keeps moving forward. Indeed it opens itself, including as it does at one time the Wilsons on Route 66, then the Wainwrights whose daughter Al marries at the end.

Stage three takes us beyond the family. Ma realizes that the family as it is is not sufficient. ("The famby was fust..."

Ch. 30.) When in the boxcar she pulls down the blanket separating them from the Wrainwrights, she invents a new name to describe was matters first and foremost: it used to be family, now it is 'anybody.' (The words rhyme...) 'Anybody' is the exact contrary of selfishness. Caring for your own family was still selfish as Ma discovered very early in the Hooverville where they first stopped when they arrived in California: she cannot not share the stew she has been cooking with all the unknown children that suddenly surround her. In the novel, 'anybody' usually means first of all a question of food and hospitality towards people you don't know. It is a duty, one could almost say the new Law. The Joads invited the Wilsons on the road, Tom is offered breakfast by people he comes across by chance at the Weedpatch government camp, etc. You establish a new link and that link is essential, it is synonymous with caring for the other. In other words, identity is no longer defined by your vertical link with a piece of land as was the case in the popular sort of Jeffersonism prevalent at the beginning of the book. The new link is horizontal with the stranger you encounter on the road.

Is it absolutely necessary to pinpoint the origins of Steinbeck's philosophical convictions? He was a man who was extremely curious in an intellectual sense and he had certainly read a lot. Let us recognize that the ideas he put forward in *The Grapes of Wrath* are sufficiently general not to need a former proprietor... Emerson is certainly an obvious influence as he is present in the book through Casy's allusions to him and his concept of the Oversoul. However, rather than Emerson whose beliefs were mainly aimed at individual fulfilment, it would be more relevant to mention Walt Whitman, probably Emerson's greatest disciple. With Whitman, the Oversoul unquestionably acquires a political dimension. Steinbeck just like Whitman

certainly believed very strongly in equality and democracy and more specifically on the need to refuse any form of exclusion. (Equality actually begins inside the Joad family with the collapse of the old patriarchal principles: Grampa dies the moment he leaves his land and in the last chapter Pa is the one who symbolically is now in charge of food...) We may also remember Tom's allusions to *Ecclesiastes* in chapter 28: "Two are better than one. (...) A three-fold cord is not quickly broken," etc. In fact, the whole novel can be seen as a necessary shift from 'I' to 'we.'

#### The sense of an ending

The novel has two successive denouements as far as the Joad family is concerned: chapter 28 is devoted to Tom and chapter 30 to Rose of Sharon. To some extent, the two siblings turn into heroes or at the very least prophets. The novel certainly makes no attempt at being realistic as Tom and Rose become more than just human beings. Besides, we don't know what happens after them once the book is finished. Tom just says he will metamorphose himself into some sort of ubiquitous 'soul'. In their last scenes, both Tom and his sister undergo a re-birth process before going 'beyond' ordinary humanity. (As we will see further down, 'beyond' is a key word — almost a concept — for John Steinbeck.)

Tom goes into a cave through a narrow tunnel before leaving it for ever and consuming the final separation from his mother. There is here clearly no need to insist on the re-birth process. Besides, as we know that he has been wounded, Tom enters the world as a new man with a new face. In his last conversation with Ma, Tom explains that there is something wrong with "one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'." That is the first difference between Tom's message and

Rose's. It is political. (We said that if we are good followers of Whitman, there should be no differences between men and women, but it would appear that at the end of the 30s it wasn't conceivable for a woman to play a political role. Even for Steinbeck...) We immediately note that there is no difference between morality and politics: if you are rich, you have a duty towards those less well-off than you are and you should help them get the food they need, and probably also contribute to their happiness. It is interesting to look more closely at Tom's agenda. In the speech he delivers in front of Ma, we can distinguish two parts: first, as could be expected, he stresses the notion of protest against social injustice. He then moves into what looks like a different dimension, stressing the fact that protest is not sufficient. Man has to go beyond resentment which remains negative. Through Tom's mouth, Steinbeck promotes positive values: hungry children who get their dinner and men building a new house. In others words, food, life, and home (and, one supposes, love) are what really matters and what the future should be like. In addition, Tom stresses the fact that it will be present "ever'where — wherever you look (...) I'll be there." The passage is important. Tom doesn't choose, everybody, anybody is concerned without any exclusions or divisions between human beings. Rich people are not superior and have no special rights. We could perhaps resort to the term 'utopia' to describe Tom's vision, except that Tom (and presumably Steinbeck himself) believe that such a state is possible in the (near) future.

As she enters the barn after she has crossed the rain, Rose of Sharon discards her clothes and stands naked under an old blanket. Like Tom, the character is symbolically re-born, or rather undergoes a new birth as we now discover a completely different Rose of Sharon. She goes one step further than Tom who spoke of the

duties of the rich. Rose of Sharon will put into practice the essential truth Ma has just discovered and expressed through her famous pronouncement: "Worse off we get, the more we got to do." (Ch. 30.) Indeed, the family has nothing left, no home, no car, no money, no food. Rose will give the only thing she possesses: her milk. In this passage full of paradoxes, she is reborn and at the same time as she becomes a (symbolic) mother, she at last finds the identity she has been unconsciously looking for ever since the book began. She indeed discovers the essence of motherhood with its true meaning. She gives her milk to a man who is about 50 and could be her father. This scene was harshly criticized when the novel appeared and has regularly been condemned by critics who have chosen to display very little sympathy and understanding for what we can safely reconstruct of Steinbeck's intentions. The novelist repeatedly pointed out that such an ending was rigorously logical. It is. To begin with, all the men have left the barn (apart of course from the dying man). Women have taken over, a process which started much earlier on in the novel, the moment the family abandoned their farm. Men cannot cope and they have slowly lost their power and their authority as they have proved unable to feed their families. It certainly was a stroke of genius for Steinbeck to show a young woman — almost a teenager — who gives life to a (failed?) father figure. Here again, as with Tom, the values put forward are food, life, and undeniably love. Indeed, the three words are here strictly synonyms. It would also appear that Rose of Sharon creates a sort of home in that derelict, weather-beaten barn. Secondly, the reader notes a marked contrast between the man and the young woman. He shakes his head as if to refuse the food offered. She says a deep 'Yes,' and eventually the life force wins over the attraction of death and despair. (At least one supposes that is what happens, as the novel ends there and we will not

know whether the man survived or not). In any case, it is the beginning of spring, the rain finally stops during the passage, suggesting that the scene could be a sort of new Mount Ararat. (They have reached that barn located at the top of a hill as the flood stops...) Besides, it is seven days since the man last had some food to eat. Are we wrong to suppose that, with Tom and Rose, Steinbeck wanted to show that it was possible for a new mankind to be born? Do we witness a new Creation?

Tom and Rose of Sharon are thus clearly no longer realistic characters. They have almost become mythical types whose function in the novel is to embody the values and ethical choices John Steinbeck is trying to promote. These choices sound extremely modern to us. One is almost tempted to ask the question whether the novelist had read Emmanuel Lévinas's seminal *Totality and Infinity*. The answer is most probably no as the book appeared in French in 1961. After all, the question is not really important. Steinbeck did not need Lévinas. Yet he was able to discover and express similar intuitions to that of the French philosopher. All the same, if one is familiar with Lévinas's thought, it is decidedly uncanny to read *The Grapes of Wrath* afterwards. It is almost as if we were reading the same text twice.

In a famous letter, Steinbeck explained that the Joads "have" to meet the dying man by chance. The meaning of the scene is indeed inseparable from the fact that the meeting is an unforeseeable event. Lévinas could have used exactly the same words. Relationships between humans are not reciprocal. We have an absolute duty towards the person we encounter by chance, the stranger (in other words, someone who is not part of my friends or a member of my family). That is what we have been saying when we dealt with the family (which of course doesn't mean that we have no duties towards our friends and our

family). Lévinas was a deeply religious thinker, and Steinbeck most probably would not use Lévinas's words when he said that it is the stranger that carries the trace of God — not me —, but most certainly he would have concurred: the other is more important than me (who believes that I have been created in the image of God. Lévinas explains that absolutely doesn't give me any rights over the others). Lévinas wanted here to insist on the important idea that humility is one the most important of all the virtues. A consequence of that pronouncement is that I am the 'hostage' of the other, that is to say that I am responsible for his or her welfare and happiness. To summarize what is at the heart of Lévinas's and most certainly of Steinbeck's ethics: (i) you give, you don't receive; (ii) you say 'yes', never 'no' to the other. In this respect, *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the two great 20<sup>th</sup> century novels which (almost) end with a resounding 'Yes.' The other one is of course James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It is possible to prefer Steinbeck's book, at least from an ethical point of view. Molly Bloom's 'Yes' is purely personal and one is tempted to say strictly selfish, as the character is mainly concerned with her own happiness, not to say her sexual fantasies. Rose of Sharon was probably selfish like most teenagers, she certainly enjoyed sex with Connie. (The passage when they have sexual intercourse in the car next to the dying grand-mother has caused much ink to be spilled...) At the end of the book, she has however reached a stage completely beyond that type of behavior. She says 'Yes' to life in a way about which there is absolutely nothing personal. The only thing she now cares for is life, the life of a complete stranger. She expects nothing in exchange. Thirdly, the other gives a meaning to my life. In other words, that meaning doesn't come from me, and it is not already present in me. I understand who I am and what possibilities of life lie ahead of me when I meet the

stranger. That is the case for Tom whose life will acquire its meaning when he finds those unknown people who suffer and/or are happy “ever’where — wherever.” It is literally the case for Rose of Sharon who finally finds herself the moment she sees the old man in the barn.

There is no denying that Steinbeck’s book speaks to us today. We mentioned what sounds for us like echoes of Emmanuel Lévinas. We could also have mentioned echoes of Jacques Derrida, who voices the same ethical concerns in virtually the same terms in what is curiously and unquestionably his most political book, as if politics could not but be ethical (or ethics political?) In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida writes that “a discourse on human rights and on democracy remains little more than an obscene alibi so long as it tolerates the terrible plight of so many millions of human beings suffering from malnutrition, disease, and humiliation, grossly deprived of the rights of all, of everyone, of anyone. (This ‘anyone’ comes before any other metaphysical determination as subject, human person, or consciousness, before any juridical determination as compeer, compatriot, kin, brother, neighbor, fellow religious follower, or fellow citizen.)” Derrida adds that, if we choose to promote democracy, “what basically has to matter for us is what Jean Paulhan called ‘le premier venu’, translated by ‘the first to happen by,’ anyone, no matter who.” With these very simple words, Jacques Derrida says exactly the same thing as Ma when she replaced ‘family’ with the word ‘anybody’ to explain that there was only one value which counted: hospitality, giving to those we don’t know but who cross our path.



## Ethics versus morality

Steinbeck's ethical ideas have implications. It is once again pointless to ask where they come from. Had the novelist read Spinoza or Nietzsche? Had he just simply heard about them? Perhaps it would be better to suggest that the possibilities of elaborating an ethical theory are singularly limited. In other words, we have a number of choices to make at the outset and we then become part of great, ancestral traditions. When one reads *The Grapes of Wrath*, it seems certain that Steinbeck consciously or not chose to place himself in the continuity of men like Spinoza or Nietzsche. He probably re-discovered on his own their central intuitions, the way they problematized the world and revealed the logic behind our desires and our actions. Steinbeck did the same. He was a great thinker, he possessed more than a fair amount of genius, and his intellectual argumentation when he dealt with questions of ethics and politics proves completely convincing (provided one looks at it very closely of course).

The basic choice is between morality and ethics, two words that for a number of philosophers have come today to acquire a very precise meaning. Gilles Deleuze summarizes the opposition between the two terms in a very clear and handy manner. "Ethics, which is to say a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values." Presumably, Deleuze became interested in ethics when he read Spinoza's *Ethics*, a book that develops a purely immanent conception of life. Steinbeck clearly possessed a deeply similar sensibility. Positing a transcendent level with all the consequences clearly appeared to him as too facile and more especially dishonest.

The key problem is the problem of choice: what should

we focus on in priority? What is the most important, assuming that we don't disregard the consequences of the choice we make on ourselves and on others? Possibility Number One is morality. That is the traditional Christian option: everything is seen in terms of good and evil. Steinbeck is not interested. To begin with, it is a waste of time, as ethics is more important than morality to focus on, and both our time and our energy are limited. When we emphasize morality, there is usually no room left for ethics or very little. Secondly, morality posits a transcendent level out of our world, inventing in the process an illusory entity we call God that is basically the spokesperson of the desires and obsessions of a small number of humans. Of course, God is the customary pretext these people use to exert their power over the minds and bodies of men (and here with bodies, minds and power, we're back in this world which in fact we never left). *The Grapes of Wrath* is extremely critical of religion which is always synonymous with forms of superstition which managed to become established and respectable. Mrs. Sandry at the Weedpatch camp is a terrifying example. She embodies the two crucial features of Christianity: (i) asceticism: she denies her body, her sensations, all forms of pleasure (and in all honesty we have to recognize that most forms of pleasure are perfectly innocent) (ii) resentment: judging other people in the name of her artificial, transcendent values, which makes her more than extremely dangerous. She almost destroys Rose of Sharon psychologically when she tells her that her unborn baby will die because she went dancing... As we said, it is a question of energy, of what we focus on. Mrs Sandry is certainly sincere. She just focuses on forces that are against life. In fact, she does not focus on the opposition good/evil. She is never really attracted by good, but only interested in evil and death — in other people, it goes without saying... (Uncle John is also almost destroyed

by a Christianity-induced guilt of which he is the prisoner and that prevents him from living in a positive, creative way.)

Ma needs to use all her energy to reassure her daughter. In the process, she discovers ethics, just like Rose of Sharon will in her turn discover it in the last scene of the novel. Ethics tells us to focus all our forces on the opposition between life and death, and of course promote life at all costs. In this respect, it is quite logical that Rose of Sharon should replace her mother at the end of the book. Life means that generations follow each other. Ma understands and she accordingly leaves the barn. It is now the young woman who embodies the forces of life. Life means fertility. It is first and foremost something that has to do with your body. Life means establishing links with the others, which is precisely what Rose of Sharon does in the last scene. It is in fact only by helping the man to live that she is able to develop her possibilities and create an identity for her in which she is not alienated by artificial values.

The character who enables ethics to become the book's main preoccupation is of course the former preacher Jim Casy. Like Emerson, he gave up religion as he could not believe in transcendence. He chose to follow men to try and understand them concretely and help them promote new values based on always increasing life. The strange 'sermon' he 'preaches' on the occasion of Grampa's burial (ch. 13) is the best summary of Spinoza's ideas one could possibly find. The clearest too. "I don't know whether he was good or bad, but that don't matter much. He was alive, an' that's what matters. An' now he's dead, and that don't matter." Jim needs to repeat the verb 'matter' to make his point. There is an actual, concrete choice the Joads have to make then and there: what should they focus on? In fact, no-one disagrees as to the fact that the grand-father was

bad. (The adjective that describes him in a recurrent way in the novel is 'mean'...) The passage is certainly not a celebration or vindication of the selfishness of the old man. It is just that, now that he is dead, the question has become entirely pointless. In addition, imagining that he perhaps has a 'soul' that needs to be 'saved' (the idea is meaningless...) or go to a place some people call Heaven (which is pure fiction) would be to accept the traditional Christian superstition. What 'matters' at that juncture is obviously not the past, but the future. What lies ahead of the small group, the food and the money they will need, the dangers awaiting them. "We got a job to do," he says. (Has the word 'job' theological overtones? Work against grace? In other words, reality against illusions?) In any case, Jim makes himself perfectly clear, using words that sound pure Spinoza: "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do." (Ch. 4). That is Jim Casy's great discovery: we should be concerned with life and reality. What is good is increasing life, our own and that of others. (We certainly are here not very far from Emerson's concept of Self-Reliance). Jim also speaks of a poem he has read somewhere (slightly misquoting William Blake): "All that lives is holy." In other words, the problem raised by Steinbeck is that of creating values: how do we choose between values? The only criterion should be their impact on life. Jim Casy is a preacher who gave up the illusions of transcendence to turn to immanence, that is to politics.

#### Non-teleological thinking

We now reach what is possibly the deepest level of John Steinbeck's way of thinking. Non-teleological thinking is the name he coined to refer to the peculiar logic he was trying to develop and, as we will see, it is a logic conceived at its most abstract level. Steinbeck alludes to it in *The Log*

of *The Sea of Cortez*. Can we account for the fact that the novelist found himself attracted to that particular way of accounting for the functioning of reality? The influence of his friend Ed Ricketts was certainly important. Each of them wrote half of the book *The Sea of Cortez*. We also remember that Steinbeck had always shown a profound interest in biology, especially when he was a student at Stanford. The fact that he did not complete his degree does in no way indicate that the subject he chose was not important for him. It is clear that studying a scientific discipline taught him that we should try to be as objective as possible and not content ourselves with ready-made explanations and partial points of view. At bottom, the real problem is here again that of choice: why did Steinbeck prefer this manner of using his mind rather than another of the usual traditions that are available to us? We will never know for sure. The truth lies somewhere in the unconscious of the individual John Steinbeck. The point is that here again the novelist inscribes himself in the tradition illustrated by Spinoza in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and Nietzsche in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Both philosophies are pure examples of non-teleological thinking.

Chapter 14 of *The Grapes of Wrath* is devoted to a general presentation of the novelist's theoretical ideas. It may indeed appear very shocking to some of its readers who do not understand that reality is precisely non-teleological. In that intercalary chapter, the narrator explains that, in the future, children will have food because today "the bombs plummet out of the black planes on the market place, [...] prisoners are stuck like pigs, [...] the crushed bodies drain filthily in the dust." That is the way things are with what Steinbeck calls "Manself:" "we suffer and die for a concept." Apparently, evil is necessary for progress to be eventually possible. In other words, for Steinbeck, time is not linear, "[H]aving stepped forward, he [man] may slip back, but

only half a step, never the full step back." It is in this crucial paragraph from Chapter 14 that we will discover the starting point of Steinbeck's political thought which is at the same time the guiding principle of his aesthetics. The function of literature is not to describe the present. It would only offer a superficial image of reality, that is a surface without its depth, its underlying movements, and myriad possibilities. If we do so, we only see the cut throats, the bombs falling...

The problem obviously is to determine in what way we should look upon the future. Steinbeck strongly believed that the future will never be a pure repetition or continuation of the present. The future will not be what A or B desires or imagines. Here, A could be the banks and more generally modern financial capitalism, and B trade-union leaders who produce their own blue-print for the future. The problem is that (by definition) we cannot represent the future. That would be an act of magic. We only know that it will be different from today, and most probably (but not necessarily) it will resemble a little what B desires rather than A, if only because B is hungry and therefore angry (the play on words is the narrator's in Chapter 29), whereas A gradually loses its energy and its grip on reality. In other words, Steinbeck consistently stands on an immanent level: the future is not written. That means that any traditional approach including some amount of transcendence would be wrong: the future will never correspond to a (transcendent) model that we will content ourselves to apply as it were in a mechanical way. In this respect, Steinbeck seems to be very close to Nietzsche's concept of the Eternal Return. This difficult notion has probably received its most fruitful explanation in the books Gilles Deleuze devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche: it represents a non-teleological vision of history, that is a vision of history without beginning or ending. In other

words, history doesn't need all the transcendent illusions that Christianity has equipped it with, such as for instance an ending that supposedly determines us. What returns is not the same, but differences. Time is not linear, there is no fate, no guilt, no supernatural blue-print, no hell or heaven, and we can perhaps start our lives anew in another direction depending on the way chance treats us. There will be no supernatural ending. That is also true of all the other forms of transcendence: the future will not be what the banks or the trade-unions are planning. A synonym for the Eternal Return could be the word Life. Life is basically unpredictable and heterogeneous.

In this respect, Chapter 5 offers a practical case-study in non-teleological thinking. A farmer is threatening the driver of a bulldozer with his shotgun. Who is responsible for what has happened to the farmer and his neighbors? The problem is that the farmer's point of view is extremely limited, he only sees his present situation. Non-teleological thinking implies that things are never that simple. At bottom, it is synonymous with education, and also for Steinbeck with literature. In that chapter, the discussion slowly reveals to the reader that a whole system is involved. Banks themselves are not responsible, their point of view is limited too, they do what they do because they have to do it in order to make profit (otherwise they would 'die,' as the text rightly points out). Such is the present. We know however that our problem is not to be the prisoners of the present. What are we to do exactly? There are two possibilities: (i) rebel against the banks, kill the driver of the bulldozer, or even go East (to New York City?) and kill the president of the bank? That would not change anything, as the driver and the president would simply be replaced. (ii) displace the problem, go elsewhere and start a different kind of life with different desires. Going West is the solution many of the dispossessed tenants will choose.

It will mean a lot of additional suffering, but Steinbeck believes that they are right and that eventually they will create a new people and build a different type of society. In other words, you will never destroy evil. All you can do is focus your desire and your energy elsewhere, on life, on difference. Spinoza says that there are (only) two kinds of passions, gay passions and sad passions. Men following their gay passions create new possibilities in reality. Nietzsche proposes an opposition that is roughly similar: either you react, content yourself with your resentment and remain passive, or you act and build new things, establish new links with the world and the others. Steinbeck's choice is of course the second alternative.

At the end of Chapter 29, "[T]iny points of grass came through the earth, and in a few days the hills were pale green with the beginning year."

### The people to come

Maybe we should once again mention someone Steinbeck most probably was not familiar with, but who belongs to the same fundamental tradition as him. The painter Paul Klee will help us understand a little better the novelist's enterprise. Klee is famous among other things on account of two seminal pronouncements. It is time we recalled these quotations, if only to stress that there were very close links between our aesthetic and our political choices. On the one hand, Klee maintained that "Art does not represent reality. It makes it visible." Secondly, he offered that cryptic statement: "A people is missing." (*Es trägt uns ein Volk.*) The echo with Ma in *The Grapes of Wrath* ("We are the people") is more than striking.

Literature has nothing to do with what is personal, such as love stories, disappointments, etc. These are only the ingredients of bad novels. (That is the majority of them and



the majority of the best-sellers, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* constituting a famous exception). Literature is about peoples. Indeed, Steinbeck's novel is not about the Joad Family, it is not a realistic novel, Tom doesn't fall in love, Rose of Sharon's evolution has nothing to do with the state of mind of a woman who's been betrayed. More than half the chapters are in fact about the migrants, and the Joads only provide an example to illustrate the problems the novelist is dealing with. We could propose that what good novelists describe is the way our fellow human beings enter processes of becoming, and more precisely the way they enter the future. (Indeed, that could be our criterion to determine who is a good novelist and who is a superficial one, that is basically someone piling up clichés and contenting himself or herself with describing appearances...) It follows that 'good' novelists perform two actions: (i) they describe an intolerable situation, and (ii) they reveal what the future could be like. The future indeed will be the creation of 'a' people, the people that is 'missing' and that will be born when it becomes conscious of itself. The article has to be indefinite, as saying 'the' people would imply that there is an already existing and predetermined people that will continue to exist in the future. Klee and Steinbeck both belong to the age-old traditions of utopias: how can we create a better future out of the sufferings of the present? Can those who suffer and are currently divided help produce that better future?

Such is the great idea put forward by Tom in front in his mother in the cave in Chapter 28. Tom remembers the Weedpatch camp, "how our folks took care of themselves." He adds, "I been a-wondering why we can't do that all over. [...] All work together for our own thing." In other words, organization should come from the bottom up, not be imposed by the ideas or the desires of another group, which of course in this context would be synonymous with

transcendence. Ma understands: they will have to be the 'people' of the future, that is a people still to invent, "a people to come," another way of translating Klee's phrase, and of course an echo of Jacques Derrida's famous "democracy to come." For democracy is always "to come". The solution will not come from a preestablished group or ideology, that is to say neither from (i) American capitalism ("ritualized thieving," as Chapter 15 very aptly describes it) and its allies, the local judges and the deputy sheriffs, nor (ii) from organizations like the Communist Party. That explains why Steinbeck never wrote a second *In Dubious Battle*, a book in which he voiced his disillusion with the CP who confiscated the people's voice in order to promote its own personal agenda.

Jacques Derrida explains that we would be wrong to content ourselves with what passes for democracy today. It is extremely imperfect, and basically it serves to defend the rights and interests of a small minority of people who try to pass them on to their children. History however never stops and democracy has always to be re-established anew. As indicated above, one thing at least is certain, the "democracy to come" will not be the reflections of the current desires of a given group. Any sort of predetermined future would simply abolish History. Derrida thus insists, it is "wholly other." It is more like a sort of promise. The French philosopher coined the phrase "Messianism without Messiah" in this respect: the future will solve part of the problems of the present, it will be an unforeseen event, something concrete and revolutionary, and at the same time it will not be brought about by a figure already fully described and characterized in our current ideologies such as a Messiah. That would be teleological. The end would already be written. (Incidentally, as Derrida remarks, our Messiahs in the Western World are always already fully determined and always... male. It is certainly

a real a pity he hasn't read Steinbeck's novel. Admittedly, Tom may prove to be a Messiah, but so will Rose of Sharon too). Jim Casy showed the way, if one may say so: "I got the call to lead the people, and no place to lead 'em." (Chapter 4).

Why the former farmers? They are angry, hungry, eager. More accurately, they are currently not a people and that is the key reason. A revolutionary people is a nomadic, minority people, as opposed to communities who have vested interests and a strong link to a territory. When they lost their farms, the so-called 'Okies' lost their connection to a pre-determined land, and for Steinbeck that means the end of any kind of Jeffersonian nostalgia. They have no home, nowhere to go, and therefore they will have to invent a home and create themselves as a people. One essential characteristic is that the link uniting its members will not be the family. ("The famby was fust," Chapter 30.) Here again, Jacques Derrida expresses for us that idea very clearly: the starting point will be the link with "anybody," the stranger, the person we meet by chance. We do not feel solidarity with that person because he or she has the same religion, or skin color, or any other conceivable similarity with me. That again would create exclusion, that is we would be adopting a 'us/them' binary logic: you are like me, and we are different from the others... On the contrary, the new logic advocated by John Steinbeck is not binary, it proclaims that there is only a big 'us', "we are the people," without exclusions, as exclusions are always based on transcendent criteria (religion, political party, trade union, race, etc.) In his own way, John Steinbeck rewrites the history of America. There used to be a vertical covenant whose model is in the Old Testament which claimed that God had chosen some of us and given us this beautiful Promised Land. Those who have not been chosen, such as the Quakers, the Indians, etc., have only the right to go

away or die. (19 million Indians were exterminated or allowed to die in the United States one way or another throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.) Grampa who believed in the old logic killed quite a few of them and stole their land. (One remembers that famous interjection uttered by one of the anonymous tenants confronting the bulldozer driver: "Grampa killed Indians, Pa killed snakes for the land." Things are perfectly clear.) One of his descendants tries to do the same with a gun (the same gun?) in front of the bulldozers sent by the bank. It no longer works this time. The (former) farmers will have to invent new values. They first of all will have to devise a new covenant, this time a horizontal one, with the stranger, the other human beings who suffer just like them.

It should now be clear that *The Grapes of Wrath* has strictly nothing to do with realism. It is a fable. It is a novel about people's rights and justice. Why are some people denied rights and justice? What if strangely enough they represented our future? The book is of course not realistic as for instance Mexican farmers are conspicuously absent from its pages. We know however that Steinbeck had no prejudices against Mexicans and other social groups made up of non white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. We all remember the loving way he paints his characters in *Tortilla Flat* published four years before *The Grapes of Wrath*. The migrants of *Grapes* are here to raise a political problem: they are American citizens, they are the descendants of the pioneers. By definition, they have rights. What happens when these rights are denied? What can the meaning of their action be?

Perhaps, what remains Steinbeck's most far-reaching and economical concept is that very simple word, 'beyond,' of which he is so fond, especially in Chapter 14, the most theoretical of the book. Like animals, human beings are characterized by needs, mainly food and sex. Unlike them

yet, they are able to go 'beyond' their needs, and in the process they find themselves in a position to write a different future for themselves. These two needs constitute the real leitmotiv of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom (who incidentally gives up sex) shows that food can lead to anger, which itself will lead to Justice ("to come") and to 'a' people ("to come"). Rose of Sharon goes 'beyond' sex and shows as it were that what matters in sex should be its outcome, that is to say fertility. The future will be the advent of more life and love. The lesson may seem somewhat pointless in the United States or in the other industrialized countries today. And yet, we 'have to' ask: is that also true of the rest of the world? We also 'have to' ask: aren't there pockets of squalid poverty and despair in America or in Europe which some of us unconsciously prefer not to see? The abstract meaning of *The Grapes of Wrath* unquestionably still makes sense in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Admittedly, it would be foolish to translate its message directly into reality. Hospitality has limits. One cannot accept everybody into one's home or country. Jacques Derrida, who is among those who preached the most in favor of it, is perfectly conscious of that fact. That is probably the reason why there are two kinds of people and in this respect the manifold ending of *The Grapes of Wrath* is perfectly clear. Tom indicates a minority. Minorities are necessary to show the way. He also has a brother, Al. Al gets married, will certainly find a job in a garage, raise a family, etc. He stands for the majority, and both Tom and Al are essential in society.

Was John Steinbeck a thinker? The answer should be a strong yes. He in fact was also a very demanding and rigorous philosopher. A lot of commentators have simply ignored the key passages of his books, or refused to unfold their implications. It certainly is a pity. John Steinbeck has

still something to tell us today. And one thing is certain, he more than fully deserved his 1962 Nobel Prize.

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