The Dream of Independence

Joseph Fontenrose

John Steinbeck once wrote in a letter that Of Mice and Men was "a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world." Steinbeck's portrayal of the yearnings of common people is clearly evident in Of Mice and Men; George, Lennie, and other farm-workers share a dreamlike ideal of land and a little farm to work. According to Joseph Fontenrose, this dream of independence and prosperity contrasts sharply, however, with the dream of a carefree lifestyle and freedom from inconvenient burdens. These two dreams oppose each other; the pursuit of pleasures—cards, whiskey, and women—can thwart the best-laid plans to acquire land and settle down. Fontenrose taught classics at the University of California at Berkeley, Cornell University, and the University of Oregon. He is the author of John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation.

When Of Mice and Men appeared in February, 1937, one year after In Dubious Battle, readers were not surprised to find that it dealt with agricultural labor in California; for the earlier novel had established Steinbeck as a writer interested in contemporary issues. Yet, if upon opening the new novel the reader expected more about strikes and Communist agitators, he was disappointed; for the workers in Of Mice and Men have not yet reached social awareness or class consciousness: they accept their lot, spend their small earnings, never question the structure of society. Here is no Growers' Association to exploit migratory pickers; the men work on a large grain-producing farm (always called "ranch"), managed solely by its owner, who hires hands at

fifty dollars a month and found. That is, he has workers who stay with him the year round; others prefer to work for a season and then move on; these are migratory of their own choice. The Great Depression is not yet...

Man’s longing for the land, a favorite Steinbeck theme, appearing in some form in nearly every novel, is here expressed in the farmhand’s and bindlestiff’s desire for a few acres of his own, so that he can be his own boss. George said, “I’d have my own little place, an’ I’d be bringin’ in my own crops, ’stead of doin’ all the work and not getting what comes up outa the ground.” And Candy said,

Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus’ som’thin’ that was his. Som’thin’ he could live on and there couldn’t nobody throw him off of it. I never had none. I planted crops for damn near everbody in this state, but they wasn’t my crops, and when I harvested ‘em, it wasn’t none of my harvest.

Only in such speeches as these does *Of Mice and Men* seem to relate this land hunger to contemporary social issues. But this is hardly the author’s intention: he is simply reporting a mode in which the yearning is really expressed by men whose chances of acquiring land are well-nigh hopeless—altogether hopeless, as Crooks, the Negro stable buck, saw it:

I seen hundreds of men come by on the road an’ on the ranches, with their bindles on their back an’ that same damn thing in their heads. Hundreds of them. They come, an’ they quit an’ go on; an’ every damn one of ’em’s got a little piece of land in his head. An’ never a God damn one of ’em ever gets it. Just like heaven... Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land. It’s just in their head.

Yet Crooks too had the dream. When he saw that Candy and Lennie had a real proposition, backed by real money, he offered to work for them for nothing, just to share their independence—until Curley’s wife made him realize the futility of his wish. And Crooks was right after all, as the story is told: these were but three more men with that “thing in their heads.” The land hunger of impoverished farm workers, a dream of independence, usually remains a dream; and when it becomes a real plan, the plan is defeated.

**A PARABLE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION**

*Of Mice and Men* was meant to be a non-teleological tale, and the first title that Steinbeck gave it was “Something That Happened.” Something that happens may be accidental, coincidental, atypical, and surely the concluding events and
deeds in this novel are neither typical nor commonplace. For George and Lennie, being who they are and where they are, the outcome may be inevitable, and we may see a personal tragedy in the tale. Steinbeck, however, meant the story to be a parable of the human condition, as his final title indicates. It is a good title, because the story itself tells us just what Burns meant when he said, “the best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley”: one unlucky fieldmouse lost its nest when the field was plowed. But not all fieldmice suffer that fate; Burns did not mean that no man’s scheme is ever realized. Steinbeck reads, “All schemes o’ mice an’ men gang ever agley.” Crooks said, “Nobody never gets to heaven, and nobody gets no land,” and George said to Candy, “I think I knewed from the very first. I think I knewed we’d never do her,” thus reading destiny—the inevitable failure of his plans—in Lennie’s terrible deed. It is the message of Cup of Gold, the vanity of human wishes. In a letter to his agents, written soon after completing the manuscript of Of Mice and Men, Steinbeck said that Lennie represents “the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men,” and referred to its scene as a microcosm, making it plain that this novel was meant to express the inevitable defeat and futility of all men’s plans. But the tragic story of George and Lennie cannot carry the load of cosmic pessimism placed upon it. It tells us only that it is hard for bindlestiffs to buy land, and that even when they get the money they cannot be sure of making the purchase. Nevertheless, migratory workers have acquired land, even in California, and George could have done so. Not Lennie who died, but Candy who lived, had $350, and Candy still wanted to carry out the plan. Objectively considered, the prospects for success were better without Lennie, who would surely have killed every rabbit on the place. But without Lennie the plan had no meaning for George. The sweeping pessimistic thesis is thus imposed upon the story and obscures its true meaning: that our pleasures often oppose and thwart our schemes. Steinbeck came nearer to an adequate statement of thesis when he said in another letter that Of Mice and Men was “a study of the dreams and pleasures of everyone in the world.”

After shooting Lennie, an act that the others assumed he had done in self-defense, George went off with Slim to get a drink. This means that George had turned to his counter-dream of independence: freedom from Lennie. This dream,
as well as the other, George recited in both the opening and closing scenes among the willows by the river:

God a’mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an’ work, an’ no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why, I could stay in a cat house all night. I could eat any place I want, hotel or any place, and order any damn thing I could think of. An’ I could do all that every damn month. Get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room and play cards or shoot pool. . . . An’ whatta I got, . . . I got you! You can’t keep a job and you lose me ever’ job I get.

It is a recital that Lennie often heard. At the end the contrite Lennie expected to hear it again and urged George to say it. George started half-heartedly, but soon turned to the other recital about the land and the rabbits. And what George longed for in his dream of individual freedom was exactly what he deprecated in his dream of living with Lennie on a small ranch. He recited this dream too at the beginning and end of the story, and once in the middle; but only the first time is it given in its complete ritualistic form:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no fambly. They don’t belong no place. They come to a ranch an’ work up a stake and then they go into town and blow their stake, and the first thing you know they’re poundin’ their tail on some other ranch. They ain’t got nothing to look ahead to. . . . With us it ain’t like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don’t have to sit in no bar room blowin’ in our jack jus’ because we got no place else to go.

Then he went on to describe the little place that they would buy when they “[got] the jack together,” where they would “live off the fatta the lan’.”

**A CHOICE BETWEEN DREAMS**

So the “dreams and pleasures” of Steinbeck’s statement are both synonymous and contrasting terms. The lonely bindle-stiff dreams of owning land (and although George said that others did not have “a future,” Crooks said that all ranch workers had that dream); yet he enjoys cards, whisky, women. His pleasures take his little money and he never begins to realize the dream. For George, who was tied to Lennie, freedom to enjoy these pleasures was as much a dream as having a ranch; in fact, any indulgence in them was severely limited, since Lennie prevented his earning
more than a few dollars at a time. Thus George was split between genuine affection for Lennie, who was company, someone to control and look after, and a desire to be free of an inconvenient burden. When he shot Lennie he was not only saving Lennie from Curley's cruelty, but was also making a choice between dreams: events had forced him to a decision. "I'll work my month an' I'll take my fifty bucks an' I'll stay all night in some lousy cat house. Or I'll set in some poolroom . . .," —thus George answered Candy's question "Then—it's all off?" and realized without joy that one dream was dead and another, the dream of lonely independence, had come true.

*Of Mice and Men* has no recognizable mythical pattern. The central image is the earthly paradise, visible in nearly every Steinbeck novel. This has meant for Americans an agrarian economy of small farms, worked by their owners for their own benefit. It is part of the American dream, finding expression in such nineteenth-century visions as "the garden of the west" and "the garden of the world." It is a vision of Eden, a land of peace, harmony, prosperity; it includes both individual independence and fellowship. And in Steinbeck's world you aren't likely to get there; as Crooks said, "Nobody never gets to heaven."

We should also notice that this novel ignores the group organism; unless we say that Lennie, representing "the inarticulate and powerful yearning of all men," symbolizes it. Like the group Lennie has an elementary mentality, lacks initiative and originality, and can follow but not lead. The association of George and Lennie, leader and follower, is held together by a religion, complete with myth, ritual, and litany. When George makes his formulaic recitation, as quoted above, Lennie responds at the right place with "But not us! An' why? Because... because I got you to look after me, and you got me to look after you, and that's why." From loneliness, from blowing our money in barrooms and cat houses, from jails, good Lord deliver us—and grant us the blessings of fellowship on the land. It is a religion of cooperation, but, as in other religions, deprecated evils are powerful to keep men from paradise. The individual's desire for carefree enjoyment of pleasures is the serpent in the garden.