

The Pastures of Heaven: Making of Californian Myths or Legends

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1

The Pastures of Heaven (1932) was published following *Cup of Gold* (1929), but in writing sequence it was the third after *To a God Unknown* (1933). Steinbeck's deep affection for and confidence in this work as an apprentice is stated in the letter to Amasa Miller (December, 1931).

If the reader will take them for what they are, and will not be governed by what a short story should be (for they are not short stories at all, but tiny novels) then they should be charming. . . . I am extremely anxious to hear the judgement because of anything I have ever tried, I am fondest of these and more closely tied to them. (*Life in Letters* 51)

As Steinbeck expresses affectionately his emotion on this work, it is full of attraction. His words, "I am fondest of these and more closely tied to them." must have been delivered by his confidence that the environments in the work have roots in the real land of California which he knew best. Though this is a collection of twelve short stories, it can be called a novel with a coherent theme in them. This is a highly mature work with stories appreciated as independent "tiny novels" as written in the letter.

In *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*, Peter Lisca refers to *The Pastures of Heaven* as follows:

The Pastures of Heaven marks an important point in Steinbeck's career. It reveals his disengagement from romantic materials of *Cup of Gold* and unwieldy mythical paraphernalia of *To a God Unknown*; and it announces his preoccupation with fresh materials much closer at hand — the ordinary people of his “long valley.” (*Wide World* 71)

Steinbeck began his career as a regional writer in this novel, disengaging from “romantic materials of *Cup of Gold* and unwieldy mythical paraphernalia of *To a God Unknown*.”

According to Warren French, one of the themes of *The Pastures of Heaven* is “appearances are deceiving” (*John Steinbeck* 56) and Steinbeck confirms there is no such West as “the American myth of the promised land flowing with milk and honey.” Instead of those illusions, his emphasis is on the importance of seeing the reality deep-rooted in the motherland of California and telling its myths or legends, the fundamental concept of his literature.

In this essay I am elaborating the above mentioned issues, not focusing the appreciation of each story but reconsidering the position of *The Pastures of Heaven* in Steinbeck literature.

2

The Pastures of Heaven is composed of twelve chapters: the first and the last chapters called “frames,” serving as prologue and epilogue respectively, and ten other narrative chapters. The factors with which this work is considered as a “novel” are from the theme which the prologue and epilogue have, and the key characters called the Munroes who play important roles in unifying the narrative chapters and interpreting Steinbeck's

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message. The first “frame” is to be examine first.

Old California in history is told in the first chapter: First of all, the year 1776 catches the eye. In the East including the South and the North it was about the time the Revolutionary War finally came to end and young America began to walk by herself. At that time the West end of the Continent still belonged to Spain. Thus this story begins before the history of the United States began, in the prehistoric age of the U.S. in a sense. After this the Gold Rush began in 1849, Homestead Act enacted in 1862 and disappearance of geographical West was announced in 1890.

Those are the days when the Carmelo Mission is in trouble as twenty converted Indians run away because of the hard work of molding adobe bricks in the workshop. A Spanish corporal is sent by the religious and civil authorities to pursue them, and on the way he sees the “sweet valley in the hills,” and he whispers “Here are the green pastures of Heaven to which our Lord leadeth us” (3).

Fortunately, no Spanish nobleman became its owner and eventually he settles in this land to build an “Eden” here. He names the land “Las Pasturas del Cielo.” Before making his dream of turning it into Paradise comes true, he is infected with the pox by an Indian woman and dies. However, in the end he is described, as dying “peacefully.” After a hundred years, most successors of the first settlers in “Las Pasturas del Cielo” are white people and twenty families “live prosperously and at peace.”

In this first chapter I would like especially to give attention to three things.

1. When the Revolutionary War end and young America was born in the East, the West belonged to Spain. Described here is a California on the West Coast, with a history different from the East. The First Chapter, which concerns the birth of “the Pastures of Heaven” reminds us of so to

speak "Nation building" myths and legends.

2. Although the European sense of values, moral and ethics based on Christianity were intruding on American Continent; in the East and the South black slaves were exploited and Indians robbed of their home lands, and in the West, the Spanish made the natives disciples in their missions. Though scale is different, what they did was the same, reminding one of the tragic history of the Incas in South America.

Europeans settled in the South in 1607 and Puritans in the East in 1620. They intended to establish the Garden on this continent, their dream called "the American myth," "the myth of an American Eden" and "myth of the Garden." They pursued their dream across the Continent, but in vain. What they wanted to establish was a utopia, and that was why they could not create it in reality. And what this chapter shows is that the experiment to build "Eden" on the earth was tried and failed by the Spanish corporal a hundred years before.

3. The corporal, however, suffered from the pox and his dream collapsed, but he still "died peacefully." This story suggests that men can live and die in peace in whatever environment they are put in, wherever it is.

The above three are the theme not only in this chapter but in all the narrative chapters showing legendary parts in the birth of America. And Bert Munroe, a subsidiary character necessary for the development of the story, appears in the second chapter, and new themes are shown.

3

In this chapter are described California which is now American territory, and the Pastures of Heaven where the attempts of two families to settle on a farm fail, and Bert Munroe succeeds.

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In 1863, one year after the Homestead Act was enacted, George Battle moves from New York and works for the farm very hard. After his death his only son John, a fanatic believer in a religion, comes home to succeed his father on the farm. He says the devil lives on the farm and one day attacks a serpent of the devil but is killed by the serpent.

This story is of 1911 and it, as well as the episodes of his Grandmother, who dies on the way to the West, reminds us of the history of America and the Westward movement.

Then in 1921 the Mustrovics, who do not speak English, seeming to be immigrants from the old world, buy the farm to settle, but again they fail and disappear suddenly. And the farm was finally said to be haunted and cursed.

The third attempt is made by the Munroes: father Bert and mother, 19-year-old Mae, 17-year-old Jimmie and Manfred seven years old.

He came to possess the so-called "cursed farm," but he succeeds easily in establishing the farm with much cleverness and knowledge which he had acquired while struggling with bad luck before coming here.

He analyzes his situation jokingly to the villagers that his idea is to buy a cursed land and "make his curse and the farm's curse get to fighting and killed each other off" (19). But a neighbor interprets it in different way, "Maybe your curse and the farm's curse has mated and gone into a gopher hole like a pair of rattlesnakes. There'll be a lot of baby curses crawling around the Pastures the first thing we know" (19).

This is an omen for the Pastures of Heaven and its people who are living prosperously and at peace. Steinbeck says in his letter on an original story he collected: ". . . about the Morans there was a flavor of evil. Everyone they came in contact with was injured. Every place they went dissension sprang up" (*Life in Letters* 43). Readers believe these words of

Steinbeck and that the newcomer gives trouble to the villagers and their fate turns bad. The Munroes seem to have opened the Pandora's box, but diverse explanations for the troubles are always possible. The Munroes may not necessarily have scattered curses and done the evils, of which the following are some examples.

In chapter three, the Shark (Edward Wicks) runs away from the Pastures of Heaven and Jimmie Munroe has something to do with it, but in fact it is mainly caused by his false dealing of bonds and too much sensitivity about his daughter's virginity.

In chapter four, the reason Tularecito is sent to the asylum for the criminally insane is not just because Bert Munroe finds out who dug the hole in his garden but that young Miss Molly Morgan tells about the Gnomes to Tularecito who has not enough wit to distinguish fiction from reality.

In chapter five, Helen Van Deventer, widow, goes to live in the Pastures of Heaven, and builds "a beautiful log house" accompanying her daughter Hilda who seems schizophrenic. "The carpenters had aged the logs with acids, and the gardeners had made it seem an old garden" (87). This is a false Eden and parody of the American myth, but she feels she could be reborn in this new environment in nature. However when Hilda complains to Bert Munroe about her confinement in her house, she is shot to death in Christmas Canyon by her mother.

I will omit the explanation of the other narrative chapters, but in all of them the Munroes seem to affect the people in some way or other, but it is not the curse of the Munroes' that changes the fate of the people. Close observation shows that those incidents are to happen whether the Munroes are involved or not. What matters is not the existence of the Munroes but the ignorance of the people who do not see the reality. People come to know and face the reality, and consequently get out of the Pastures of

Heaven without getting their dreams to come true.

In other words, the Pastures of Heaven, described as “prosperous and at peace” in the first chapter, reveals itself as a microcosm of America: it contains religion which cannot save the believers, people who look gentle among themselves but their conventionality cannot accept the heterogeneity, schools which cannot give true education, all of which show the goodness and ugliness of a small country town. A community with such problems is far from the image which “prosperous and at peace” conveys. Thus, in the first chapter the depiction of the Pastures of Heaven as “prosperous and at peace” might be the impression of outsiders who see it from afar, but in the last chapter the readers can clearly understand the reality.

4

When tourists see the Pastures of Heaven in its greenery, they are moved just like the Spanish corporal, and they mistakenly believe their visions of harmony and peace actually exist in the Pastures of Heaven. However, the moment they think they have fulfilled their dream, it slips through their hands.

Just when Gatsby sees the green light of Daisy’s dock in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and when Dutch seamen first see the green breast of Manhattan Island after a long voyage, they think they have arrived at Eden, but it will disappear silently (162). Even when they go to the Pastures of Heaven, they cannot fulfill their dream.

Steinbeck does not deny the value of having dreams or illusion, but as Richard Peterson says, “They will have to accept the cruel twists of fate and overcome the human mediocrity and idiocy which exist in ominous

abundance in the world if they are to succeed in fulfilling their visions of the harmony and peace . . . ” (101-2).

However, we must not forget the fact that even though the reality of the Pastures of Heaven is far from the illusions tourists see from outside, people of the Pastures are living in that reality. Even if people seem to go rushing hither and thither, they can find a place to live their lives as the Spanish corporal did. Steinbeck turns a warm eye on the inhabitants who have to settle in those situations. Readers never fail to acquire his non-teleology in those scenes.

This is the message from Steinbeck and the key to understanding this work: it is expected one will see the reality non-teleologically. Louis Owens explains: “Steinbeck is suggesting a non-teleological or ‘non-blaming’ reading of the stories, a reading that eventually makes the work richer and more rewarding than would a literal acceptance of the concept of a ‘Munroe curse’” (*Re-vision of America* 78). “Non-blaming” is to accept the reality as it is and there lies Steinbeck’s message.

What *The Pastures of Heaven* tells us is the importance of deep-rooted not in the earth of illusion but in the real earth of California, forgetting the illusion of “Eden myth.” This is Steinbeck’s message of non-teleology — one of the keys to mapping the Steinbeck World. On this matter Steinbeck says in the letter to his friend Duke¹, “The new eye is being opened here in the west — the new seeing” (*The Errant Knight* 123). The world we live is “not the world apart from man — the world and man — the one inseparable unit man plus his environment” (123).

In other words, “the myth of an American Eden” is an illusion and the West is not “the land flowing with milk and honey.” The substitute for the illusion is to probe the way to commit to “the one inseparable unit man plus his environment.” This interpretation concerns “*To A God Unknown*,” but

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is a dogma applicable to any of his works. And this idea contains some similarity to Emerson's Oversoul.

5

Seeing the social background, we notice that the great spree of the 1920s is over and there is crisis and unrest in the 1930s. It was the time for Americans who lived in the grotto of material civilization to review the homeland. People needed myths other than the Eden myth; it was also a time to rediscover the land of California and to tell the tales about the long valley, California and the America which Steinbeck loved.

One is a tale about the making of California and the other is a tale about the land of California and its people: these are the folk tales deeply rooted in the land and the birth of what can be called contemporary legends or myths.

What are seen in the frame chapters as well as in other ten narrative chapters is the pattern in which the dream, in other words "Eden," almost in hand, slips through. This is Steinbeck's non-teleological approach to the present reality made over and over again, shown in other novels as well. Though the protagonists do not attain their object, the enthusiasm they show in the process moves and encourages the reader.

The Pastures of Heaven begins with the history of California, and reveals the toils of the protagonists, foreheads sweating, muscles aching. The Spanish and immigration eras are already history and legendary. The narrative chapters, where Pandora's box is opened and curses are rampant, are rendered with such a wryly humorous view of reality and of people's destiny, it is as if the gods and goddesses in the Greek Myths are running about.

However this is not a collection of farces, eccentric characters, and the causes and fatalities. Each story ends when people who cause some kind of trouble get out of the Pastures without solving it. The keynote of the Non-teleological approach to the matter is: obvious problems but no solutions are shown in any of the stories.

For example, the problems described in the stories of Tularecito, Hilda, the daughter of Helen Van Deventer, Robbie, son of Junius Maltby and all the others are connected to those of today: school education and education for mentally retarded children, about sex, civilization, the death penalty, religion etc. etc. These are urgent problems to solve but for which no pertinent solution has been found yet.

Steinbeck presents us universal matters we see in every day life, and has no intention of commenting on them, to say nothing of how to settle them. His letter clearly tells about them: "This book [*In Dubious Battle*] is brutal. I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing" (*Life in Letters* 98. To George Albee). And here is one more explanation on this theme from Louis Owens: "Although the various kindnesses and cruelties in the novel are obviously meant to draw a moral response from the reader, for the central catastrophe of Lenny Small no one is to blame; Lenny's misshapen mind is just something that happened" (*The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land* 85).

Tales of the Pastures of Heaven are "just something that happened," and there is "no one to blame," the concept of "Be-thinking" or "non-teleological thinking." Which is the thought Steinbeck stated in the above passages: "judging nothing, simply put down the thing" about them "as merely a recording consciousness."

And still now, in chapter 11, after Whiteside, the community's ethic

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backbone leaves Arcadia, the Pastures of Heaven, the Munroes's curses are rampant, overflowing into the whole of California and continue threatening us by bringing forth a lot of conflict.

In reality Steinbeck collected many folk tales and legends in California in preparing for writing these short stories. Concerning *The Pastures of Heaven*, Steinbeck himself refers to the origin in *Life in Letters* (42-43)². And he also introduces a story about the making of "The Snake" in *The Long Valley in The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (xxiii-xxiv). According to Jay Parini, "Steinbeck heard a few of these tales from his mother (who once taught in a rural valley under circumstances similar to those of Molly Morgan, one of the most interesting characters in this book) and his aunt Molly, who of course lived in the Corral de Tierra" (*Biography* 127).

It is needless to accept the authors' comments or biographers' just as they tell them, but it is well known that Steinbeck was very eager to collect that folklore handed down among Californians. And through Steinbeck those stories became true legends and myths with immortality.

One of the clues to understanding the connection to the native land is the pattern which Steinbeck's works have. Peter Lisca says on this as follows:

The Pastures of Heaven demonstrates again that Steinbeck does not write merely realistic fiction. His habit as a writer is always, whether dealing with the adventures of an individual or the history of a community, to provide for his realistic surface a broad foundation of mythic reference. (*Nature & Myth* 54)

Thus these tales of the Pastures of Heaven supported by that concept can be called Folklore of California and it is not exaggerated to call them modern California legends or myths, because they (a) present modern problems performed on the stage of the Pastures of Heaven, and (b) tell of

the founding process of the native land of California

6

How does Steinbeck weave such a view point and purpose of forming modern legends or myths into his other works?

His first work, *Cup of Gold* is about the legendary buccaneers from the Old World. Henry, hero of the romance, was a soul who left his home in Wales to realize his dream, just like Steinbeck's ancestors emigrated from his home in Ireland. It may have had no connection to California and America when Steinbeck wrote this, but the moment Steinbeck picked up Henry, a legendary hero of his home, his stories became those of Americans.

What is dealt with in *To a God Unknown* are stories about descendants of immigrants to the New World. Joseph Wane in the East migrates to the West to establish his kingdom there. Steinbeck makes us recall the homesteading ancestors in depicting Joseph in the mythic, "pagan," and non-teleological tale. He is given Christ-like characteristics and devotes himself to saving his kingdom in a severe drought. Thus his tale deserves to be called a legend or a myth.

These three works: *Cup of Gold*, *To a God Unknown* and *The Pastures of Heaven* are the fruit of his dogma and an inevitable process in establishing the identity of California. What is needed is a substitute truth for such ancient phrases as "the land flowing with milk and honey." It is the new legends or mythic tale going beyond mere history or symbolism that he depicts in his three works. *The Pastures of Heaven* is the collection of such stories found rooted in California. They are Californian folklore and the birth of new legends and myths.

This mythic concept deep-rooted in this land is also evident in his later

The Pastures of Heaven: Making of Californian Myths or Legends (Mitsuo Kato) works including *The Grapes of Wrath* (published five years later in 1939) and *East of Eden* (Published 13 years afterwards, in 1952). The former is the modern Exodus, the record of roaming to find the promised land, the new Eden in the reality. There is no Eden in the West, but the Joads, the non-teleological people are not frustrated. *East of Eden* was written with such intention as the compilation of Californian tales. Thus in the origin of Steinbeck's literature there undoubtedly exists the elements of discovering and creating Californian myths and legends.

Notes

1. *John Steinbeck, The Errant Knight* by Nelson Valgine reveals that in later years Steinbeck sent to his friend Dook, Carlton A. Sheffield, then in Long Beach a package:

“— a commercial ledger in which John had written several of his stories. . . . The body of the ledger, consisting of 300 numbered pages of thirty-eight lines per page, had been used by John for the penning of several short items and two stories— *Pastures of Heaven and To a God Unknown*.” (119-120)

2. This is a passage from a letter to Mavis McIntosh saying about the original stories of *The Pastures of Heaven*, which he collected.

There is, about twelve miles from Monterey, a valley in the hills called Corral de Tierra. Because I am using its people I have named it Las Pasturas del Cielo. The valley was for years known as the happy valley because of the unique harmony which existed among its twenty families. About ten years ago a new family moved in on one of the ranches. They were ordinary people, ill-educated but honest and as kindly as any. In fact, in their whole history I cannot

find that they have committed a really malicious act nor an act which was not dictated by honorable expediency or out-and-out altruism. But about the Morans there was a flavor of evil. Everyone they came in contact with was injured. Every place they went dissension sprang up. There have been two murders, a suicide, many quarrels and a great deal of unhappiness in the Pastures of Heaven, and all of these things can be traced directly to the influence of the Morans. So much is true. (*Life in Letters* 42-43)

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