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California Dreamin': The Significance of "A Coupla Acres" in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

In the most recent film of *Of Mice and Men*, the director, Gary Sinise, departs from Steinbeck's short novel in two important ways: first, the film incorporates panoramic shots of the fertile California countryside and second, there are numerous shots of the "bindlestiffs" working on the land. Without seeking to criticize the film, which is beautifully made, I want to focus on the elements of the novel that these departures throw into relief. Despite the novel's setting, the conquered western frontier never comes into view; similarly, the portrayal of the migrant fieldworkers does not extend to a description of the work itself in any detail. Initially, this may seem to be an evasion on Steinbeck's part, given the more explicitly political nature of much of his previous work. As Paul McCarthy has pointed out, "*Of Mice and Men* and *In Dubious Battle* differ in that the former lacks widespread violence, class conflict and Marxian ideology" (57). However, while *Of Mice and Men* is marked by the absence of the open spaces of the frontier and the absence of labor, the novel is crucially concerned with both of these things, and with the complex political relationship between them.

This relationship between land, labor and capital is explored through the dream of freedom that absorbs first Lennie, then George, Candy and Crooks. According to Louis Owens, Steinbeck "saw no cornucopia of democracy in the retreating frontier, but rather a destructive and fatal illusion barring Americans from the realization of any profound knowledge of the continent they had crossed" (4). In *Of Mice and Men*, the dream of independence and self-sufficiency apparently upheld by the vast spaces of the western frontier does indeed turn out to be

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"destructive and fatal." What remains unacknowledged, however, in Owens' analysis, is that the closing of the frontier was a direct consequence of the need for a capital-based economy to impose order on and to control the open spaces of the West, and not, as Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis suggests, simply the result of population migration. The allocation of virtually all available land to railroad companies and a small number of wealthy farmers through a corrupt system of land grants, the extent of which is amply traced in Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Fields*, was the most significant factor in exhausting frontier space. The central irony of this development is that while capital "killed" the frontier, it also encouraged the prevailing frontier myth—that of individual freedom—in order to amass a labor force. The dream of independence described in *Of Mice and Men* directly conflicts with capitalist practices, as George, Lennie and the others discover.

The novel opens in what seems to be a fertile wilderness setting in which "the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green," and in which rabbits, raccoons and deer all live among the "golden foothills" (1). However, it is soon apparent that this is not quite virgin landscape: a path has been worn by boys from a nearby ranch and by tramps, while in front of a sycamore limb that has been "worn smooth by men who have sat on it" there is "an ashpile made by many fires" (2). Even the tranquility of the scene is undermined by the fact that it offers only a brief respite on the journey between two jobs. From here we move very quickly to the ranch—at least to the bunk house and the barn—where the bulk of the novel is set. The bunk house both symbolizes and underscores in a very literal way the migrant workers' lack of space and freedom. It is a construction whose apparently simple functional purpose disguises its status as an instrument of control:

> [The bunk house was] a long rectangular building. Inside, the walls were whitewashed and the floor unpainted. In three walls there were small windows, and in the fourth, a solid door with a wooden latch. Against the walls were eight bunks. . . . (19)

This spatial confinement forms more than an ironic contrast to the vast acres outside; it reinforces the economic, social and psychological constrictions on the workers.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* examines the architecture of "discipline," of which both the bunk house and the barn are ex-

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amples. Since effective control of a large concentrated group is difficult to achieve solely by force (as Curley discovers in his attack on Lennie), observation provides, for Foucault, the key to controlling behavior in a more subtle and successful manner: "the exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation" (170). The ideal model for such coercion is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, in which men are always subject to the gaze of the all-seeing eye of authority. Both the bunk house and Crook's barn are panoptical structures: the "small square windows" of the bunk house, for example, are less suited to their ostensible purpose of lighting the interior than they are to allowing for the observation of what is taking place within. In both buildings, control is established by the authoritarian gaze of the boss and his son Curley. Suspicious of Lennie's silence, the boss punctuates his departure from the bunk house with an arresting glance: "He turned abruptly and went to the door, but before he went out he turned and looked for a long moment at the two men." George is immediately aware of the significance of the glance: "Now he's got his eye on us" (25-26). A short time later, Candy's description of the boss is disrupted by the entrance of Curley, who immediately fixes the men in his gaze: "He glanced coldly at George and then at Lennie. . . . [H]is glance was at once calculating and pugnacious. Lennie squirmed under the look and shifted his feet nervously. . . . Curley stared levelly at him" (28). On Curley's departure, George turns to Candy for an explanation and, before replying, "the old man looked cautiously at the door to make sure nobody was listening" (28). Almost as soon as he begins to speak, Curley's wife appears in the doorway, blocking out the sunlight. Such observation serves to place the characters in what Foucault calls "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

Foucault's description of the function of observation cannot fully account for the internal divisions among the migrant workers in *Of Mice and Men*, or for the corresponding absence of a collective response. Peter Blau has suggested that "social values that legitimate opposition to dominant powers, and thereby solidify it, can emerge only in a collectivity whose members share the experience of being exploited and oppressed" (231). While the novel alludes to certain social distinctions—the boss "wore high-heeled boots and spurs to prove he was not a laboring man" and Curley "like his father, . . . wore high-heeled boots" (23, 28)—there is little sign here of the class conflicts which so marked

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the birth of industrial capitalism in Europe. In fact, the migrant workers in the novel do not "share the experience of being exploited and oppressed" because as the West underwent a period of industrial expansion in which agriculture had become "large-scale, intensified, diversified, mechanized" (McWilliams 5), the notions of individual freedom and individual responsibility fostered by western expansion preempted a collective defense of migrant workers' interests.

What distinguishes George and Lennie at the outset from the other more aimless and isolated workers is their shared dream of "a coupla acres." The dream operates as a chorus in the novella, in terms of both its tone and the structure that its repetition defines. It is described on three occasions: first, in the opening scene, as a "pipe dream" that George uses to calm Lennie; then, in the middle of the novel, when it appears that there is a possibility of its realization; finally, near the end, where it functions as a requiem for Lennie. In each case, it is recited in religious tones, as if it were a sacred text: "George's voice became deeper. He repeated his words rhythmically as though he had said them many times before" (15). The reaction that the vision provokes in George himself supports its apparently spiritual or other-worldly qualities: "he looked raptly at the wall. . . . [H]e sat entranced with his own picture" (64). This rapture, together with the pastoral vision that it invokes, has led critics such as Owens and Goldhurst to see the dream as an expression of a desire to return to Eden and a pre-lapsarian world. Owens, for example, suggests that the vision "represents a desire to defy the Curse of Cain and fall of man" (102), while Goldhurst traces a parallel between the migrant workers and Cain, neither of whom "possess or enjoy the fruits of [their] labor" (Benson 52).

Because it is so like a litany, however, there is the danger that what the dream actually describes will be overlooked in favor of its allegorical status. In fact, an analysis of its terms of reference suggests that the vision is, more than an invocation of some symbolic Eden, a direct reaction to the physical and psychological conditions imposed by capitalist practices; it is an expression of the desire for self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency. Initially, what is described is sketchy: George tells Lennie that they will "get a coupla acres an' a cow and some pigs. . . . An' when it rains in winter, we'll just say the hell with goin' to work, and we'll build up a fire in the stove and set around it" (15). Later, when the possibility of realizing their hopes seems closer, the description of "a coupla acres" and the comforts they will offer becomes much more detailed, includ-

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ing a "kitchen, orchard, cherries, apples, peaches" as well as a "chicken run" and a "win'mill" (62). This vision is the quintessential "American Dream," a dream founded, of course, on the notion that on the frontier anyone can find success. The dream reveals as much about the nature of power relations in an industrial system as it does about the simple desire for material success. The vision described by George is a reaction to what Foucault calls "biopower," the exercise of which provides for the "subjugation of bodies and control of populations" (Rabinow 262) that a developing capitalist society needs to accomplish: "we'd just live there: We'd belong there. There wouldn't be no more runnin' around the country. . . . No, sir, we'd have our own place where we belonged, and not sleep in no bunk house" (63). The vision unites George and Candy in a reaction to alienation, which is classically the consequence of the separation of labor from the full process of production. Candy's alienation ("I planted crops for damn near ever'body in this state, but they wasn't my crops and when I harvested 'em, it wasn't none of my harvest" [83]) would be, for George, resolved by the fulfillment of their shared dream: "when we put in a crop, why, we'd be there to take the crop up. We'd know what'd come of our planting" (63). A corollary is freedom from exploitative working conditions: "It ain't enough land so we'd have to work too hard," George says, "Maybe six, seven hours a day. We wouldn't have to buck no barley eleven hours a day" (63). The "administration of bodies and the calculated management of life," which, for Foucault, is an essential element of capitalism (Rabinow 262), would be usurped by the realization of the vision of spatial and temporal freedom: "S'pose they was a carnival or a circus come to town, or a ball-game, or any damn thing. . . . We'd just go to her. . . . we wouldn't ask nobody if we could. Jus' say 'We'll go to her,' an' we would" (66-67).

In discussing their plan, George warns Candy to be careful not to reveal anything because "They li'ble to can us so we can't get no stake" (67). Their plan is potentially subversive because the growing unity between George, Lennie, Candy and even Crooks raises the possibility that they will be able to stake themselves to a few acres of land. This would offer Candy the opportunity to escape the Darwinian consequences of capitalism: "Maybe you'll let me hoe in the garden even after I ain't no good at it" (66). Even the cynical Crooks, who has "seen hunderds of men come by on the road an' in the ranches, with bindles on their backs, an' that same damn thing in their heads," is caught up in the moment: "If you . . . guys would want a hand to work for nothing—

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just for his keep, why I'd come an' lend a hand. I ain't so crippled I can't work like a son-of-a-bitch if I want to" (84). This excitement soon dissipates, however, when he remembers his position, or rather, when he is reminded of it by the one character who is equally isolated and lonely: Curley's wife, who points out that "Nigger, I could get you strung up on a tree so easy it ain't even funny" (89).

Ultimately, however, any system that aims to organize and categorize human life must be confronted by its inherent contradictions, those moments of "power-failure." Foucault points out that "It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques [of biopower] that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them" (Rabinow 265). This is particularly true of the American West, where the need for migrant labor conflicts with an important function of authority, which is that it "clears up confusion" and "dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways" (Foucault 209). The well-documented brutality of the response to any attempt on the part of migrant workers in the West to act collectively may be seen as a consequence of this conflict, for the expression of power is never so unsophisticated as when it is most threatened.

Throughout the novel, Lennie has been portrayed as an ideal worker for the industrial system: he personifies the sheer bulk and strength of labor power. Clearly, though, his actions illustrate that he is beyond the control of authority, and therefore a threat to that authority. This is more than simply dramatic irony; it reveals one of the crucial contradictions inherent in "discipline," the successful expression of which, according to Foucault, "increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (138). Lennie's physical strength is thus a valuable commodity, but because it cannot be controlled it also constitutes a threat to the very system in which it is valued: the same strength that bucks bales of hay kills the wife of the Boss's son. His silence has already been interpreted as subversive both by the boss and by Curley ("By Christ, he's gotta talk when he's spoke to" [28]), and, according to George, he possesses a quality that cannot be tolerated: "He don't know no rules" (30); in other words, because he can neither be isolated nor coerced, Lennie exists outside the framework of capitalist practices, "beyond the pale." Earlier, George had complained that, without Lennie,

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> I could live so easy. I could get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month came I would take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want. Why I could stay in a cat house all night. . . , get a gallon of whisky, or set in a pool room. (12)

This corresponds exactly with George's vision of the future at the end of the novel but, by the end, it has become a vision of desolation. Lennie's death signifies the end of the dream of "a coupla acres" of land, and George's final recitation of that dream constitutes not only Lennie's last rites, but those of the dream itself. More than simply the "mercy-killing" of a doomed man, it signifies the triumph of capitalist authority.

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