

# ジョン・スタインベックによる最後の警鐘

久保田 文\*

## John Steinbeck's Last Warning

Aya Kubota

**要 旨** 今日、かつてのノーベル賞作家スタインベックは大半の人々にとって、*The Grapes of Wrath* によってその名を残す存在である。たしかに、1930年代の大不況下にあったアメリカにおいて、スタインベックは極貧と持たざる者の見果てぬ夢を描くことで社会を揺り動かした。その後の大作 *East of Eden* を経て、1960年代をむかえた彼は、病後の体調を押してアメリカ再発見の旅に出ることを決意する。愛犬チャーリーを伴いキャンピング・カーを駆る旅に出た彼は、季節労働者の家族と一期一会の時を楽しみ彼らの明るい笑顔を喜びながら、自分のような作家たちが理不尽なまでの不平等に苦しむ季節労働者の生活を変えたことを、自負をもって回顧している。

しかし、同時にスタインベックは、豊かに見える時代がやって来て、世界が新たなる罅につまずいて重大な問題に直面しつつあることを鋭く予知していた。何不自由なく暮らしながら、敵意と破壊への衝動にかられている若者。物質の氾濫する社会にあって、欲求不満の苛立ちと挫折感に苦しむ人々。他人が殺され取り除かれていくことを、ほとんど黙認する社会… これらに対しスタインベックは、「人の生命が貴重であった頃に作られたモラルは、もはや通用しない。新しい倫理観の確立が必要である」と主張し、人の生き生きとした生命力を奪うものへの嫌悪感を顕わにしている。

アメリカ一周旅行の経験と感慨は、*Travels with Charley* に収められ、アメリカという国が抱える問題を更に踏み込んで捉えたエッセイは、最後の作品 *America and Americans* の形をとった。後者の出版の二年後、スタインベックは没した。そのため、彼は我々の取るべき方向性を具体的には述べてくれないのだが、彼の数々の作品の中から、答えを拾うことは可能である。その前にまず、この二作を中心に分析することから、スタインベックが後に続く我々に聞かせたいと願ってくれた最後の警鐘に、じっくりと耳を傾けたい。

## Introduction

For the vast majority of people today John Steinbeck is best known as the writer of the 1930s classic, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Writing in the time of the Great Depression, he appealed to public opinion by depicting the lives of those living below the poverty line as well as the unfulfilled dreams of poor migrant workers.

In his journal on 11 July 1938, Steinbeck wrote, “Once this book [*The Grapes of Wrath*] is done I won’t care how soon I die, because my major work will be over.”<sup>1)</sup> Although “Steinbeck’s Testament,” and his “longest and most ambitious” novel,<sup>2)</sup> *The East of Eden*, was written in the 1950s, the voice of Steinbeck some fifteen years previously had been one of God’s wrath, and he summoned

\* 本学助教授 アメリカ文学

up all his strength to complete *The Grapes of Wrath*. As a result of this, the success of the novel moved American society.

In 1960, accompanied by his beloved old dog Charley, Steinbeck traveled in a truck with “a little house built like the cabin of a small boat”<sup>3)</sup> to rediscover America, and came into contact with the families of migrant workers. During a time of great social change, the working conditions of migrant workers on whom Steinbeck had concentrated his gaze in the 1930s, had greatly improved. He commented on these changes in 1960.

I've known quite a few migrant people over the years ... Okies and Mexican wetbacks, and the Negroes who move into New Jersey and Long Island. And wherever I've seen them there has always been a contractor in the background to smooth the way for them for a consideration. Years ago the farmers tried to draw more labor than they needed so that they could lower wages. This seems to be no longer true, for government agencies channel only as many laborers as are needed, and some kind of minimum wage is maintained.<sup>4)</sup>

Steinbeck further commented on these events of the 1960s in reviewing what he had previously written partly proudly and partly humorously, writing in *America and Americans* ... “American novelists in the nineteen-twenties and thirties and forties attacked social injustices and inequalities with a savagery aimed at reform, conditions which have since changed and improved still linger as truths in the foreign mind. This is a compliment to the force of American writing.”<sup>5)</sup>

Yet, the objects of Steinbeck's fury and animosity haven't completely disappeared from society. His retrospection led to his criticism of Hollywood commercialism, “... the American films in the golden early days of Hollywood, having no purpose but to excite, to amuse, to astonish, and thereby to sell tickets, created a life that never existed, based perhaps on the dreams and the yearnings of the inexperienced and ill-informed.”<sup>6)</sup> Further compounding Steinbeck's comments the current monster of mass media nowadays creates stories of “a life that never existed,” resulting in disillusionment for many people and blaming themselves as failures. Steinbeck wisely noticed that an irresponsible entertainment industry makes people waste their true lives. “Americans and the Future,” the last part of the book tells us that the author had misgivings about the future.

To further examine what exactly were the social diseases that Steinbeck warned against in the twilight years of his life, the reader should concentrate on *Travels with Charley* and its near contemporary, *America and Americans*. Although the former book is a very casual travel sketch and the latter contains some rather unsparing social criticism, it is possible to discover common messages in both which make up Steinbeck's important last words.

In the fall of 1960, Steinbeck wrote, “A kind of second childhood falls on so many men. They trade their violence for the promise of a small increase of life span.... I did not want to surrender fierceness for a small gain in yardage.”<sup>7)</sup> Though having the limitations of being a convalescent, he set out “in search of America,” in a truck with his French poodle. He drove from New York to visit 38 states on a road trip that was to take him four months. Despite Steinbeck being only 58 at the time, it can be inferred that he knew his remaining life span would not be long if he were to reject a defen-

sive way of living, and that he began to think about what he had not yet imparted to people.

The great writer's openness and unaffectedness show through in the phrasing of *Travels with Charley*. In 1966, six years after the journey, and two years before his death from heart failure, *America and Americans*, an essay discussing American civilization, was published. While *Travels with Charley* was so humorous that it "sold more copies following its first appearance than any of his earlier works,"<sup>8)</sup> the project of *America and Americans* began "as a collection of photographs commissioned by the Viking Press, to present a colorful montage of the nation two thirds of the way through the twentieth century."<sup>9)</sup> This particular essay, therefore, isn't so voluminous and the book is now out of print. Additionally, his scathing criticism of the problems facing America may have touched a raw nerve in the American people, and *America and Americans* was not well received.

*Travels with Charley* allows us to review Steinbeck's basic position both as a writer and as a man. Although his personal opinions in *America and Americans* are unsupported by profoundly academic facts, the intuitive analyses and predictions found in the book remain extremely valuable as Steinbeck's counsel to future generations. Moreover, among the humorous passages found in *Travels with Charley*, we can find numerous examples that corroborate the author's more serious assertions contained in *America and Americans*. Mainly focusing on these two works, this thesis aims to analyze the meaning of John Steinbeck's last warning to posterity.

### **A Creeping Evil Thing<sup>10)</sup>**

When he was writing about the future of America in *America and Americans*, Steinbeck appears to have been clouded in mist of great anxiety regarding it. Our new enemy made its appearance from unexpected directions.

Much earlier than the appearance of *America and Americans*, in the 1930s, America had been subject to the devastating and miserable dust bowl migration. Steinbeck battled against the resulting extreme poverty by recording the affected people's lives and by making public statements. He saw a "three year old child" with a "swollen belly caused by malnutrition,"<sup>11)</sup> and he met a mother who had "had a baby in the tent.... It was born dead"<sup>12)</sup>

George West, an editor for *The San Francisco News*, asked Steinbeck "to do a series on the dust bowl migration."<sup>13)</sup> In the summer of 1936, the writer drove around California "touring the state's agricultural valleys in an old bakery truck,"<sup>14)</sup> and out of this came *The Harvest Gypsies*, an essay-like record of observation. In the last chapter of this work, Steinbeck made a proposition to the government.

Since the greatest number of the white American migrants are former farm owners, renters or laborers, it follows that their training and ambition have never been removed from agriculture. It is suggested that lands be leased; or where it is possible, that state and Federal lands be set aside as subsistence farms for migrants. These can be leased at a low rent or sold on long time payments to families of migrant workers.

Blocks of these subsistence farms should be located in regions which require an abundance of harvest

labor. Small houses should be erected and the families settled, schools located so that the children can be educated. People who take these farms should be encouraged and helped to produce for their own subsistence fruits, vegetables, and livestock ... pigs, chickens, rabbits, turkeys and ducks....

The cost of such ventures would not be much greater than the amount which is now spent for tear gas, machine guns and ammunition, and deputy sheriffs.<sup>15)</sup>

This appeal demonstrates the writer's sincere hope that people could find their own places. Three years later, this anger, hope and eagerness culminated in the appearance of the great novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In the 1960s, in the author's later years, America had entered a period of material prosperity, resulting in Steinbeck's struggle with people's misery becoming one of the great accomplishments of the past. Nevertheless, the author realized another tragedy; one far more uncontrollable than that of the 1930s had begun. He wrote, "Starvation, pestilence, plague, which once cut us down, are no longer possible.... We have succeeded in what our fathers prayed for and it is our success that is destroying us."<sup>16)</sup> Here, we should consider the reasons for Steinbeck's lack of optimism. Today, medical advances and nutritious food allow us to live much longer than ever before. The people of advanced nations in particular appear to live in hygienic comfort and material abundance. In Steinbeck's opinion, what exactly have we lost on our way to this seemingly Utopian state?

### **Seemingly groundless anger**

Our newborn enemy is perhaps best expressed by Steinbeck when he says the following.

What happened to us came quickly and quietly, came from many directions and was the more dangerous because it wore the face of good. Almost unlimited new power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Machinery took the heavy burden from our shoulders. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life span. Automation began to replace our workers. Where once the majority of our people worked the land, machines, chemistry, and a precious few produced more food than we needed or could possibly use. Leisure, which again had been the property of heaven, came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all these good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity.<sup>17)</sup>

As Steinbeck pointed out, machinery and automation came to act for us, allowing us to achieve the leisure time, which had been our ancestors' dream. Yet, for some reason, even the youth of today have tired and unhappy faces. In addition, how can we explain our not so infrequent encounters with cruel and sad news, apart from natural disasters?

Steinbeck called such social phenomena a "deadly illness", and sufferers from the disease were described as follows.

Americans, very many of them, are obsessed with tensions. Nerves are drawn tense and twanging. Emotions boil up and spill over into violence largely in meaningless or unnatural directions. In the cities people

scream with rage at one another, taking out their unease on the first observable target. The huge reservoir of the anger of frustration is full to bursting. The cab driver, the bus or truck driver, pressed with traffic and confusion, denounces Negroes and Puerto Ricans unless he is a Negro or a Puerto Rican. Negroes burn up with a hateful flame. A line has formed for the couches of the psychoanalysts of people wound so tight that the mainspring has snapped and they deliver their poisons in symbolic capsules to the doctor. The legal and criminal distribution of sleeping pills and pep pills is astronomical, the first opening escape into sleep and the second access to a false personality, a biochemical costume in which to strut. Kicks increasingly take the place of satisfaction. Of love, only the word, bent and bastardized, remains.<sup>18)</sup>

Exactly why are the people in advanced nations so obsessed with tensions, anger and hatred?

It is also strange that we cannot even easily define the targets of this anger or hatred, and Steinbeck lamented this unwelcome situation, saying, “the boy today, hating the world, creating a hateful world and then tries to destroy it and sometimes himself.” This raises the question of why people have reasonless hostility to the world? Do the people of today regard others and their surroundings as enemies? In the 21st century, many people also seem to be obsessed with the feeling that they are somehow losers. In many recent American movies, we recognize that some characters’ ridiculous acts are caused by having such an inferiority complex. Some characters say they are losers, accompanied with a sigh, while other characters shout, “You are a loser!” at yet more actors. This precise problem, and its reasons, remains to be discussed in another thesis, although it is safe to say that hatred and a lust for destruction are just some of the staple characteristics of the social disease.<sup>19)</sup>

### **Anethics<sup>20)</sup>**

Steinbeck found yet another peculiarity of this sickness, and minted the word “anethics” to describe it. This quotation is also from the beginning of “*Americans and the Future*.”

I begin to think that the evil is one thing, not many, that racial unrest, the emotional crazy quilt that drives our people in panic to the couches of the psychoanalysts, the fallout, dropout, copout insurgency of our children and young people, the rush to stimulant as well as hypnotic drugs, the rise of narrow ugly, and vengeful cults of all kinds, the distrust and revolt against all authority, political, religious, or military, the awful and universal sense of apprehension and even terror, and this in a time of plenty such as has never been known ... I think all these are manifestations of one single cause.<sup>21)</sup>

Needless to say, snowballing fallout and dropout rates overshadow our future. These young people are discontented with society, or the world is simply unbearable for them.

Contemporary people also tend to be lacking in moral standards. According to Steinbeck, we are on the “verge of moral and hence nervous collapse.”<sup>22)</sup> And to make matters worse, the nation itself is contaminated with the disease as a whole, and the trouble with society is that it is getting more and more accustomed to it.

It's a rare morning when our newspapers do not report bribery, malfeasance, and many other forms of cheating on the part of the public officials who have used the authority vested in their positions for personal gain. Of course we don't hear of the honest men, but the danger lies not in the miscreants but in our attitude toward them. Increasingly we lose our feeling of wrong. Huge corporations are convicted of price fixing and apparently the only shame is in being caught. It is a kind of a game.<sup>23)</sup>

This feeling of numbness towards wrongdoing is extremely unpleasant and unsettling.

### **Wallowers in self-pity**

Loss of any moral sense ultimately gives rise to the birth of a more irresponsible people. Younger generations are now twisted masters of the shifting of blame onto other shoulders, even when they are the ones at fault.

The American has never been a perfect instrument, but at one time he had a reputation for gallantry, which, to my mind, is a sweet and priceless quality. It must still exist, but it is blotted out by the dust cloud of self-pity. The last clear statement of gallantry in my experience I heard in a recidivist state prison, a place of two-time losers, all lifers. In the yard an old and hopeless convict spoke as follows: "The kids come up and they bawl how they wasn't guilty or how they was framed or how it was their mothers' fault or their father was a drunk. Us old boys try to tell 'em, 'Kid, for Chrise sake do your *own* time and let us do ours.'" In the present climate of whining self-pity, of practiced sickness, of professional goldbricking, of screaming charges about whose fault it is, one hears of very few who do their own time, who take their rap and don't spread it around. It is as though the quality of responsibility had atrophied.<sup>24)</sup>

It is not only criminals who were caught in a trap of self-pity and irresponsibility. In "*The Pursuit of Happiness*" Steinbeck turned to the issue of modern home discipline in America. It seemed that although parents had given up the rigorous discipline of their children, they still expected them to be perfect in society. When this dream ended in subsequent failure, it was supposed to be the parents' fault.

No longer was it even acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did; he must be better, live better, know more, dress more richly, and if possible change from his father's trade to a profession. This dream became touchingly national....

If the hope was not fulfilled, and it rarely was, the parents went into a tailspin of guilt, blaming themselves for having done something wrong or at least something not right.... This feeling of self-recrimination on the part of the parents was happily seized upon by the children, for it allowed them to be failures through no fault of their own. Laziness, sloppiness, indiscipline, selfishness, and general piggery which are the natural talents of children and were once slapped out of them, if they lived, now became either crimes of the parents or sickness in the children, who would far rather be sick than disciplined.<sup>25)</sup>

This refusal of youth to become well-disciplined grown-ups has subsequently led to educational confusion in many advanced nations.

The relationship between generations has also become colder and more complicated. Adults,

nowadays, due to being busier and more exhausted than previous generations, can't bring themselves to educate the younger generation without some reluctance, just one more example of their irresponsibility. Steinbeck didn't only condemn the youth:

I do not blame the youth; no one has ever told him that his tricks are obvious, his thoughts puerile, his goals uncooperative and selfish, his art ridiculous. Psychoanalysts constantly remind their little patients that they must find the real "me." The real "me" invariably turns out to be a savage, self-seeking little beast.<sup>26)</sup>

Again, we have to keep in mind that living in this century, we ourselves were also brought up to lead an irresponsible existence and were not trained well, meaning that this shouldn't be a kind of self-pity.

### **Being destructive and self-destructive**

Steinbeck's love of his nation both worried and encouraged him to write *America and Americans*, "It is hard to criticize the people one loves. I knew this would be a painful thing to write."<sup>27)</sup> Though he wrote the book in the 1960s, today's generations are still able to recognize that the social problems he pointed out became fairly common issues in advanced countries before we even really came to recognize them. After conquering many physical diseases, psychological diseases then started to prevail. It poses the questions of what has become of human beings in a society that is both irresponsible and filled with anger?

Let us think about cases where the worst rises to the top. Social diseases whose characteristics are "hatred" and "immorality," lead to random murders and unreasoned killing. Nowadays, the minds of criminals are getting ever more twisted and extortion is no longer their sole goal in many cases. It seems that they have no specific aim but their lust for destruction.

... But the greatest increase is in crimes against people, against the physical bodies of people. The rapes have little to do with sexuality and much to do with destructive murder. The mugging in the streets and the violence which has turned our parks into jungles have little to do with robbery, although, as in the modern rape the ritual of sex is added, so in mugging there is robbery but its purpose and its drive seem to be destructive, the desire to hurt, to maim, to kill.<sup>28)</sup>

It goes without saying that such phenomena show the morbidity of our society.

When Steinbeck used the phrase "destruction of the self," he was referring to the increasing number of suicides in modern society. Despite now being able to live with the greatest amount of ease in history, it remains a mystery as to why so many of us are obsessed with suicidal desire or with feeling that life is just a burden. It suggests that those people who were indiscriminate in killing others actually want to kill themselves; they are just seeking traveling companions for death.

Steinbeck asked: "Is that what we are becoming, a national kennel of animals with no purpose and

no direction?”<sup>29)</sup> Moreover, he stated people had come to have “no duty to carry out, and no purpose to fulfill.”<sup>30)</sup> In this current age, it is easy to recognize the author’s serious apprehensions for future society.

It is true Steinbeck was a romanticist and his writing contained much nostalgia, but his feelings in this area doesn’t mean that we should return to ways of living in the past; he added, “I’m not going to preach about any good old days. By our standards of comfort they were pretty awful.”<sup>31)</sup> He pointed out that the rules and morals which were made a long time ago had become meaningless in modern society, saying “[t]hose codes of conduct we call morals were evolved for this thinly inhabited continent when a man’s life was important because he was rare and he was needed.”<sup>32)</sup> Steinbeck’s words indicate the need for new rules and new morals in an age when most people are able to physically survive with relative ease.

## Conclusion

As Steinbeck anticipated and was worried about when writing *America and Americans*, our society is becoming progressively worse with seemingly no end. People are so frustrated that they easily lose their temper, and we seem to have lost any sense of guilt. By becoming too self-centered, and through wallowing in self-pity, many people are thinking of committing suicide in an extremely closed individualistic world. Is this symptomatic of having reached a dead end? Is our current situation nothing but mass hysteria? Is it similar to a group of lemmings jumping from a cliff one after another? What route will human dignity allow our species to take?

At the end of *America and Americans*,<sup>33)</sup> Steinbeck went on to say “We have not lost our way at all. The roads of the past have come to an end and we have not yet discovered a path to the future. I think we will find one, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now.” Steinbeck, on occasion, seems to be too composed or too objective and even a little cruel toward human beings due to his biologically fair points of view; he loved all the species on the earth with near equality. It was this true love of humankind that allowed Steinbeck to warn against the newly born evilness, even in the twilight of his life, indicating that he was hoping for the wholesome conservation of our species. *America and Americans* is surely worthy of being much more widely read and of being paid far more attention than it currently receives.

It is possible for us to change the dead end into our turning point. Yet, as was mentioned before, *America and Americans* was published just two years before Steinbeck’s death, and regrettably he didn’t explain his views on any new direction or new morals concretely. The book ended with ambiguous hope and expectation for the future. It remains for us, therefore, to search for our new route by the careful rereading of his other works. In the following theses, Steinbeck’s loves and hates will be analyzed, allowing us to take further useful cues from the author.



## Notes

- 1) John Steinbeck, *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath*, ed. Robert Demott (New York: Viking Press, 1989), 41.
- 2) John Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (Penguin Books, 1990), vii–viii.
- 3) John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley* (Penguin Books, 1986), 6.
- 4) *Ibid.*, 67–68.
- 5) John Steinbeck, *America and Americans* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 136.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 136.
- 7) *Travels with Charley*, 20.
- 8) Susan F. Beegel, et al., *Steinbeck and the Environment* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 83.
- 9) *Ibid.*, 282.
- 10) *America and Americans*, 137.
- 11) John Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1988), 29.
- 12) *Ibid.*, 30.
- 13) *Ibid.*, vi.
- 14) *Ibid.*, vii.
- 15) *Ibid.*, 58–59.
- 16) *America and Americans*, 142.
- 17) *Ibid.*, 141.
- 18) *Ibid.*, 139.
- 19) *Ibid.*, 142.
- 20) *Ibid.*, 137.
- 21) *Ibid.*, 137.
- 22) *Ibid.*, 140.
- 23) *Ibid.*, 140.
- 24) *Ibid.*, 138–139.
- 25) *Ibid.*, 93–94.
- 26) *Ibid.*, 103.
- 27) *Ibid.*, 139.
- 28) *Ibid.*, 142.
- 29) *Ibid.*, 139.
- 30) *Ibid.*, 140.
- 31) *Ibid.*, 138.
- 32) *Ibid.*, 141.
- 33) *Ibid.*, 142.