A Journey into
Steinbeck’s
California

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ARTPLACE SERIES

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For Bill Gilly,
who most certainly knows why
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Chapter 1
Steinbeck’s California
The Valley of the World
In 1951, when John Steinbeck had been a resident of New York City for about a year, he sat down at his desk to write East of Eden (1952), his ode to California. Nearly twenty years earlier, he had declared his intention to tell “the story of this whole valley . . . so that it would be the valley of the world.” Epics take time to incubate. Certain forces coalesced when he moved East and ended a cycle of personal despair: a new marriage, a new home, distance from California. As he worked on his manuscript, he wrote in his journal, “My wish is that when my reader has finished with this book, he will have a sense of belonging in it. He will actually be a native of that Valley.” John Steinbeck was ready to unravel his intertwined heritage of place, history, and people—and to retie it with a knot of his own invention.

Steinbeck’s “valley of the world” is an enticing notion, particularly irresistible for anyone concerned with marketing the pleasures of the Salinas Valley. But, for the writer, the words undoubtedly suggested something closer to what D. H. Lawrence proposed when he tackled the subject of American writing in 1923: “Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality,” he wrote in the introduction to Classic American Writers. John Steinbeck grew up sensing that spirit of place, feeling that the whole of
Monterey County was in his blood. From age fourteen on, his passion was to set it down right and true. “My country is different from the rest of the world,” he wrote to his publisher in 1933.

It seems to be one of those pregnant places from which come wonders . . . I was born to it and my father was. Our bodies came from this soil—our bones came . . . from the limestone of our own mountains and our blood is distilled from the juices of this earth. I tell you now that my country—a hundred miles long and about fifty wide—is unique in the world.

Steinbeck spent a long career shaping the contours of that unique land in words. His Monterey County is not Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, more fabricated than real, but the landscape of his childhood, often more real than fabricated. His valley of the world is historically rich, beautiful, and peopled with migrants. Steinbeck wanted to carve prose so exacting that the places of his heart—the bronze hills of the Salinas Valley and the churning Pacific Ocean nearby—would be fully rendered for any reader. But it’s not just his descriptions that bring forth the spirit of place. His authorial grasp was ambitious and holistic. He wrote about nature’s impact on the eye and the heart.
He wrote about the history and geography of place. He wrote about the people who lived in the towns and valleys of Monterey County. He showed how each place he loved—Jolon, Soledad, Pacific Grove, Monterey, Salinas—had a different energy. Steinbeck’s fiction is a rich tapestry of land, history, and human experience.

East of Eden, part autobiography, part myth, part historical survey, part anecdote, part pure creation, was the “big book” that would strike the symphonic chords of Steinbeck’s life. He considered the novel his War and Peace, written with “the great word sounds of speech not writing,” with “song” in it. “I will make my country as great in the literature of the world as any place in existence,” he wrote.

A Journey into Steinbeck’s California is about John Steinbeck’s country, its landscapes and towns. Its intent is akin to Steinbeck’s own—to capture the whole picture, the intersection of land and people. Human history and natural history were never separate subjects for Steinbeck. Each place where he lived and wrote shaped him differently because each place had its own “vibration.” He in turn shaped those places: visitors to Cannery Row today expect to see Mack and the boys and are disappointed to find curio shops. Time alters a street like Cannery Row. But its vibration persists.

A Holistic Sense of Place

John Steinbeck said repeatedly that his books were written in layers: The Grapes of Wrath (1939) has five, Cannery Row (1945) has four, and Sea of Cortez (1941) has four, “and I think very few will follow it down to the fourth,” he wrote his editor. That notion of layers is perplexing because Steinbeck, like most writers, resisted textual explications. Although his comments on layers provide no keys, they do suggest that each book may be approached from different perspectives. And, in fact, holism begins here, understanding the importance of several perspectives, multiple layers, different “peepholes” as he notes in Cannery Row. To appreciate Steinbeck’s spirit of place—as well as his holistic sensibilities—is to consider what layering might mean for him (although this book is hardly concerned with strict constructions): first is the wonder of the surface; second, human interactions; third, historical shadows; and fourth, the universality of life.
For John Steinbeck, surface texture encompasses the names of things, human eccentricities, and the physicality of a place. He asks readers to see with precision. Numerous examples could be given of his rapt attention to the external world. In a tide pool, “orange and speckled and fluted nudibranchs slide gracefully over the rocks, their skirts waving like the dresses of Spanish dancers.” Rose of Sharon in *The Grapes of Wrath* looks “frawny” when mournful. Salinas hills are “gold and saffron and red” in June and, as summer wears on, become “umber.” California poppies are “a burning color—not orange, not gold, but if pure gold were liquid and could raise a cream, that golden cream might be like the color of the poppies,” he writes in *East of Eden*, and deep purple lupins have petals “edged with white, so that a field of lupins is more blue than you can imagine.” Steinbeck’s prose gives readers a human heart in contact with the land, to paraphrase nature writer Barry Lopez.

Steinbeck’s holistic sweep includes human interaction with nature, as he declared in a notebook while writing *To a God Unknown* (1933): “Each figure is a population, and the stones, the trees, the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man—the world and man—the one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know.” In Steinbeck’s hands, the Salinas Valley becomes a template for human struggles. As the opening chapter of *East of Eden* shows, the valley is a land of contrasts seen and felt: drought and rain; rich years and scrappy...
years; aching natural beauty—tawny or bright green
hills, swaths of mustard or lupin in the spring, “round
comfortable oaks”—colliding with menacing shadows—
“high grey fog,” afternoon winds, dark blue mountains
to the West, and turbulent waters on the Big Sur
coast (and these days, unavoidable traffic). Chiaroscuro
of the land tallies with his characters’ own light
and shadow.

Perhaps the mountain ranges bordering the Salinas
Valley shouted “contrast” to Steinbeck most loudly—
and those contrasts mean things deep in the psyche.
The Gabilan Mountains to the East are “light gay
mountains full of sun and loveliness and a kind of
invitation,” he writes in East of Eden. In The Red Pony
(1937), the Gabilans are “jolly mountains, with hill
ranches in their creases, and with pine trees growing on
the crests. People lived there, and battles had been
fought against the Mexicans on the slopes.” But to the
West lay the Santa Lucias, coastal mountains with
stands of redwoods, deep ravines, hot springs, and scrub-
covered hills. These are the unexplored, mysterious
places in Steinbeck’s fiction. Like Jody, his protagonist
in The Red Pony, the young Steinbeck must have
wondered about these “curious secret mountains” to the
West and thought how “little he knew about them.”
Jody’s father tells him that “I’ve read there’s more
unexplored country in the mountains of Monterey
County than any place in the United States,” a snippet
of dialogue that might well have come from Steinbeck’s
own father.

These landscapes, resonant with human energies,
are quite different from those of another renowned
Californian, John Muir. Whereas Muir’s is a triumphant
wilderness, Steinbeck’s is a peopled land, space with a
human imprint. Even at its darkest, Steinbeck’s nature
is a place where people experience joy as well as pain.
Nature offers a refuge. In Of Mice and Men (1937),

California poppies.

Lupins in the San Antonio Valley.

A California oak, depicted in Ann B. Fisher’s The Salinas,
Upside-Down River.
George and Lennie find a protective clearing by the Salinas River; in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad hides from pursuers in a cave; Jody in *The Red Pony* finds comfort in a grassy spot near the water tank. In *Cannery Row*, Mack and the boys’ home is under the protective shadow of a black cypress tree whose “limbs folded down and made a canopy under which a man could lie and look out at the flow and vitality of Cannery Row.” Land is home to restless spirits.

**A Sense of History**

Steinbeck’s holism also embraces what he called a necessary “wall of background” in each work. That meant getting the atmosphere right for each story. History and culture are as much a part of place in Steinbeck’s work as is nature, carefully rendered and symbolically evoked.

Human histories crowd California. Settlement came from all directions: Spaniards and Mexicans from the south; Chinese and Japanese by sea from the west; and German, Swedish, and English pioneers from the prairie or seaboard of the eastern United States. Steinbeck includes this historical diversity. His Salinas Valley is, in fact, a region roughly outlined by Spanish missions: Mission San Juan Bautista in the north, Missions Soledad and San Antonio de Padua to the south, the Carmel Mission to the west. These romantic, brooding ruins and restored churches stand sentry over Steinbeck Country and serve as fitting sentry over Steinbeck Country and serve as fitting

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**Dark Watchers**

To the Spanish, *Big Sur* was “El Pais Grande del Sur,” or “the big land to the south.” To Steinbeck, the Big Sur coast was a land of mystery: dark mountains, churning sea, silent redwood groves. Perhaps his 1920 stint on a road construction crew in the area stamped him with the region’s dark appeal.

Highway 1 along the wild coast opened to much fanfare on June 27, 1937; it has been compared to two of the loveliest and most precipitous drives in the western world, the Cornich in France and the Amalfi Coast in Italy.

One of Steinbeck’s most anthologized stories, “Flight,” is set in this region: “About 15 miles below Monterey, the Torres family had their farm, a few sloping acres above a cliff that dropped to the brown reefs and to the hissing white waters.” When young Pepe Torres must flee into the mountains, “Dark watchers” haunt him—as they seem to haunt the gnarly mountains today. “I don’t know who the dark watchers are,” Steinbeck responded to a 1953 query about the meaning of the story, “but I know they are there. I’ve seen them and felt them. I guess they are whatever you want them to be.”