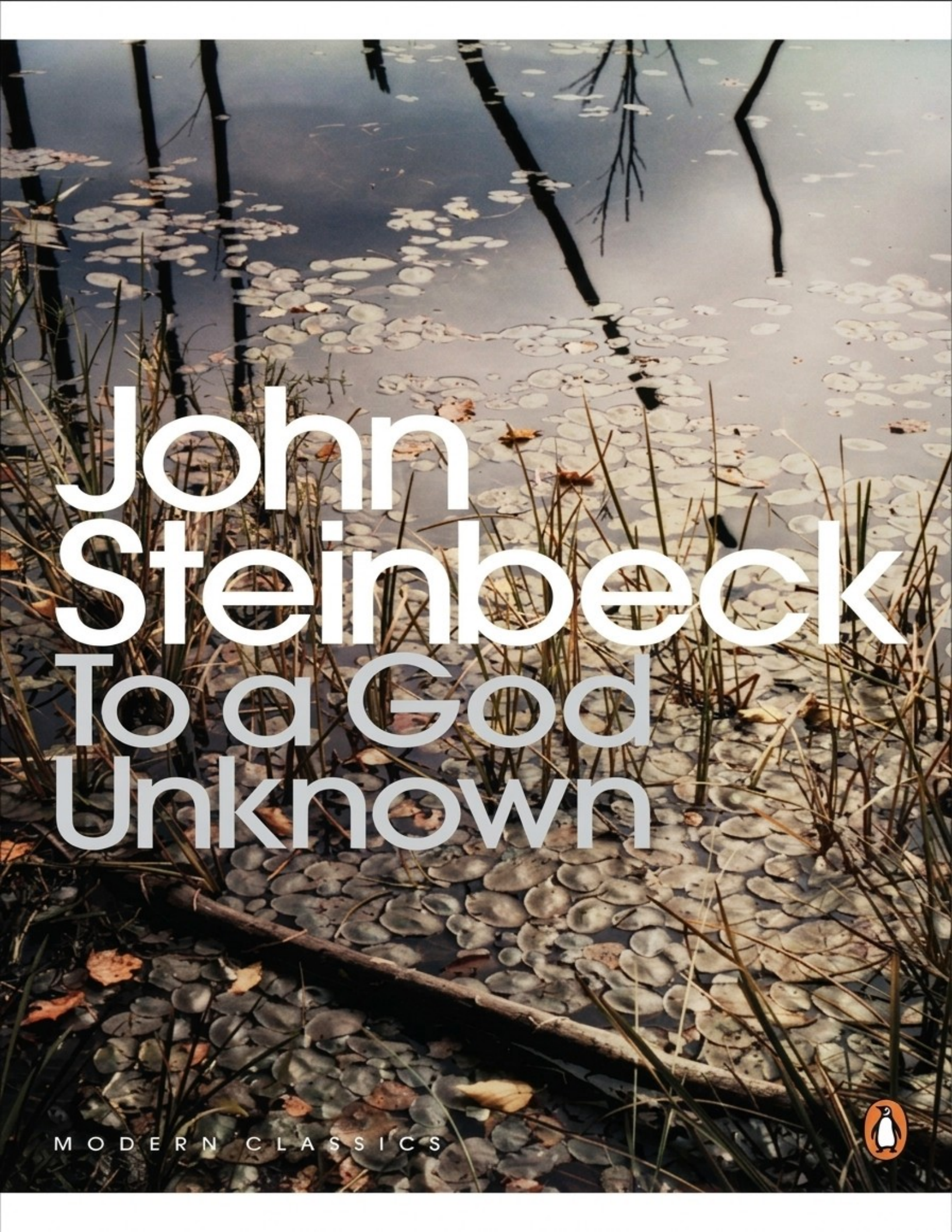




John Steinbeck To a God Unknown

MODERN CLASSICS





P E N G U I N
C L A S S I C S

JOHN STEINBECK

To a God Unknown

With an Introduction and Notes by Robert DeMott



PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS

TO A GOD UNKNOWN

Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, John Steinbeck grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast – and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a labourer and journalist in New York City, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two Californian fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed courses regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the Californian labouring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *A Russian Journal* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burning Bright* (1950), and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) preceded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he travelled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A*

Fabrication (1957), *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966), and the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!* (1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), and *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath* (1989). He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

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INTRODUCTION

“Primus ego in patriam mecum... deducam Musas”; “for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country....” This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse... to his own little “country.”...

—Jim Burden on Virgil’s *Georgics*, in
Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

This story has grown since I started it. From a novel about people, it has become a novel about the world.... The new eye is being opened here in the west—the new seeing.

—John Steinbeck in a 1932 journal

I

In the margin of an older sister’s copy of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Prince Otto*, a very young John Steinbeck marked in pencil his intention to be a writer. It was startling because, as Steinbeck later claimed in an early draft of *To a God Unknown*, “Artists and poets were not much thought of in western America.” But at that time, when the definition of *writer* seemed less ambiguous and contested (but no less fraught with dilemma) than it has become in our post-structuralist age, Steinbeck’s desire would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which he addressed with such undeflected intensity for the rest of his life that he often considered himself “monomaniacal”: “When there is no writing, I feel like an uninhabited body,” he remarked in 1931. He belonged to a turn-of-the-century generation of white male novelists for whom the act of writing would be considered an essential, even exalted, pursuit. (William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway were his contemporaries; born within four years of each other, all three eventually won the Nobel Prize

for Literature.) For Steinbeck, as with many modernist-era writers, literary creativity took precedence over nearly all other life endeavors. He reached maturity in a period when becoming an author was a self-willed act with a romantic, rebellious aura to it; consequently, two of his first three books—*Cup of Gold* (1929) and *To a God Unknown* (1933) —feature larger-than-life heroes. More than that, however, throughout Steinbeck’s life, writing was all things to him—a purely enjoyable activity, a sustaining addiction, a way of establishing and maintaining personal and economic identity, and perhaps most of all, a habit of being, a necessary condition of existence: “As long as [I] can eat and write more books, that’s all I require,” he stated in November 1933.

Though occasionally he played the role of Artist with capital A, Steinbeck was more often than not extremely humble and self-deprecating. He learned early to distrust and even eschew the glamorous, celebrity side of authorship (with its emphasis on publicity and fame), and instead focused his energy on its private workaday side. If living so deeply in his fiction made him less than fully comfortable in the social, domestic, and emotional spheres of real life, it also provided therapeutic, compensatory benefits for a man who was intensely shy and inward-looking. Novels “regulate our lives and give us a responsibility,” he claimed in 1930. Five years later, having tasted his first critical and commercial success with his fourth novel, *Tortilla Flat*, he confessed to the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s book critic Joseph Henry Jackson, “The work has been the means of making me feel that I am living richly, diversely, and, in a few cases and for a few moments, even heroically. All of these things are not me, for I am none of these things. But sometimes in my own mind at least I can create something which is larger and richer than I am.” More than two decades later, Steinbeck was still espousing the priority of the life in art; he counseled Denis Murphy, a young novelist and family friend, that “work is your only weapon” against life’s tragedies.

John Ernst Steinbeck was born into a respected middle-class household in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902. He was the third of four children of John Ernst Steinbeck (1862–1935), a quiet, emotionally distant man who was, until 1911, manager of the Sperry Flour Mill, then became a private tradesman with his own feed and grain store (which failed), a bookkeeper at the Spreckels Sugar Refinery, and, in 1926, elected treasurer of Monterey County. Steinbeck’s mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck (1867–1934), was an

energetic, formidable, and socially active former schoolteacher, who encouraged Steinbeck's intellectual habits and fostered his sense of privilege at being the only son among the four children. His bookish side, however, was colored by a sensitivity—passed down from the Hamiltons—toward ghostly apparitions and paranormal reality; throughout Steinbeck's work, beginning with *Cup of Gold*, detachment exists side by side with an attraction for archetypes, visionary experiences, and mythic patterns. The great live oak under which Joseph Wayne, the protagonist of *To a God Unknown*, builds his house has its counterpart in a “brother” pine tree the young Steinbeck planted next to the family's Monterey Bay summer cottage on Eleventh Avenue in Pacific Grove: “If the tree should die, I am pretty sure I should be ill,” he claimed in 1930.

Steinbeck's parents were proper, civic-minded citizens in Salinas, a predominantly conservative agricultural community toward which Steinbeck exhibited antipathy for most of his adult life. Writing was his ticket out of town, though once gone he remained in close contact with his family. (Like Joseph Wayne, Steinbeck always chafed between the desire to be “at home” and the need to be independent and court adventure; metaphorically speaking, writing fulfilled both urges.) His father hoped Steinbeck would do something suitably practical with his life, such as be an engineer or lawyer, but accepted his son's “ruthless” decision to become a writer. Beginning sporadically in 1929, he allowed John—and after August 1930, and continuing for most of the next five years, John and his wife, Carol—to occupy rent-free the family's three-room Pacific Grove cottage, and also provided a twenty-five-dollar monthly living allowance so that his son could concentrate solely on writing daily. From that time on, Steinbeck never held an outside job; working in words became his profession and vocation.

Steinbeck's mother, never quite satisfied with her son's radical decision, hoped that, if he became a novelist at all, he would be like the successful Booth Tarkington. Well into his twenties, Steinbeck was still influenced by the flabby sensibility and wordy excesses of Donn Byrne and James Branch Cabell. Fortunately, however, besides devouring the Bible and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, Steinbeck also read widely in translations of ancient classics (notably by Aeschylus, Herodotus, Homer, and Virgil) and modern American and world literature, philosophy, history, science, anthropology, and mythology. His acquaintance, begun in 1930, with

Edward F. Ricketts—a philosophical marine biologist at whose Pacific Biological Laboratory, on Ocean View Avenue in Monterey, Steinbeck spent countless hours of discussion and debate—would, by the early 1930s, curb the mawkishness in his writing and enlarge his view of fictional taste and artistic propriety. In 1932, urged by a friend to read Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Steinbeck perused the first chapter, then returned the book, claiming he could not read it because it would “kill” his art. Despite frequent lapses of self-confidence, on his way to becoming a full-fledged novelist Steinbeck relied upon little more than enormous dedication and commitment, unflagging endurance and independence, strong convictions, sincere intentions, an honest desire to improve, and a blistering capacity for self-criticism. To these aspects of his talent, he was fortunate to add the support of his family and the generosity and goodwill of several trustworthy friends.

After graduating from Salinas High School in June 1919, Steinbeck entered Stanford University and attended classes for a total of six semesters through June 1925, without earning a degree. His nominal major was English. In eleven of his fourteen English Department courses (which included Journalism), Steinbeck's grades ranged from D to B+; his only three A's were in courses where more than the usual amount of imagination was called for—Versification, Feature Article Writing, and especially Short Story Writing, which he took twice (the first time earning a B). More importantly, Edith Ronald Mirrielees, Steinbeck's creative-writing professor in English 136, instilled in him an extraordinary—and lifelong—awareness that there was no “magic formula,” no “secret ingredient,” for writing “effective” fiction except experience, the desire to communicate, reverence for precise language, a terse, lean style, and plenty of discipline and humility. Some of these elements were in lesser supply than others in Steinbeck's brash juvenile period, when he managed only two stories in Stanford's literary magazine in 1924, and another, “The Gifts of Iban,” by “John Stern,” in *The Smoker's Companion* in 1927. Throughout the twenties, in a succession of odd jobs in California and New York as surveyor, day laborer, carpenter's helper, bench chemist, ship's steward, journalist, and fish hatchery attendant, Steinbeck built a reservoir of practical experience (which he would draw upon for the rest of his life), and continued writing stories and submitting them for publication, but without success.

In 1927–1928, seeking solitude to devote himself seriously to writing, he wintered at Lake Tahoe as an estate caretaker, and began reworking “The Lady in Infra-Red,” a story he had written at Stanford. The result was his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, a historical work set in Wales and Panama, about the seventeenth-century pirate Henry Morgan. It was published in August 1929 by the New York firm Robert M. McBride (which also optioned his next book). Steinbeck considered *Cup of Gold* “an immature experiment” necessary to purge a beginning novelist’s enthusiasms and to sweep “all the Cabell-yo-Byrneish preciousness out for good.” As Steinbeck was soon to discover, however, *Cup of Gold*’s publication guaranteed nothing as far as mastery of his art was concerned. “It is an awful lot of work to write a novel,” he reported to A. Grove Day, a Stanford classmate, in late 1929.

From 1929 through 1934, when Steinbeck was struggling to establish confidence and credibility, and trying to perfect a tighter style, he wrote constantly, but with mixed success; more often than not he wrote only for himself, but at other times he labored with an eye on the marketplace, such as it was in the early stages of the Depression. Besides *Cup of Gold*, he published two other books of fiction—a linked collection of stories, *Pastures of Heaven* (1932), and *To a God Unknown*—and he published several stories that would later become part of his classic tale of childhood, *The Red Pony*, and others—“The Chrysanthemums” among them—that would make up *The Long Valley* in 1938. Under the stress of his parents’ illnesses in 1933 and 1934, he wrote a large portion of *Tortilla Flat*. He also wrote other longer fictions during that five-year stretch, including “Dissonant Symphony,” which he destroyed, and “Murder at Full Moon,” a shameless commercial satire of pulp-detective novels, written under a pseudonym, Peter Pym (named for a character in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*), which was never published. During this apprenticeship period, alternately dejected and elated by his progress, and sometimes living hand-to-mouth, Steinbeck tried out different methods, forms, and styles, but never wavered from his purpose: “Fine artistic things seem always to be done in the face of difficulties, and the rocky soil, which seems to give the finest flower, is contempt. Don’t fool yourself,” he informed fellow novelist George Albee in 1931, “appreciation doesn’t make artists. It ruins them. A man’s best

work is done when he is fighting to make himself heard, not when swooning audiences wait for his paragraphs.” (Until *Tortilla Flat* succeeded commercially in 1935, Steinbeck earned less than a thousand dollars from publications.) With *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown* he was on his way toward establishing a new fictional voice in California. Like Virgil, whose *Georgics* Steinbeck admired, he too hoped, against great personal and cultural odds, to be the first of his generation to bring the Muse into “my country.”

In the wake of such politicized, socially conscious novels as *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck has come to be regarded as one of America’s foremost documentary stylists; but the truth is that, in a career spanning nearly forty years, during which he wrote thirty books of fiction, drama, and nonfiction, he was never fully comfortable with or in control of a strictly realistic mode. Like Pilon, a character in his comic *Tortilla Flat*, “the curse of realism lay uneasily” on Steinbeck. Even *The Grapes of Wrath*, his most important fictional achievement, and arguably one of the world’s great novels, owes as much to the mythopoeic legacy of nineteenth-century American romanticism and to the experimental techniques of modernist cinema as it does to the rigorous process of conducting field research among California’s Dust Bowl migrants, upon which Steinbeck built his convincing vision.

It is worth recalling Steinbeck’s early admission to his Stanford classmate and fellow novelist Carl Wilhelmson: *To a God Unknown*, he announced, “leaves realism farther and farther behind. I never had much ability for nor faith nor belief in realism.” Realism is, he added, just another “form of fantasy.” For Steinbeck, all modes of discourse, all enabling theories of writing, were equally fictive. Objectivity, which he adopted as a technical strategy, created narrative distance and control (which allowed him to establish irony and/or ambiguity). Like so many other American novelists who had an anxious, even subversive, relationship with literary realism (Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and William Faulkner are three he explicitly admired), Steinbeck always distrusted its naïve veneer. So he redefined realism for his own purposes, made it up as he went, so to speak, and consistently nudged his readers behind or beyond the exterior face of reality to the contextual and constitutive factors—whether biological, economic,

social, historical, emotional, mythical, or psychological—that impinge on the way his fictional human beings act (he built a “wall of background,” as he later called it). The “profound and dark and strong” libidinous “streams” of the unconscious in every human being had become the locus of his interest, he admitted to Wilhelmson in August 1933; in *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck defined reality to include seen and unseen, physical and metaphysical, quotidian and psychological, elements. His characters follow “a trail of innumerable meanings” toward what Joseph Wayne tells his wife is “... the undistorted real,” the alluring reality behind reality. This novel, then, inscribes a related web in which the conscious life is affected by the unconscious, and the literal, denotative properties of language are interpenetrated by symbolic, connotative values. Steinbeck’s goal, writes his biographer, Jackson Benson, was to make people “see the whole as it really is.”

By striking through outward masks, of course, Steinbeck also frequently bent the formal rules of realistic writing. In a loose sense, all his fiction—even his most naturalistic—has an allegorical dimension and can be considered fabular. (His propensity for writing parables has ensured Steinbeck’s popular success, but has hurt his reputation in the highest reaches of the critical academy; parables and fables, the argument goes, are not serious art.) His favorite met-aphoric gambit was to choose a microcosm to represent the drama of the world: the fruit orchard in *In Dubious Battle*, the bunkhouse in *Of Mice and Men*, the Joad family’s Hudson Super-Six in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the pre-World War II industrial cannery section on Monterey’s Ocean View Avenue in *Cannery Row* are perhaps his four most recognizable examples of contested sites.

But Steinbeck also saw the macrocosm represented in the geographical space of his native country—California’s Monterey County—and especially in his home turf, the Salinas Valley. This entire region, which takes on a distinct life of its own in his fiction, was his equivalent of Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, and the rugged Carmel/Big Sur landscape of neighbor Robinson Jeffers’s poems. From an early stage of his career, Steinbeck exhibited a special affinity with and—like Joseph Wayne—an enormous hunger toward this unique part of his native state. In 1933 Steinbeck told Albee, “I think I would like to write the story of this whole

valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world.” Steinbeck’s gaze covered an area from Santa Cruz and Watsonville on the north, to King City and Jolon on the south; westward, Steinbeck’s country was bounded by the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Lucia Mountains, and to the east by the Gabilan Mountains. That slice of northern California is now popularly known as “Steinbeck Country.”

Steinbeck’s hunger, his compulsion to tell the significant stories of people situated in and on, but not apart from, this land, became one of his recognizable signatures as a novelist. In a 1932 journal (addressed privately to former Stanford roommate and close friend Carlton “Duke” Sheffield), Steinbeck noted of *To a God Unknown*: “The story is a parable, Duke, the story of a race, growth and death. 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 indescribable unit man plus his environment.” Chronicling the lives of people in “the valley of the world” in such a way that they would be more than mere regional oddities, and so that they would represent an embedded part of the environment out of which they came, was Steinbeck’s special achievement in *The Pastures of Heaven*, in the stories of *The Long Valley*, including *The Red Pony*, and of course in *To a God Unknown*— particularly in [Chapter 21](#), where Steinbeck’s ecological posture reaches a visionary level as he metaphorizes Joseph Wayne’s body as a land mass, a “world-brain” with the power to destroy environmental “order” on a whim. Philosopher John Elob Boodin’s axiom that “the laws of thought must be the laws of things”—one of Steinbeck’s favorite quotations—has special resonance here and underscores the novelist’s view of the human body as text, the text as body, on which are written the defining struggles of desire, as well as the intricate difficulties of representation.

When reading this unusual novel, then, with its oddly unsettling and sometimes strained combination of Christian and pagan, sacred and profane attributes—its earthiness and surreality, violence and pastoralism, pantheism and anthropomorphism, naturalism and lyricism—it is helpful to remember that Steinbeck invested his essential self in it, which is to say, he wrote it more like an extensive poem, or extended dream sequence, than like a traditionally mimetic or realistic novel. “I have the instincts of a minstrel

rather than those of a scrivener,” he informed Grove Day in late 1929. Thus, while *To a God Unknown* has an urgent, breathless fairy-tale quality, and is, as critic Howard Levant asserts, more “a series of detached— scenes” than “a unified— organic whole,” it is not an incoherent concoction—“a rambling and improbable history,” as Warren French calls it—that flies in the face of all sensible literary convention. During its long gestation through different versions and multiple drafts, Steinbeck worked hard to create a palpable factual dimension that gives this otherwise arcane book a recognizable texture in regard to its geographical setting and landmarks (the moss-covered rock actually existed in the northern California town of Laytonville), its unusual characters (some of whom, such as the seer, Steinbeck claimed were based on living persons), and in its feel for telling details of nature and social life in Monterey County in the early part of this century.

Although Steinbeck is not normally considered an autobiographical writer, the story of Joseph Wayne’s pursuit is, up to a certain point, the story of Steinbeck; both are obsessed with tracing out destinies, and with seeking a generative place behind the reality of words and actions. *To a God Unknown* is driven by a kind of masculine poetics (symbolized by the totemic bull in [Chapter 6](#)), which thrives on competitiveness and prizes primacy and mastery. But it is also leavened by irony, and employment of a “new eye in the west.” Steinbeck subverted California’s populist image as a carefree golden land by pitilessly exposing its dichotomies, its mysteries, its unattainable felicities. Like those “twisted” madrone trees of [Chapter 2](#), whose “bright green and shiny” leaves appear only at the end of “horrible limbs,” Steinbeck’s imagination, and his vision of himself as author, were thoroughly implicated in these paradoxical critiques. Indeed, Joseph’s drive toward the ineffable functions as a parable of Steinbeck’s own struggle with his art—but where Joseph’s solipsistic fetish leads him back to the vortex of unconsciousness, which erases presence and the need for language, Steinbeck’s expressive fetish thrusts him out of the unconscious toward a self-fashioned place in the vast geography of words. “You haven’t any place you know until you make one,” Steinbeck informed George Albee in 1932. “And if you make one, it will be a new one. Forget about genius and write books. Whatever you write will be you.”

II

On September 12, 1933, John Steinbeck received from Robert O. Ballou, his financially beleaguered New York publisher, a small shipment of his newly printed *To a God Unknown*, with its dark green pictorial dust jacket designed by Steinbeck's artist friend Mahlon Blaine. Editor Ballou had gone out on his own after the rapid, successive bankruptcies of Jonathan Cape, and then Brewer, Warren, and Putnam (publisher of *The Pastures of Heaven*); although several houses eventually bid for *To a God Unknown* (including Simon and Schuster, which would have promised more money), Steinbeck had remained loyal to Ballou's fragile, shoestring operation while the publisher sought the cash necessary to bring out his two fall-list books—Steinbeck's and one by Julia Peterkin. "The books came this morning and I like them immensely. Thank you for doing such a fine job with them." They gave, Steinbeck confessed, "more pleasure than I have felt for a number of months." His casual reply has a restrained elegance that belies the protracted and difficult history of the book's development and eventual production. In fact, in one form or another under three different working titles (marking various and sometimes overlapping stages of its progress), *To a God Unknown* occupied Steinbeck's attention and tested his artistic mettle and resources for over four years. Except for the posthumously published *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), Steinbeck labored longer on *To a God Unknown* than on any other book, including his two famous epics, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* (1952). "The book was hellish hard to write," he told Ballou succinctly in February 1933, and he admitted, without going into details, having worked toward it "for about five years."

The history of the making of *To a God Unknown* is worth elaborating upon, for the story behind the story (informed by a number of heretofore unpublished primary documents), makes an intriguing tale of its own, as well as a lesson in the felicities of endurance and dedication. Neither individual expression nor cultural construction alone can fully explain the source of the creative act, which eludes final categorization. John Steinbeck was nothing if not resolutely single-minded. The process by which the book grew was not so unitary, however, because forces of every kind from within and without kept entering his purview, altering his text, altering him. Even if

all those factors were known—which is doubtful—it would still be impossible to establish their priority or present them fully, so what follows here is a working sketch, a narrative in and of process.

Steinbeck's novel had its roots in an unlikely source—an unfinished stage play called "The Green Lady" written in the mid-twenties by his Stanford University undergraduate classmate and boon companion, Webster "Toby" Street. In the third and only extant draft of Street's play, the action "takes place in a front room of Andy Wane's ranch house in the hill country of Mendocino County, California." Street's main characters include Andy Wane, "a tall, well-knit man of about fifty-five, or more, with the characteristic stoop of one who has made his way with his hands"; Mrs. Ruth Wane, "a woman about fifty"; and their three children—two sons, Luke and John, and one daughter, Susan, "a girl of seventeen or eighteen." In addition, a neighbor, Milton, is a suitor for Susan's hand. The Wane family is gradually being torn apart by Andy Wane's pathological preoccupation with the trees on his land, which make up "her"—the female forest, the "green witch" of the natural world: "Seems like the whole outdoors was a green lady sometimes," Mrs. Wane complains bitterly. As the play progresses, the drama turns on Andy's nature worship, but also on his selfish refusal to sell timber rights to raise the money necessary to send his daughter back to the University of California at Berkeley. Moreover, Andy conceives an illicit, unseemly attraction to Susie, confusing one form of natural beauty for another: "Men loves things 'cause they're like a woman, or 'cause they're pretty. They git 'em mixed up sometimes, an' don't know which is which," her jealous mother explains. In the end Andy is supposed to die in a raging forest fire.

Even though Street was an active amateur playwright who "wrote all the time," by his own admission his work was "not very good." In the case of this unfinished play, his dialogue and gestures are wooden, his characterizations one-dimensional and unrealized. "I don't think it's anything like *To a God Unknown*, except that there is a pantheistic streak in it," he said in 1975. And yet, despite Street's disclaimer, in protagonist Andy Wane's pantheism, his fatal attraction to natural and sexual forces, this otherwise uninspired melodrama does indeed contain the essential germ of Steinbeck's *To a God Unknown*, though it would be left entirely to Steinbeck to raise Andy Wane's

aberrant behavior to the level of Joseph Wayne's tragic obsession in this novel.

Street, on the path to becoming an attorney (LLB, Stanford, 1928), recognized his friend's artistic ambitions, and permitted Steinbeck to novelize the original treatment (which included a prologue and first act, but only written suggestions for acts two and three). Although Steinbeck may have given thought to revising the play as early as 1927, it wasn't until April 14, 1928, that he told their mutual friend, Robert Cathcart (another Stanford classmate), that he was "preparing to write a novel around" Street's play, which, he claimed, has "a fine thesis, and I do not know whether I have the power and acuteness and artistry to bring it out." From that point on, even though it may have been intended as a collaborative effort, Steinbeck himself worked sporadically and mostly alone at "The Green Lady" for the next two years, marking the manuscript's uneven progress in frequent letters to his close friends of the time—Albee, Cathcart, Sheffield, Wilhelmson, poet Katherine Beswick, and lawyer Amassa "Ted" Miller, who, until Steinbeck signed with literary agents Mavis McIntosh and Elizabeth Otis in 1931, served as the novelist's sole representative to New York publishing houses. All of them became sounding boards for Steinbeck's artistic concerns with this book.

In its first stage of composition, the book seems to have languished during much of 1928 and into 1929—that is, for about a year after Steinbeck announced his intention to adapt Street's play. In February 1929, he traveled with Street to Laytonville and its environs in Mendocino County (north of San Francisco) to visit the locale of the action, and hoped to finish a draft by September. But over the next two months, writing went very slowly, and in early March he reported to Kate Beswick that he had temporarily fled Pacific Grove, and headed for San Francisco, hoping to escape the "terror" of "The Green Lady," by which he probably meant his own inadequacy at executing an inherited story, no matter how sympathetic he was to its basic premise. His hiatus, however, accomplished positive ends, in that it allowed Steinbeck to reassess his obligation to Street's original, and to initiate important modifications, some of which would have long-range results. With fresh innovations in mind, around mid-April 1929, Steinbeck started "The Green Lady" again, this time so enthusiastically that by May 22, 1929, he reported

to Beswick that he had finished eighty pages, and had set his eye confidently on completing one hundred pages by June 1:

The Lady progresses pretty rapidly... and it seems to be improving in fluency and ease and in interest all the time. I am terribly anxious for you to have a look at it. I didn't make a carbon though. What shall I do? Shall I send you the first hundred pages heavily insured? Then if it were lost I would be repaid for doing it again. You see I write with a pen for five days of the week and on Saturday and Sunday I type and revise the pages I have written, so if the typed pages were lost all I would have to do would be to go through the typing and revising again. Or else I could wait and send you the third draft of which I shall make carbons. The only trouble is that I should like your criticism before I make the third draft.

In his new version, Steinbeck began with a key decision to move the setting from Mendocino County—about which he felt no emotional attachment, and with whose geography he was unfamiliar—to an area near Jolon, in southern Monterey County, the writer's home county, and thus a familiar landscape upon which to build his dynastic tale. (As a child Steinbeck had spent summers on his uncle Tom Hamilton's ranch in King City, not far from Jolon). The flat voice and slightly ironic tone registered in this characteristic early paragraph of "The Green Lady" indicates how declarative his approach was at this point. (Compare the following entry with its counterpart in *To a God Unknown*, the opening paragraph of [Chapter 2](#)): "Jolon is a large bowl in the earth in central California. It is watered in part by two large streams, the Nacimiento and the San Antonio. It lies in the arms of the Coast Range mountains of which one rampart guards it from the ocean while a smaller ridge separates it from the long, fertile Salinas Valley. On one of the river's banks sat the old Mission San Antonio surrounded by its gardens and irrigation ditches, maintained by the Indians who, in return for their labor in making bricks, digging ditches and tilling the soil, received from the mission divine grace and cotton pants."

Furthermore, instead of following Street's plan to begin in medias res in the present, Steinbeck started in 1850 (when the lure of easy money in California's gold fields was drawing men "westward like Hamlin's rats")—which, he must have thought, would lend his version greater historical reach and sociological context. Steinbeck would also develop two generations of male Waynes: Joseph, the "strong" father, "born to be a patriarch," and

husband to three successive wives, including his last, a Bible-reading woman named Carry, who never quite fits into the Wayne family regime; and Andy, Joseph's "strange," sensitive prodigal son (by his second wife, Beth Willets) who would become the protagonist of "The Green Lady" (and of "To the Unknown God"). The second half of the novel was probably intended to chronicle Andy's domestic life with his new bride, Julia Seib. (In the third and final version of the novel Steinbeck would abandon the second half; he would also transpose the fledgling story of the Lopez sisters to [Chapter 7](#) of *The Pastures of Heaven*).

Another element not mentioned by Street but added by Steinbeck was climatological: Steinbeck's version of "The Green Lady" incorporated the cyclical return of the dry years, but did not elaborate upon its effect in determining characters' actions. (One of the handwritten editorial comments on the "Green Lady" manuscript—perhaps by Street, or Beswick, or Sheffield—reads, "Must show effect of heat and dryness on Andy.") The basis for one aspect of *To a God Unknown's* wasteland motif is evident here in the precursor draft:

About every thirty years there have come periods of rainlessness to Central and Southern California. These desolating years seem to come creeping up out of the white desert to warn the west that it will one day die as the desert has died. They are like the Reminders of Death at an Egyptian feast....

And now the periodic drought had settled on the land. Little by little, year on year the water was sucked from the ground. The hills looked gaunt and hungry and pale. The bones of many thousands of starved cattle were whitening on the ground. Two families of Waynes packed up their possessions and drove away. Joe watched his dying land with terror and with loathing.

Several other basic elements in this originating version of "The Green Lady" would eventually be developed more fully in *To a God Unknown*: Joseph Wayne's preoccupation with fertility; a haunting "green grotto" in the mountains would become the published book's mysterious glade, where much of the novel's key action occurs; Beth Willet's accidental death would be reprised in Elizabeth's death; and Andy's unconscious desire to "become one with the greenness" of the voluptuous forest would prefigure Joseph Wayne's attraction to the forest's "curious femaleness." Thus, from its roots