East of Eden
by Isobel Murray and Jim Merrilees

Steinbeck's use of Old Testament material in *East of Eden* (1952) is very different from that in *To A God Unknown* (1933). As outlined in a previous article,[1] Steinbeck was there qualifying the status of his protagonist, Joseph Wayne, by a number of literary means. But the most powerful qualifier of Joseph Wayne as prophet and saviour of his people is the manner in which Steinbeck contrives to keep the closely parallel story of the Joseph of Genesis ever-present throughout *To A God Unknown.* In *East of Eden* Steinbeck again, and indeed more obviously, makes use of Old Testament sources. But the Old Testament Cain and Abel do not loom reproachfully behind mere human characters in the book: when considered at all, they are considered explicitly and rationally in discussion, and in another sense the whole novel is clearly devoted to re-enactments of the episode and discussions of its significance.

Steinbeck sums up the centrality of the story in *Journal of a Novel* (1970), written during the composition of the first draft of *East of Eden:*

> its framework roots from that powerful, profound and perplexing story in Genesis of Cain and Abel . . . this story with its implications has made a deeper mark in people than any other save possibly the story of the Tree of Life and original sin (90).[2]

It is using the biblical story as a measure of ourselves (105). However, Steinbeck's adaptation of Genesis 4, 1-16 carefully excludes consideration of God, to whom, in Genesis, Cain and Abel offer their gifts. The blatant Cain-Abel correspondences in the novel are Charles and Adam Trask, and the twin boys Caleb and Aron Trask, ostensibly Adam's sons, but, it transpires, probably like all of us sons of Cain, that is, of Charles. Both Charles and Caleb have gifts rejected by their fathers, in Charles' case his penknife is ignored for Adam's pup, and in Caleb's the money he amasses for his father is despised, while Aron's success at college brings his father real happiness. On the surface, then, the problem is to be treated as a universal and psychological but not a spiritual one, but we would contend that in the course of writing the novel Steinbeck implicitly comes to posit the existence of some kind of Providence, and of a subordinate something oddly like the workings of grace.

On one level, Steinbeck seems to diagnose all evil in psychological terms of rejection breeding violence, most obviously in the Cain-Abel characters, whose dominance in the novel is unfortunately over-emphasized by the over-stressed significance of their initials. But the Cain-Abel story is presented as that of Everyman. As the

[1] 'This Side of Paradise', *New Blackfriars*, February 1972.
[2] Page numbers incorporated in the text are from the following editions: *Journal of a Novel,* Heinemann, London, 1970; *East of Eden*, Heinemann, London, 1965.

educated Chinaman, Lee, Adam's servant and often Steinbeck's guide for the reader, says:

> The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt—and there is the story of mankind (235).

As in the Bible Cain's murder of Abel is the first clear fruit of the Fall, murder in *East of Eden* is made symbolic of all sin, linked with its sources, hatred, jealousy and violence. The rather silly predominance of names beginning with initial C or A in the novel, which is by no means confined to clear Cain or Abel figures (besides Charles and Caleb there are Cyrus and Cathy, besides Adam and Aron, Alice Trask, the Ames and Abra), obscures the all-pervading significance of the symbolic sin of murder in the novel, especially, for example, the variation on the Cain-Abel theme provided by Tom and Dessie Hamilton. Steinbeck presents a large number of murders, including suicides (the first Mrs Trask, Cathy's teacher James Grew, Tom Hamilton and Cathy herself), patricide (Cathy's murder of her parents), fratricide and other cases (Cathy's murder of the whorehouse madam Faye, Lee's mother killed by multiple rape), and many planned, attempted or symbolic murders (Cathy's plans for Ethel and a murder of prosperous businessmen, her plans for Edwards and his attempted murder of her, her attempt at abortion, Cyrus' attempt on Charles after Charles' on Adam), and a legal killing never seen as murder (the police killing of Joe Valery). It is one thesis of the novel that 'Everybody's got it in him. . . . You just find his trigger and anybody will go off' (184).

Each of these killings is different in some ways from the others, and in presenting them Steinbeck examines the nature of this crime: he examines the nature of guilt and men's attitude to it. Thus even of the suicides, Mrs Trask's is caused by an unreal sense of her guilt for her husband's casually acquired gonorrhea, James Grew's by the desperation of his desire for the fourteen-year-old Cathy, and his religious despair, Tom Hamilton's by his attempt to judge himself for the sins of his life, culminating in his unintentional murder of his sister Dessie, and his self-execution according to his mistaken conception of law, and Cathy's by paranoid fear of final discovery by someone as 'clever' as herself. It is clear from the novel that even if they are *de facto* murders, Tom Hamilton does not murder his sister, nor Caleb Aron; the difference between these cases is that Tom wills Dessie nothing but good, while Cal in his hurt does intend to hurt, although by no means to kill his brother. Throughout the novel, it is only Cathy, who is introduced as a moral 'monster' (61) who kills naturally, repeatedly and without compunction.

But the two central discussions of the story of Cain and Abel by

Lee, Sam Hamilton and Adam (Chapter 22, part IV and Chapter 24, part II) focus explicitly on issues which also arise throughout the novel, questions where good and evil become absolutes, and hence the attainment by Lee and acceptance by Samuel of a position involving belief in the existence of the human soul, something greater than the psyche. This implicitly, despite Lee's disclaimer, involves belief in some kind of beneficent creating Power who can offer the fallen sinner the choice of freedom and greatness involved in Lee's interpretation of Genesis 4, v. 7, as 'Thou *mayest* rule over sin'—Timshel. Thus Lee's declaration:

> This is not theology. I have no bent towards gods. But I have a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed—because 'Thou mayest' (264).

And thus Sam Hamilton's reaction:

> It was your two-word re-translation, Lee—'Thou mayest'. It took me by the throat and shook me. And when the dizziness was over, a path was open, new and bright. And my life which is ending seems to be going on to an ending wonderful. And my music has a new last melody like a bird song in the night (268).

This discovery is what gives Samuel the courage to attack Adam, lost in his dream of Cathy, and by a symbolic murder to bring him back nearer to real life, and it also gives Lee courage to petition Adam on Cal's behalf when Adam lies gravely ill. To Cal's protests Lee replies:

> 'I have to. . . . If it kills him I have to. I have the choice,' and he smiled sadly and quoted, ' "If there's blame, it's my blame" ' (525).

The original simple diagnosis of 'rejection leads to murder' may explain but it cannot check evil. Some characters are in themselves beyond the diagnosis anyway; good is represented by characters who simply are good, and loving and brave, whatever their heredity and upbringing, such as Sam Hamilton, Lee, Lee's mother and Abra, and evil is represented by one character who is simply evil and cannot recognize good, the 'monster' Cathy, and, to a lesser extent, by her employee, Joe Valery. The hope that psychological analysis cannot provide comes by way of 'acts of faith' by these characters, which are unacknowledged gifts of grace, unacknowledged because the book usually explicitly rejects the existence of God. And in a way interestingly similar to the function of Mr Jaggers in *Great Expectations* the law has a special significance. Because God is apparently excluded, the mercy and forgiveness of God is frequently represented by law officers and doctors who obey the spirit rather than the letter of the law, often by technically breaking the law.

Sometimes the operation of law is merely mechanical, as when Adam is jailed for vagrancy in Florida (48-49), but the important instances are the others, like the judge who refuses to allow a willing

half-wit to be convicted for Cathy's supposed murder: 'The law was designed to save, not to destroy' (77). Very important in this context are the actions of deputy Horace Quinn and the Sheriff when Cathy shoots Adam. Horace is kindly, and when he finds himself out of his depth he knows he must 'run to papa' (the old sheriff), leaving his temporary deputy to see that Adam 'doesn't get away—or hurt himself' (182). The sheriff's tact, diplomacy and humanity are described in detail, and together he and Quinn decide to suppress knowledge of Cathy's whereabouts in the whorehouse: 'if I told some of the things I know, this whole goddam county would go up in smoke' (186). The sheriff does not interfere with Cathy although he guesses at 'something pretty nasty' in her past; 'I want peace in this county, and I mean all kinds of peace, and that means people getting to sleep at night' (194). His main point is, 'I don't want you . . . to hurt Mr Trask or his boys' (195).

Doctors similarly act on their own notions of what is right, rather than legal ones: Adam asks the doctor to protect the injured Cathy from legal questioning, but attempted murder is too grave a crime—'I admit I break a few, but not that one' (97). And when Cathy attempts to terminate her pregnancy, Dr Tilson gets no response to his offers of help, so that he threatens her on behalf of life: 'if you lose this baby and I have any reason to suspect monkey business, I will charge you, I will testify against you, and I will see you punished' (114). The final picture of a law which includes both mercy and forgiveness is in Chapter 51, where Horace Quinn, who has for a long time been the sheriff, wise like his predecessor, has to cope with the ramifications of Cathy's suicide. Finding her will and a quantity of blackmail material, he checks the validity of the former and takes it upon himself to burn the latter, before an implicated witness, although this is knowingly committing professional suicide. He sees that all the victims are told, and because of their shame, 'he knew he wouldn't be sheriff much longer' (487). He brings Adam the will which leaves Cathy's money to Aron, and cannot let it be destroyed, although 'we do quite a few illegal things' (490). He advises the only possible course, complete honesty towards Aron about his mother.

The legal characters who can transcend the actual letter of the law can do so because, like all the vital, positive characters in the novel, such as Lee, Sam and Abra, they are able to take a balanced and practical view of the state of man as a fallen creature, made up of tensions between good and evil. These vital good characters are different from the inertly good like Adam and Aron, both of whom are vague, grey, ghost-like creatures, who cling to dreams and cannot accept the totality of life. Adam and Aron only recognize the letter of the law, and can only follow it, as Lee points out to Adam when he thinks he has a decision to make over telling Cathy that Charles has left her a fortune. Adam knows that the use Cathy is

likely to make of the money is 'closer to murder than to charity', but he will follow what Lee actually calls 'the letter of the will' (330), because as Lee says, 'you don't have any choice, do you? . . . Faced with two sets of morals, you'll follow your training. What you call thinking won't change it' (331). The vital characters on the other hand can recognize evil, and hope and achieve beyond it, can even commit 'good' sins, like Cal's lie to Aron about what he overheard about their mother (332), and Sam's symbolic murders of Adam, which are consciously 'kill-or-cure' actions, violently attacking him over his neglect of the twins (223-226) and on another occasion destroying his dream of Cathy with a medicinal doze of truth:

> If I had a medicine that might cure you and also might kill you, should I give it to you? . . . believe me when I say it may kill you. . . . Cathy is in Salinas. . . . Cathy, and she is now called Kate, takes the fresh and young and beautiful and so maims them that they can never be whole again. Now, there's your medicine. Let's see what it does to you (266).

Samuel takes this responsibility because the knowledge may kill Adam, but, as he says twice, 'without it he would surely die' (267).

Evil in an unmitigated form is represented in the novel by Cathy, who is never able to comprehend the existence of goodness, and who prides herself on being 'not a dog. I'm smarter than humans' (281), and in a lesser form by Cathy's employee in the whorehouse, Joe Valery. Joe has little thematic significance in himself, but is important because of the limited parallels to Cathy that he provides. While Cathy's wickedness is part of her warped nature, Joe's has been at least in part caused by his unhappy childhood, so that 'Even before the first magistrate looked down on him, Joe had developed a fine stable of hates towards the whole world he knew', and a compensatory love of self (434). Like Cathy, 'he knew it was necessary to be smart' and he admired her as his superior in cleverness. She is indeed cleverer, but at least once Joe's superior caution points up Cathy's mistakes: drinking in Monterey, he is tempted to go out:

> But then his discipline took over. He had made a rule, and kept to it, never to leave his room when he was drinking (441).

The occasions on which Cathy reveals too much of herself, in turn to Edwards, to Faye and to Adam, are all the result of something she knows is unwise, drinking, which loosens her tongue against her will. Although unlike Joe, Cathy is in no sense explained, her enclosed and paranoid world is revealed in an image which has a close relationship to this weakness in drinking. When she comes to take her own life, her life-long sense of sanctuary in case of need is expanded from an earlier hint (70). She has an obsession with *Alice in Wonderland*, suitably, for like Alice, Cathy for ever wanders in a world which makes no sense by her own standards, and in particular she has a sense of kinship with Alice, and of escape by

Alice's means, 'it was the bottle which said "Drink me" that had changed her life' (479). Of course, this is true in a sense that Cathy does not recognize. For Cathy, this has always been the last defence: 'She had only to drink the whole bottle and she would dwindle and disappear and cease to exist. And better than all, when she stopped being, she never would have been' (479-480). And so drinking is her final act of self-destruction, as over-indulgence in alcohol has repeatedly endangered her in the past.

Perhaps the most vividly realized of all the novel's characters is Caleb Trask, the man in whom we see most clearly and explicitly the struggle between being good and being 'mean'. Cal, the 'Cain' figure, feels rejected by his father, and has a great deal in common with Will Hamilton, who feels rejected by Samuel, and recognizes Cal: 'This was the son he should have had, . . . Cal was as close to his own soul as it is possible to get' (416-417). Cal tries, like Will, to buy his father's love. But Will is contrasted with his brother Tom, as an echo of the Cain-Abel theme, and Cal has many of the qualities of Tom, also. Samuel recognized that 'None of my children will be great either, except perhaps Tom. He's suffering over the choosing right now. It's a painful thing to watch' (230). Elsewhere, 'Samuel knew his son's quality and felt the potential of violence. . . . It is probable that his father stood between Tom and the sun' (244-245). Cal has Tom's potential for violence, and exercises it, and Cal more than Tom consciously exercises choice. This is detailed throughout the latter portion of the book, and it is Cal, the man with good *and* evil potential, the man who does real wrong to his brother, who most clearly exemplifies Lee's doctrine of Timshel—'Thou mayest'. After he has indirectly caused his brother's death and his father's illness, Lee and Abra together convince him of his ability still to choose good. And it is Lee's final exhortation to Cal that most clearly betrays the necessary belief in some kind of beneficent Maker which underlies the resolution of the book:

> 'Maybe you'll come to know that every man in every generation is re-fired. Does a craftsman, even in his old age, lose his hunger to make a perfect cup—thin, strong, translucent?' He held his cup to the light. 'All impurities burned out and ready for a glorious flux, and for that—more fire. And then either the slag heap or, perhaps what no one in the world ever quite gives up, perfection.' He drained his cup and he said loudly, 'Cal, listen to me. Can you think that whatever made us would stop trying?' (523).