

Masochism, Authoritarianism, and the Crowd

A Frommian Reading of John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*

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ABSTRACT

This essay rereads John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) through Erich Fromm's theory of escape mechanisms, arguing that the novelist and the German analyst arrived at strikingly similar ideas independently of one another, working within roughly the same years. This case of parallel thinking reveals significant, previously unexamined links between Steinbeck's phalanx theory and Fromm's framework, later developed in *Escape from Freedom* (1941). The pairing helps push back against a critical tradition – running from Edmund Wilson through Harold Bloom to Leslie Fiedler – that has dismissed Steinbeck's characters as psychologically shallow, verging on the “animal.” Psychological depth, the essay argues, is very much present – it just isn't conveyed through introspection, but through the unstable, often destructive relationship between the individual and the group. The analysis focuses on the arc of Jim Nolan, the young Communist organizer at the center of the novel. Drawing on Fromm's concept of masochism – the attempt to escape the burden of individual freedom by dissolving oneself into a cause larger than the self – the essay follows Jim's trajectory: from an initial torpor, the product of a meaningless life ground down by capitalist exploitation and a broken family history, through his absorption into Party ideology, to the moment this masochistic disposition flips into a sadistic, authoritarian assertion of self. That reversal, the essay contends, doesn't betray the character's internal logic but completes it: for Fromm, masochism and sadism share the same underlying inability to bear individual aloneness. Steinbeck, the essay concludes, is far from undermining the workers' cause; if anything, he strengthens it, showing that real political commitment depends on holding onto one's individual conscience rather than losing it in the crowd.

KEYWORDS

John Steinbeck, Trade Unions, Erich Fromm, Psychoanalysis

Introduction: A Shared Vision of the Human

In a 1951 letter to his friend George Albee, John Steinbeck wrote of a book he had recently read: “I find it a brilliant piece of analysis. It is all the things we have thought about, but stated clearly and well” (qtd. in DeMott 44-45). He was referring to Erich Fromm’s *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. In his book, Fromm analyses the moral decay of contemporary individuals (1), calling for the analyst to become a “physician of the soul” – understanding “soul” as an umbrella term for that part of the human psyche concerned with “higher human powers” (6): “love, reason, conscience and values.” Pursuing the reflection he had first developed in *Man for Himself*, Fromm continued his attempt to build a secular ethics, nurturing the human being’s most creative capacities. As Robert DeMott points out (148), the book would also serve Steinbeck as inspiration for the character of Samuel Hamilton in *East of Eden*.

Yet the affinities between their thought run deeper than any direct influence, and indeed precede the consonance acknowledged by Steinbeck’s 1951 letter to Albee. Working independently within their respective fields, Steinbeck and Fromm described the same psychological patterns in roughly the same period, observing the interplay between the individual and the group in Western capitalist societies. In the mid-to-late 1930s, Steinbeck developed a theoretical framework to interpret the behaviour of groups, inflecting it with a strongly biological register, known as the “phalanx theory.”¹ As Steinbeck

¹ In fact, the phalanx theory has a transhistorical scope: Steinbeck was convinced he had identified a universal psychological mechanism operative in any human group at any point in time (Steinbeck to Sheffield). In *In Dubious Battle*, however, he situates this mechanism within a specific historical context – that of Western capitalist society and the exploitation

wrote to Carlton “Dook” Sheffield in a 1933 letter, the individual “plugs into the phalanx” through an unconscious “keying mechanism,” by which he loses his identity within the group (Steinbeck to Sheffield). Steinbeck narrativized this theory in *In Dubious Battle* (1936) – by which point it had undergone significant development from its earliest formulation in the 1933 letters. Fromm, observing similar psychological patterns, built his theory of escape mechanisms – describing the processes by which individuals surrender their autonomy to collective or authoritarian structures – which he developed into the broader argument of *Escape from Freedom* (1941).

Starting from analogous phenomena, the two authors arrived at strikingly convergent conclusions. Underlying both reflections is a shared vision of the individual. In both Fromm and Steinbeck, the human being cannot live a peaceful life, either with himself or with others, unless he/she assumes responsibility for his own independence – a responsibility that may also entail the risk of loneliness. In an article entitled *I Am Revolutionary*, included in the collection *America and Americans*, Steinbeck stated that his “revolt” would consist in this: “to believe in and to fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction” (90). The writer declared himself convinced that:

The greatest and most permanent revolution we knew took place when all men finally discovered that they had individual souls, individually important. This concept permanently changed the face of the world. But it has another step to go. The release of the individual mind to a sense not only of its value but of its preciousness will cause an even greater change. Such a revolution is on the way. (90)

Fromm, for his part, devoted his reflection to showing how modern man has rejected the “individuality and uniqueness of personality” (vi) in order to

endemic to corporate agriculture. This represents a significant development of the theory: what in Steinbeck’s letters remained an abstract psychological observation becomes, in the novel, a socially situated and politically charged narrative.

submit to the power of “anonymous authorities” (125). The alternative, for Fromm, lay in recovering precisely that sense of individual responsibility and independence that submission to authority forecloses.

Employing Fromm’s theoretical framework as an interpretive lens for the novel thus proves a productive hermeneutic practice – not to argue a direct historical influence, but to render explicit a psychological grammar already embedded in Steinbeck’s fiction, and to illuminate precisely that dimension of the phalanx that existing scholarship has left in the background. The critical literature has concentrated almost exclusively on the biological metaphor of the group as a living organism, largely overlooking both the novel’s psychological depth and the implicit social critique that follows from it. Above all, a reading of this kind can free Steinbeck from a long-standing critical dismissal – rooted in assumptions about psychological inwardness – that this essay will examine before proposing an alternative.

John Steinbeck and Post-Freudian Criticism

From its earliest reception, John Steinbeck’s work has often been read through a lens that denies his characters full psychological depth. Some contemporaneous observers – and, later, influential strands of literary criticism – suggested that he treated his characters more like animals than like psychologically complex human beings. A similar position was in fact articulated by Edmund Wilson who described Steinbeck’s characterization as essentially biological, arguing that he portrayed men “so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level” (Wilson 37). “The chief subject of Mr. Steinbeck’s fiction,” Wilson wrote, “has been thus not those aspects of humanity in which it is most thoughtful, imaginative, constructive [...] but rather the processes of life itself” (40). The accusation of biological reductionism is closely tied to a specific idea of characterization – one that allegedly succeeds in bringing the characters’ psychic life into full view. Over time, this line of criticism solidified into a durable interpretive framework. What had begun as a localized remark on *Cannery*

Row was transformed, in Wilson and in later critics, into a general assessment of Steinbeck's narrative practice and artistic value. The result was a persistent image of Steinbeck as a writer whose work privileges surface observation over inwardness, and biological process over psychological complexity.

In the introduction to *John Steinbeck: Modern Critical Views* (2008), Harold Bloom offered a notably unflattering assessment of the author. Although he acknowledged the Emersonian resonances of *The Grapes of Wrath* – particularly its relation to “The Over-Soul” – and its humanitarian scope, he ultimately concluded that “Steinbeck is not one of the inescapable American novelists of our century” (5). Steinbeck appears only marginally in Bloom's major works, and with the sole exception of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he is largely absent from Bloom's Canon. This exclusion is consistent with Bloom's belief that Steinbeck was incapable of producing characters with psychological depth, a quality the critic later elevated into a central criterion of literary value. As he wrote, Steinbeck “inevitably falls into bathos” (*Bloom's Modern Critical Views* 4), “lacks invention,” and is “clearly incapable of creating characters with real inwardness” (1).

Fiedler was even more severe. “On aesthetic grounds,” he wrote, “I originally refused to take Steinbeck seriously” (167). Drawing partly on Bloom's views, he described Steinbeck's prose as overwhelmed by sentimentality, by the insipidity of his characters, and by political partisanship. “Such sentimentality,” he argued, “depends [...] on stock responses to stock characters” (165). Although Fiedler acknowledged an underlying Oedipal conflict in the story of the Joad family (170), he nonetheless maintained that Steinbeck failed to create characters of lasting “archetypal resonance” (167). Drawing on Jungian terminology, he claimed that none of Steinbeck's figures attained the status of myth – understood as a cultural form capable of articulating fundamental human concerns through archetypal structures.

There is a certain irony in these judgments. Wilson, Bloom, and Fiedler were all deeply shaped – albeit in different ways and to different degrees – by Freudian psychoanalysis, which they employed extensively in their own critical

work. Yet when reading Steinbeck, this psychoanalytic sensitivity appears to falter precisely where questions of psychic life and psychological formation are most at stake. In fact, what those critics identified as a lack of psychological depth emerges instead as a different, historically specific mode of psychological representation – one that situates the psyche not in inward soliloquy, but in the unstable and often destructive interplay between the individual and others. This becomes particularly clear in *In Dubious Battle*, which Bloom once described as “a dreadful struggle” to read (*Bloom’s BioCritiques* 2). Here, psychological development unfolds not through introspective self-analysis, but through the erosion of the character’s intersubjectivity – his gradual absorption into, and eventual dissolution within, a collective entity that leaves no room for individual selfhood. Working within a deliberately plain idiom, Steinbeck reconfigured ideas drawn from sociology and psychology into a narrative form that foregrounds the pressures exerted by collective structures on individual subjectivity.

Escape for Freedom

Set in California’s imaginary Torgas Valley, *In Dubious Battle* follows the adventures of two members of the Communist Party, Mac and Jim, and their efforts to organize a revolt among the migrant workers. Of the two, Jim is a young man who has only recently joined the Party and who must assist the older Mac in his operations. The narrative focus is directed above all to the two “reds” who organize the strike, Mac and Jim, with the latter emerging as the true protagonist of the story. “Why did [Steinbeck] focus on communist organizers and oppressed workers in *In Dubious Battle*, rather than on the big growers, local police, and vigilantes, who had also organized themselves to fight the workers?” Milton Cohen asks (17), and he adds: “Steinbeck was clearly curious about these passionate organizers and their selfless devotion to this cause, devotion that often landed them in jail or in a ditch badly beaten or worse” (18). In this sense, *In Dubious Battle* appears to be more than a

study devoted exclusively to the masses – though that dimension is certainly present within the novel. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a reflection on the individual in relation to dependence on an authority, or rather on an ideology that takes possession of him. Above all, the novel is the story of Jim Nolan: of his initial inertia, his commitment to the Communist cause, and his ultimate annihilation. This focus, slightly displaced from the more common role of the *engagé* intellectual, leads Steinbeck not to celebrate Jim's commitment but to anatomize it – and it is perhaps this unflinching dissection that led him to consider that he had written a “brutal” book (*Life in Letters* 98). As early as 1940, in an essay entitled “Proletarian Writing and John Steinbeck,” Claude E. Jones suggested that Steinbeck's novel could not be counted among the tradition of the proletarian novel, since, like other works by Steinbeck, it failed to meet “some criteria of proletarian writing” (456). Mary McCarthy, writing in *The Nation*, was more severe: she remarked that “it is unfortunate that the legitimately dramatic incidents of the strike are subordinated to such infantile verbalizations” (qtd. in Benson 324). According to McCarthy, Steinbeck's novel, as an “infantile verbalization,” seems inappropriate in its displacement of the focus from the struggle of the proletariat to what appears as a vague and intellectualist reflection on the individual.

Erich Fromm's theorization in his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941) takes its starting point from a similar concern with the individual and his relationship to society. Fromm had already been living in the United States for several years when he published the book – since 1934 he had held a professorship at Columbia University. The guiding question of the German psychoanalyst's entire investigation is the following: how is it possible that, despite the historical development of individual freedoms in Europe since the age of feudalism, educated men in Western countries should prefer to submit to the absolute power of a dictator rather than exercise their democratic rights?

A hypothetical response to this question is given in the first pages of the book, as a thesis that the analyst is determined to prove in his work.

Fromm argues that modern man, once liberated from the constraints of pre-individualistic society – a structure that had simultaneously provided security and imposed limitations – finds himself in a condition of disorientation and anxiety (viii). As Friedman observes, it was the “contemporary crisis over freedom” that “compelled Fromm to put aside a study of the “character structure of modern man.” The crisis threatened “the greatest achievements of modern culture – individuality and uniqueness of personality” (99). The book, therefore, arose as a response to the readiness with which men seemed to embrace the dictatorships that had led the world into war – and from which, in the case of Nazism, Fromm himself had been forced to flee. Yet the work subsequently took on what might be called a universal scope, addressing Western civilization as a whole rather than men circumscribed by specific political contexts. Indeed, as Friedman rightly notes, “Fromm’s insights were intended to apply not only to twentieth-century fascist regimes but to democracies such as the United States” (iii). This is because Fromm identified this tendency toward submission as a characteristic inclination of modern Western man: “Psychologically, this readiness to submit to the Nazi regime seems to be due mainly to a state of inner tiredness and resignation, which [...] is characteristic of the individual in the present era even in democratic countries” (233). For Fromm, this tendency is rooted not primarily in ideology or philosophy, but in psychology – or, more precisely, socio-psychology. The alternative to this dark course, he believed, was recovering spontaneity – a “spontaneous relationship to man and nature” characterized by “love and productive work” (46), in which modern man could find “freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, *the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities*” (viii, *emphasis added*).

This vision, I would argue, is also Steinbeck’s own. Throughout his work, a similar impulse toward affirming individual autonomy and “uniqueness” runs deep, grounded in the conviction that liberation is inseparable from creative self-realization – the very capacity Fromm locates at the heart of positive freedom. As Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh has demonstrated, Steinbeck regarded

human creativity as a necessary product for the perpetuation of human society. The writer used the terms “creativity” and “creative mind” to denote not simply an internal psychological state – such as a mental predisposition toward fantasy, introspection, or contemplation – but rather a faculty that wondered about and wrestled with the outside world, seeking to transform the status quo. As Steinbeck put it, “Creativeness has its foundation in inspection, criticism and rearrangement” (*America and Americans* 90). For Steinbeck, this creativity was inseparable from freedom, conceived as the capacity – economic, social, and personal alike – for self-determination, that is, the autonomous exercise of creativity free from external restraints. Zirakzadeh aptly describes this notion of a heroic solitude of human beings within the social setting as a form of semi-anarchism (7), and he recalls a memorable passage from *East of Eden* which states: “The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of a man” (132). These themes, as is evident, strongly call upon the individual to express his own individuality with courage, without indulgence. In this sense, *In Dubious Battle* may be the first work of the Californian author in which such an emphasis becomes apparent, though in a negative form – for, as we shall see, Jim Nolan ultimately lacks the courage to exercise his personality with sufficient freedom.

Beyond its sociological and biological dimensions (the phalanx), and its political one (the struggle between oppressors and oppressed), Steinbeck’s novel acquires yet another, fundamental layer of interpretation. It is one related to Jim’s inner life and vicissitudes – his detachment from the world, and his condition at the crossroads between psychopathological disorder and existential doubt. From this perspective, the character of Jim in many respects seems to anticipate the kind of characters that would later make French existentialism famous – such as Antoine Roquentin in Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938) or Meursault in Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942). The beginning of the novel, from this perspective, is revealing:

At last it was evening. The lights in the street outside came on, and the neon restaurant sign on the corner jerked on and off, exploding its hard red light in the air. Into Jim Nolan’s room the sign threw a soft red light. For two hours

Jim had been sitting in a small, hard rocking chair, his feet up on the white bedspread. Now that it was quite dark, he brought his feet down to the floor and slapped the sleeping legs. For a moment he sat quietly while waves of itching rolled up and down his calves; then he stood up and reached for the unshaded light. The furnished room lighted up – the big white bed with its chalk-white spread, the golden-oak bureau, the clean red carpet worn through to a brown warp. (*In Dubious Battle* 3)

Jim is described in his rather miserable room: the featureless white bed, the worn carpet, the lamp without a shade, the hard chair on which he sits, and nothing more to be described, perhaps to preserve the room's anonymity. The space is clean, but it is a cleanliness that only heightens the sense of impersonality, in fact consistent with (and also emphasising) the strongest impression of alienation that emanates from the protagonist himself. Jim is presented as an automaton: "for two hours Jim had been sitting in a small, hard rocking chair, his feet up on the white bedspread" (3). All the while, an intermittent red light flashes in from the street, obtrusively filling the room, yet Jim seems entirely unaffected by it – perhaps not even aware of its presence. Furthermore, it is both interesting and significant that the very first sensation conveyed by the omniscient narrator is Jim's experience of torpor. His legs tingle, having gone numb, as though, in a sense, they were already bound up with the protagonist's inertia. The opening scene anticipates what will later become apparent: the exhaustion of a character immobilized in expectation of something yet to come. Evening thus marks a threshold between a state of non-life and the beginning of a new life: Jim becomes active only when the moment arrives, whereas before he remains motionless, like a statue. In line with these considerations, Jay Parini aptly observes:

In Dubious Battle follows the political adventures of one man: Jim Nolan who quite literally wakes up and smells the bacon [...] One of American literature's *isolatos*, he is a man without past, having no family, no property, and no visible attachments. He abandons his few connections to the people in the boarding house where he lives and takes the road, having made the firm decision to join "the Party." (165)

Jim then rises and goes downstairs to pay the rent to the surly landlady without batting an eye and proceeds without the slightest hesitation to the headquarters of the Communist Party, where he becomes a part of it. As Howard Levant has noted, the adherence to the party marks for Jim a transition from inert mood to a vivid new state: “a controlled series of images sets the tone and sharpens the meaning of Jim’s awareness that he had been “dead” and now is partly ‘alive’” (21). During the recruitment, even Comrade Nilson notices Jim’s unusual detachment: “You look half drunk, Jim. What’s the matter with you?” he asks. Jim’s answer is paradigmatic: “I don’t know. I feel dead. Everything in the past is gone” (Steibeck, *In Dubious Battle* 9).

But there is more. What becomes clear from the few occasions on which Jim speaks in the novel is the profound self-contempt he harbors. In his eagerness to place himself at the service of the cause, Jim implores his superior, Mac – who has been assigned the task of training him – with these words: “Well, let me do things, won’t you, Mac? I don’t want to be a stooge all my life” (55). Later, he impatiently reiterates the request: “What do you want me to do? [...] All I do is just listen. I want to do something” (94). And then, again: “Give *me* some work” (140). Notably, a considerable number of pages pass between the first and the last request, during which Jim Nolan is indeed occupied with various tasks. He performs various organizational duties (102-103), assists Mac in delivering London’s daughter-in-law’s child (56-59), and takes part in the communal life of the laborers. One may reasonably infer, therefore, that what persists is a state of inner paralysis – no longer the result of mere inaction, but the unchangeable persistence of a state of anxiety born of self-contempt. Nolan feels useless, senseless, unkempt; and when at last he glimpses something through which he might realize his ideal, he becomes impatient to carry out his grandiose designs – the only thing that, in his own eyes, can redeem him from a state he himself regards as pitiable.

Of course, Freud would have had much to say about this kind of psychic state. He would probably have suggested that Jim Nolan’s condition was, in a

loose sense, assimilable to something akin to an obsessive neurosis brought on by a form of “social or moral anxiety” – where:

The ego escapes it by obediently carrying out the commands, precautions and penances that have been enjoined on it. If it is impeded in doing so, it is at once overtaken by an extremely distressing feeling of discomfort which may be regarded as an equivalent of anxiety and which the patients themselves liken to anxiety. (128)

Such a theoretical framework – which, of course, underpinned the very foundations of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the century – is also partly at the basis of *Escape from Freedom*. “While hostility against others is often conscious and can be expressed overtly,” Fromm says “hostility against oneself is usually (except in pathological cases) unconscious, and finds expression in indirect and rationalized forms. One is a person’s active emphasis on his own wickedness and insignificance” (117). For him, the hatred fomented by the superego against the ego – expressed in the text as a more general sense of irrelevance – lies at the root of the individual’s need to abdicate his own will. However, yet while acknowledging that “[Freud] and his followers in modern psychology not only uncovered the irrational and unconscious sector of man’s nature” (23), Fromm maintains that Freud’s perspective was nonetheless tainted by the “spirit of his culture” (24). For Fromm – as for other analysts of the time who were disputing Freud’s legacy, such as Wilhelm Reich and Karen Horney² –

² “In psychoanalytic literature a viewpoint different from Freud’s has been presented by Wilhelm Reich, Karen Horney, and myself. Although Reich’s views are based on the original concept of Freud’s libido theory, he points out that the masochistic person ultimately seeks pleasure and that the pain incurred is a by-product, not an aim in itself. Horney was the first one to recognize the fundamental role of masochistic strivings in the neurotic personality, to give a full and detailed description of the masochistic character traits, and to account for them theoretically as the outcome of the whole character structure. In her writings, as well as in my own, instead of the masochistic character traits being thought of as rooted in the sexual perversion, the latter is understood to be the sexual expression of psychic tendencies that are anchored in a particular kind of character structure” (172).

Freud was mistaken in treating certain features of the human psyche as fixed characteristics. Rather, they were to be regarded as products of society in a particular moment, a view that led Fromm to conceive the abdication of human will as a historical process itself. This process began, paradoxically, with the emancipation of the individual from the hierarchical orders of the Middle Ages – the feudal system, the Church, and the guilds – yet its negative counterpart was a new sense of disorientation, isolation, and powerlessness. With the Reformation, this despair was suffused with new meaning, together with self-hatred and the doubt of not being among the saved: “It was the irrational doubt which springs from the isolation and powerlessness of an individual whose attitude toward the world is one of anxiety and hatred” (90). Subsequently, this transformation reaches its culmination with the rise of capitalist society. As Fromm has explained: “under capitalism, one ceased to live in a closed world the center of which was man.” Instead, man was dominated by suprapersonal forces of capital and markets; he lost his sense of unity with his society and his sense of a place in the universe (106). A society made up of isolated consumers, ruthlessly subjected to the laws of capital – much like Steinbeck’s protagonist, who joins the strikers in their struggle, or, one might say, in the phalanx.

It is clear, then, that both Fromm’s reflection and Steinbeck’s character are constructed on this very same point of departure: the experience of powerlessness and self-disdain. As evidence of this, one may consider what Steinbeck wrote to George Albee in 1935, a year before the publication of the novel:

I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s wages, and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. *But man hates something in himself.* He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle but himself he cannot win over unless he kills every individual. And this self-hate which goes so closely in hand with self-love is what I wrote about. (98, *emphasis added*)

Steinbeck’s intention is to begin from this profound self-hatred of man and to develop his narrative from there. The character on whom he concentrates

all of this is Jim Nolan who, fully “modern” in Fromm’s sense, finds himself disoriented and rootless in a society that is only apparently “free.” His father is dead, killed while attempting to blow up the slaughterhouse where he had worked; his sister has disappeared into a probably degraded life. His mother has recently died of illness, yet Jim shows no empathy, admitting that he had not felt any sorrow even when it came time for her funeral: “She just stared at me. I asked her if she wanted a priest, but she didn’t answer me, just stared. ’Bout four o’clock in the morning she died. Didn’t seem like dying at all. I didn’t go to the funeral. I guess they would’ve let me. I didn’t want to” (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 8). Such an uprooting from social reality can be directly connected to Jim’s sense of desolation in his room with which the novel opens. And the aloneness, in turn, deepens his self-hatred, or in Fromm’s word, “masochism.” “I come now to the main question: What is the root of both the masochistic perversion and masochistic character traits respectively? [...] Psychoanalytic and other empirical observations of masochistic persons give ample evidence [...] that they are filled with a terror of aloneness and insignificance” (172-173).

This condition, for Fromm, leads to the desperate attempt to recover something that might restore a sense of security. “Masochism is one way toward this goal” he contends. “The different forms which the masochistic strivings assume have one aim: *to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself*; in other words, *to get rid of the burden of freedom*” (173, *original emphasis*). What can reassemble the fragmented individual, then, may be an authoritarian ideal to serve – yet one which, when pursued in self-forgetful devotion, turns into the dissolution of the self into a cause. As a matter of fact, Fromm suggests that as long as the individual is torn between the wish for independence and strength and the sense of insignificance or powerlessness, he remains caught in a painful inner conflict. It is only by diminishing the individual self – by silencing the awareness of one’s own separateness – that one may find relief from this torment (174). This is the case with Fascisms, with Nazism, with

Communism – systems of government in which the individual offers up their submission:

The other side [besides the annihilation of the self] is the attempt to become a part of a bigger and more powerful whole outside of oneself, to submerge and participate in it. This power can be a person, an institution, God, the nation, conscience, or a psychic compulsion. *By becoming part of a power which is felt as unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous, one participates in its strength and glory.* (177, *emphasis added*)

Given what we have discussed so far, we can say with a fair degree of certainty that what animates Jim Nolan is not only the genuine impulse to serve a just cause. He fights on the side of the oppressed; yet his fervor for the cause seems to be rooted in the personal unease we have mentioned.

This is confirmed once more by the scene that follows, in which, after the traumatic death of Joy – an old laborer and veteran, shot down by three bullets, fired by vigilantes – Mac and Jim are seated in a tent through which the rain seeps. When Mac laments the harsh conditions in which they must act, Jim responds: “Don’t worry about it, Mac. Sometimes, *when a guy gets miserable enough, he’ll fight all the harder.* That’s the way it was with me, Mac, when my mother was dying, and she wouldn’t even speak to me. I just got so miserable I d’ve taken any chance. Don’t you worry about it” (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 207). It is Jim himself, at this point in the narrative, who directly links his personal unease to a more passionate and orthodox fulfillment of his political duties. It is almost as if a situation of greater misery were desirable for the perfect success of the strike. The struggle is, in this sense, a “mechanism of escape” in Fromm’s terms – the occasion to take a risk in order to break free from misery.

Fromm’s formulation helps clarify how the counterpart to an initial condition of weakness and misery lies in identifying with a force regarded as invincible, and in partaking of the authority and prestige it confers. This transformation described by Fromm – the passage from a “free but powerless individuality” to a “strength within the mass” – is precisely the arc traced by

the character of Jim. Over the course of the narrative, in fact, the protagonist moves from the phase of prostration described above to one in which he stands out for the firmness and strength of his new convictions. As Levant has noted, “Jim’s certainty strengthens this pattern, since it does not imply a synthesis. Jim is another sort of creature, a man who comes to love violence and power” (27). In a significant passage, where Jim converses with the old Dan – wounded after a fall and delirious with fever – Levant identifies for the first time in the text a crucial change in Jim. “The poor damn rats,” Dan mutters contemptuously in his delirium, “they never had nobody to tell ’em what to do. They never had no real leader.” Jim, however, responds with icy lucidity, agreeing with him (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 216-17). “So, indirectly, and prior to the event” Levant continues,

Steinbeck provides an evaluation of the strike’s development into pure violence under Jim’s leadership. Dan’s feverishly exaggerated projection of the private will is less dangerous than *Jim’s actual authoritarian rule which operates silently, behind the scenes [...]*. (28, *emphasis added*)

This “silent process” is what has been tentatively addressed in this paper. While wounded in the arm, Jim, as if in an epiphanic moment after speaking with Dan, now directs his destructiveness outward rather than inward. Out of his disorientation, Jim has arrived at a new violence, which now clashes with the methods of his former mentor, Mac. At the beginning of the narrative, in fact, Mac appeared more unscrupulous than the hesitant Jim, and he constantly sought to “use” whatever misfortune befell the workers for the sake of the strike’s success (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 60; 93; 94; 101; 103; 163; 201; 272; 292). But then, as the plot progresses, something changes, as Levant notices, “The novel is able to develop in terms of Jim’s inhuman logic because in theory Mac accepts Jim’s faith in violence. The distinction is that Mac remains human in practice, since more removed from a worship of violence than Jim” (29).

In this “worship of violence” one cannot but reread Fromm’s words: “becoming part of a power which is felt as *unshakably strong, eternal, and glamorous*” (154). The masochistic aspect of Jim, so far extensively represented, is now giving way to a sadistic side – a turn that is also perfectly explained by Fromm: “Besides these masochistic trends, the very opposite of them, namely, sadistic tendencies, are regularly to be found in the same kind of characters” (165). Yet the motivation underlying such destructiveness, in Fromm, is fundamentally different from what Levant calls “faith in violence.” For Fromm, in fact, the essence of sadistic impulses lies rather in “the inability to stand the aloneness of one’s individual self,” which in the case of sadism no longer seeks to eliminate itself through disappearance, but rather to “enlarge [the self] by making another being part of myself and thereby I gain the strength I lack as an independent self” (180). This ambivalence is perfectly conveyed in the disturbing words Jim addresses to Mac, at a moment when their roles are reversed:

Then I got hurt. And sitting here waiting, I got to know my power. *I’m stronger than you, Mac. I’m stronger than anything in the world, because I’m going in a straight line.* You and all the rest have to think of women and tobacco and liquor and keeping warm and fed.” His eyes were as cold as wet river stones. *“I wanted to be used. Now I’ll use you, Mac. I’ll use myself and you.* I tell you, I feel there’s strength in me. (Steinbeck, *In Dubious Battle* 274, *emphasis added*)

Such an explanation of Jim’s violent transformation is far more plausible: in reading the novel, in fact, we find no other concrete reasons to think that the protagonist could have turned from a hesitant young man eager to join the revolution into a bloodthirsty one in so short a time.

From this moment on, Jim takes the reins of the strike and does so in an authoritarian manner. Not by chance, when confronted with his new directives, London, the charismatic and respected worker, exclaims: “The whole thing sounds kind of Bolshevik” (278). This new despotic authority, which Jim has now come to exercise after pages of servitude, is described by the protagonist as “the great forces at work that create little troubles like this strike of ours. And

the sight of those forces does something to you, picks you up and makes you act. I guess that's where authority comes from" (279).

This authoritarian turn in Nolan's character is regarded by Fromm as a typical response of the sado-masochistic personality – tellingly, the analyst states that "I prefer to speak instead of the sado-masochistic character, especially when not the neurotic but the normal person is meant, of the *authoritarian character*" (186).

The inevitable epilogue of the novel – and of Jim's masochism – is, of course, the death of the protagonist. Nolan, rushing toward the fire set by the vigilantes at the home of Anderson, a supporter of the strike, is cut down by rifle shots. Mac, though stricken with grief, will also use this death propagandistically, in order to rally the strikers.

Conclusions

In Dubious Battle, as shown above, is a novel that vividly portrays the mental states of its protagonist, Jim Nolan – but does so in a counterintuitive way. Rather than dedicating itself to a portrait of his interiority, it chooses to represent him through his relationships with others, eschewing the canonical stylistic apparatus of the literature of those same years that signals a character's subjectivity. And yet, much of Jim's psychology is conveyed with considerable effectiveness precisely through this choice to privilege the breadth of his relational life over the depth of his emotional one. This is achieved with great precision: we are able to reconstruct a substantial portion of his life through its salient moments. We learn of his sense of displacement and isolation, rooted in a dysfunctional family history – the violence suffered at his father's hands, the rejection he received from his mother on her deathbed, and the painful disappearance of his sister. We witness Jim's sense of insignificance within capitalist society: poor, rootless, without possessions or education. This powerlessness is perfectly framed from the novel's opening scenes, where the physical torpor Jim experiences is in fact the embodiment of a mental state – his very limbs

become a symbol of his paralysis. The novel then shows how these elements coherently produce a character of masochistic disposition, eager to be used as an object, to undergo a self-annihilation that will precede an actual martyrdom. In his fanaticism, Jim does not so much desire to place his creativity and full expressiveness at the service of a just cause, but rather to be reabsorbed into an ideology and a cause as though they were a new maternal womb – and to disappear within it, beloved. We see, finally, how this desire moves from masochistic passivity to sadistic activity, as the powerless Jim is at last able to discharge onto others the same aggression born of his powerlessness.

Steinbeck's novel depicts the story of a man who embraces a correct position for the wrong reasons. In doing so, the writer did not attempt to sabotage the workers' cause, as Mary McCarthy believed. On the contrary, he elevated it: on the one hand, by narrating the story of the desperate loneliness of a young man who, like many others, had been abandoned by capitalist society; on the other, by insisting – as he did throughout his career – that the individual can only truly contribute to the fight for a more just society if he preserves his own personality and conscience, rather than dissolving them into the mass.

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