

The Depression's "Graveyard Ghosts": A Shared Motif in *Waiting for Nothing* and *The Grapes of Wrath*

John Ditsky, University of Windsor

The Great Depression of the 1930s dispossessed both workers who lost their jobs and farmers who were forced to surrender their land. To those who found themselves in either predicament, it must have seemed as though all the meaning had gone out of life--as though life itself had been reduced to a barely flickering fire. It is not surprising, then, that at least two writers of the era--one famous, one all but forgotten nowadays--should have both come up with the same simile to express the lowered vitality of the dispossessed. Tom Kromer's 1935 autobiographical "novel" *Waiting for Nothing* sold well enough on its initial appearance, its author-certified "authentic" dialogue derived from Kromer's firsthand observation of fellow "stiffs" who, like the author himself, were "on the fritz" during the peak years of the Depression. Similarly, the combination of the Depression and the Dust Bowl conditions that drove the "Okies" from their land provided John Steinbeck with the materials for his classic 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Whether or not Steinbeck knew of Kromer's book--something we cannot at present establish--the responses of the two authors to the conditions of the time are interestingly similar, especially insofar as they share the notion of the dispossessed as "ghosts" occupying a "graveyard." Whatever the degree of connectedness, in other words, a comparison of Steinbeck's and Kromer's presentations can prove instructive.

Kromer's volume still has the ring of truth--as in this scene by a hobo jungle campfire in which the narrator describes the company he is in--his fellow strangers--just before one of them begins the story of his adventures: "When I look at these stiffs by the fire, I am looking at a graveyard. There is hardly any room to move between the tombstones. There are no epitaphs carved in marble here. The tombstones are men. The epitaphs are chiseled in sunken shadows on their cheeks. These are dead men. They are ghosts that walk the streets by day. They are ghosts sleeping with yesterday's newspapers thrown around them for covers at night. I can see that these are ghosts that groan and toss through the night. I watch. From time to time a white splotch gets up off the ground. He cannot rest for the rats and the cold. This is a restless ghost. Or maybe it is the gnawing pain in his belly that makes him restless and sleepless. The ground is hard. Damp and hard. There are many things will make a restless ghost at night in a jungle. I am a restless ghost myself."¹

We note here how, in this firsthand account of life among the dispossessed, the narrator creates emphasis through repetition of fairly basic ideas and images, particularly those of "ghosts" who with their memories of a vanished time are in effect already walking dead with no place of their own in the society they remember. Specifically, they are no ordinary ghosts but "graveyard" ghosts--whose mere presence turns the vicinity into a cemetery. The reader of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* may well remember the character of Muley Graves, whom the returning Tom Joad and Jim Casy encounter on their way

¹ Tom Kromer, *Waiting for Nothing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935; rpr. New York: Hill & Wang, 1968) 166. Interestingly, the section of the novel from which this passage is taken is quoted in Harvey Swados's anthology *The American Writer and the Great Depression* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966) 351-61, esp. 354. Swados refers to Kromer's work as a "Gorkyesque cry from the lower depths, the remarkably honest, unvarnished, unliterary, unpolitical utterance of a man who barely survived to tell us of certain American horrors" (352). Kromer's is certainly the sort of eyewitness account that would have attracted Steinbeck's interest at that stage of his career.

back to the Joad property. That reader may recall what a fund of now-obsolete memories Muley is, but also how he survives among the animals that are taking over abandoned property. He or she may remember Muley's repeated description of himself as an "ol' graveyard ghos'." And wonder if a connection, or an influence, exists. Here is a key passage from Muley Graves's account of his activities. As in Kromer, it takes place in front of a campfire; and this time there is food in the form of a rabbit that has been roasted and is to be shared communally by Muley, Tom Joad, and Jim Casy. But Muley delays the meal in order to rise to a peak of indignation: "'Let her get good an' done, good an' brown, awmost black,' said Muley irritably. 'I wanta talk. I ain't talked to nobody. If I'm touched, I'm touched, an' that's the end of it. Like a ol' graveyard ghos' goin' to neighbors' houses in the night. Peters', Jacobs', Rance's, Joad's; an' the houses all dark, standin' like miser'ble ratty boxes, but they was good parties an' dancin'. An' there was meetin's and shoutin' glory. They was weddin's, all in them houses. An' then I'd want to go in town an' kill folks. 'Cause what'd they take when they tractored the folks off the lan'? What'd they get so their 'margin a profit' was safe? They got Pa dyin' on the groun', an' Joe yellin' his first breath, an' me jerkin' like a billy goat under a bush in the night. What'd they get? God knows the lan' ain't no good. Nobody been able to make a crop for years. But them sons-a-bitches at their desks, they jus' chopped folks in two for their margin a profit. They jus' cut 'em in two. Place where folks live is them folks. They ain't whole, out lonely on the road in a piled-up car. They ain't alive no more. Them sons-a-bitches killed 'em.' And he was silent, his thin lips still moving, his chest still panting. He sat and looked down at his hands in the firelight. 'I--I ain't talked to nobody for a long time,' he apologized softly. 'I been sneakin' aroun' like a ol' graveyard ghos'.'"2

Like Steinbeck's novel, Kromer's is open-ended; we can only guess what will happen to its characters next. But the books' very titles establish their salient differences: in Kromer's volume, expectation may well lead nowhere; Steinbeck's-- however one reads the ending--is hardly so pessimistic, since whatever other options present themselves, just anger is always a final possibility. In style and image and texture, Steinbeck's and Kromer's texts resemble one another to a discernible extent. The two novels are united in their concern with those characters Kromer calls "stiffs," with all the attendant meanings the word possesses both as adjective and as noun: "formal," "unbending"; "fellow," "worker," "hobo," "corpse." Steinbeck may or may not have been familiar with Kromer's narrative. But one way or another, his Muley Graves does seem to be a defiant descendant of the denizens of *Waiting for Nothing*.

² John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: The Viking Press, 1939) 70-71.