CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION
John Steinbeck is indisputably one of the greatest American novelists. In the Noble Prize citation, he was eulogized as an “independent expounder of the truth with an unbiased instinct for what is genuinely American, be it good or wicked.”¹ F.W. Watts has rightly said,

Like America itself, his work is a vast fascinating paradoxical universe: a brash experiment in democracy: a native quest for understanding at the level of the common man: a celebration of goodness and innocence: and display of chaos violence, corruption and decadence.²

He underwent a wide range of experiences during his life time. His was “a childhood soaked in impressions of fertile each, the mountains and fishing ports of California, sporadic study at Stanford University, the half enchanted work as a newspaper reporter as also odd jobs like, house-painter, fruit picker, surveyer, caretaker, filled the early decades of the man who at his death was a thrice married father of two children.”³

It would appear uncommonly easy to lose one’s sense of critical balance in discussing the work of John Steinbeck. Steinbeck has always invoked intense, arguably excessive loyalty in his supporters and contempt of varying degrees in his detractors. Possibly his artistic reputation has suffered as much, if not more, from this excessive show of loyalty, bordering at times on the verge of idolization, as it has from the barbed attacks of his critics. Taking the blanked view, we are forced to admit that, while Steinbeck is indisputably one of the greatest of twentieth-century American novelists, some of his work is incredibly bad, the style wooden, the content meretricious, the overall concept inadequate. To be fair to Steinbeck, however, this is
an assessment which could be as equally applied to some of the work of almost every other of his distinguished contemporaries: Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe, to name but a few.

It hardly needs to be repeated that a writer lives on only for as long as his books are read. It is safe to predict that Steinbeck’s books will continue to be read long after the critically acclaimed books of many of his contemporaries have become merely listed titles in dusty treatises. Edward G. Robinson has succinctly defined what he considers is “great” in literature and art. Greatness, he posits, is endowed upon a work by “a cumulative decision of the literate” and not necessarily by “the individual decision of the critic.”4 Certainly, Steinbeck himself had little time for “sour scholars,” as he once referred to them5, and preferred that his books be read for pleasure. In one sense, it is remarkable that in this immediate posthumous period his work enjoys continuing popularity among readers of all ages, and particularly among the young. It seems that he has something meaningful to say to each successive generation discovering him for the first time. He has not suffered the usual slump in interest and popularity which follows the deaths of most writers. His books still sell by the thousands, as attested by the considerable and unending turnover on the booksellers’ paperback shelves.

Why should be so? Part of the reason is undoubtedly the current strange and almost overwhelming craving for nostalgia, centered principally on the twenty years which separated the two world wars. From the view point of this overly materialistic and frighteningly aimless age in which we now live, those distant times of the
twenties and thirties do indeed in retrospect exude a mellow and desirable glow. They represent days, which, depending on the fullness of our years, we can either never hope to know at firsthand or never hope to know again. We tend to forget that so far so many of us who lived through those two decades they also represent days from which we once sought desperately to escape. Steinbeck’s books of the pre-war period are all very much of the time during which they were written. They mirror in fictive form the history, the emotive patterns, the mores of that particular era. They have survived, whereas so many “proletarian” novels of the depression years, with their outmoded polemics and their plodding naturalistic style, now seem virtually unreadable, except as historical or sociological case-books.

Steinbeck’s books for all their outdated surface topicality, express universal and enduring truths. Even regarded as parables, they are the stuff of which life is composed. Thomas Heggen, the author of Mr. Roberts (1946), defending Steinbeck’s portrayal of the Oklahoma tenant farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath*, has expressed the general view:

> His characters live and breathe, also they cuss and drink and carry-on, but only because their real-life prototypes cussed and drank and carried on.⁶

Yet immediately, even while agreeing with the basic truth of Heggen’s comment, one can still pinpoint one of the principal failures of Steinbeck’s art: the fact that, apart possibly from Lennie Small, Ma Joad, and, to a lesser degree, the Doc of *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, Steinbeck has never wholly succeeded in creating a truly memorable fictional character.
There is, moreover, when one thinks about it, a curious ambivalence about most of the men and women who people Steinbeck’s books. They do not act with absolute psychological consistency, so that (probably as one result of Steinbeck’s non-teleological theorizing) they seem driven less from the force of their own inner motivations than from the imposition of external circumstance. It is as if Steinbeck himself was not always altogether sure of their true natures. Perhaps drawing—as he so often did-portraits from real-life people, he tried too hard to avoid specific identification, or alternatively, created the fictional character from a conflicting compendium of real-life prototypes. Steinbeck’s men and women certainly live on the pages of his books while we are reading about them, but once the book is finished and put aside those men and women become curiously almost faceless types, at best people seen through a mist, or animals who are only incidentally human, so that, for example, in the short story “The Snake,” the rattlesnake and the rat and even the dissected cat remain as equally vivid in our minds as the two human protagonists, Dr. Phillips and mysterious woman.

That Steinbeck derived great material success from his books can not be denied. This fact, in itself, has unfortunately been the perfect recipe for critical condemnation from some quarters. It would seem that many critics and scholars, eschewing Edward G. Robinson’s proposition, have almost always held an inherent suspension of and occasionally a downright undisguised hostility towards popular artistic success.
Furthermore, Steinbeck's eternally questing mind, eager ever to explore new subjects and new territory, has earned him additional critical disfavor. Many critics have deprecated his apparent diversity of style and content. Warren Beck has declared: "Steinbeck's total production has been so various in its themes that it is impossible to abstract a general and fairly consistent view of it, as can be done with Faulkner, Willa Cather, Conrad, and many older novelists." Steinbeck himself is on record as frequently maintaining, he had no interest in writing the same book twice. Oddly enough, this diversity was apparently not something which ever disturbed his readers, who continued to buy his book avidly as they came out. Normally, the reading public buys the new Hemingway or the new Ivy Compton-Burnett, or (at the other extreme) the new Harold Robbins or Mickey Spillane because it knows what to expect: the familiar formulae in new permutations. Popular acceptance may be one thing, but there can be no doubt whatsoever that Steinbeck's critical reputation has suffered from the difficulty some critics and scholars have encountered in fitting him into the sort of watertight literary box to which Warren Beck refers.

How can one, for instance, equate the uncompromising realism and violence of *In Dubious Battle* with gentle satirical humour of *Tortilla Flat*, or the carefully-paired theatrical construction of *Of Mice and Men* and *The Moon Is Down* with the sprawling saga of *East of Eden*? Steinbeck, of course, was fully aware of the problem. In an interview given to a British journalist in 1959, he stated:

I once worked out a thing about criticism that it hates to change its mind. The only safe writer is a dead one for the critics. If he changes, a writer confuses critics, and
yet if he doesn't change he's really dead. I'm surprised there's been any continuity
at all in my books.⁹

At that time, although he still had nine more years to live, Steinbeck was approaching
the end of his writing career, one more novel and two full-length works of non-
fiction only still to come from his pen. Now that pen has been laid down forever and
one can assume that Steinbeck can be regarded, to use his own expression, as
“safe”—there will be no more surprises to confound his critics, but also sadly no
more books to delight his readers. It is, then, now possible to contemplate the whole
oeuvre from a more objective viewpoint than one was able to adopt while Steinbeck
was still alive. I hope to demonstrate in the following chapters that despite the
strictures of those “confused” critics and those “sour” scholars and in the face of
Steinbeck’s own alleged but not altogether convincing astonishment, there is indeed
an overall thematic and stylistic unity to his work and that work in its totality
(accepting the inevitable ups and downs, the happy successes and the dismal failures
that must of necessity punctuate the career of a writer as obsessively experimental as
Steinbeck) represents an extraordinary literary achievement.

John Steinbeck, was a very unassuming type of man and writer, who never ran
after popularity. As his social attitude and relationship to society changed, his literacy
career also witnessed changes. James Woodress rightly says,

When he was most afraid of popularity and momentary success, he was most of the
social critic and the best writer. When he was being engulfed by success, the
struggle against it produced some excellent work. But when he was drowned by his
popularity and royalties, Steinbeck entered in his period of artistic decline. He
passed through phase one in the Thirties, phase two in the Forties, and phase Three in the Fifties.9

Peter Lisca seems to hold the same view when he says that in the Thirties Steinbeck had been under the influence of Jungian Thought, thinking in terms of archetypes and racial memory, but after 1950 he became much more “Freudian” and thus individual in his outlook.10

Roy S. Simmonds, an English Steinbeck scholar living in Billericay, Essex, observed that Steinbeck’s work “enjoys continuing popularity among readers of all ages and particularly among the young.”11 This simultaneity of Steinbeck’s popularity in England and Japan, in other words, his acceptance across both the Atlantic and the Pacific, tells us something about the international appeal of this great novelist.

Steinbeck’s wide popularity means that his work gives the readers pleasure, even if “the lips of sour scholars”12 do not always care for its taste. I realize, of course, that there may be a gap between a writer’s popularity among the general public and the degree to which he is understood. A writer’s popularity sometimes is based on the misunderstanding of the reader. What is important to remember, however, is that in literature, or more generally in art, misunderstanding can be an oblique form of understanding. The critical establishment is not the only correct reader. All it can do to present an interpretation of a work, or, as a mere expedient, to extract the writer’s message from it. But when we reflect upon the dynamic fusion which takes place between a book and the reader in the act of enjoying literature, the views of established criticism loosen their apparently objective foundation. By
established criticism I mean the critical view that the essence of a work of literature expresses its author’s pen, and finally that the reader should “correctly” understand what the author tries to convey to him.

Thus, while the general public may recognize that Steinbeck’s characters are sometimes “guinea pigs”\(^{13}\) or “symbolic marionettes”\(^{14}\) and that Steinbeck was the writer of so-called proletarian novels, they also recognize that Steinbeck and his novels offer more than what those critical labels denote. Surely this is why Steinbeck enjoys a lasting popularity among the general public. While the more scholarly may speak of the general public in slightly denigrating terms, that same general public is obviously intellectual enough to distinguish between what is enjoyable and what is not. We should keep in mind, therefore, that what supports a writer’s popularity is the mass of perceptive general readers and not the professional critics alone.

The Steinbeck Society of America, founded in 1966, and the “Steinbeck Quarterly”, which has provided a forum for outstanding Steinbeck research since 1968, are, I believe, two great outgrowths of the hitherto silent voices of that sensible general public, without which even the Steinbeck scholar, Tetsumaro Hayashi would have hesitated to launch either the Society or the Steinbeck Quarterly or the Steinbeck Monograph Series.

As I wrote a few years ago,\(^{15}\) the past history of Steinbeck criticism has all too often been a history of scholarly fault-finding with Steinbeck’s so-called versatility. This approach has been keynoted by Edmund Wilson and Alfred Kazin (who, I might add, have pronounced a negatively interpreted versatility). Critic after critic
has underscored this view through the repetitious use of such words as oscillation, fluctuation, diversity and variability.

Concerning his ideology, the critics have used more detracting terms: bankrupt realism, homespun philosophy, homemade mysticism, fickled sentimentality, hausfrau sentimentality, and on and on. With regard to his characterization, as I mentioned before, "guinea pigs" and "symbolic marionettes" were the two typical pejoratives. With these shoot-from-the-hip attacks by the critical establishment, Steinbeck gradually sank beneath the surface of scholarly attention. He was condemned to be a mere storyteller who did not warrant criticism.

At the same time, however, we have had our Tiresiases of Steinbeck literature in such scholars as Joseph Fontenrose, Warren French, and Peter Lisca, who have steadily maintained a positive appraisal of the writer. These men were the mainstays with which Hayashi, the founder of the Society, and the Steinbeck Quarterly, embarked upon a renaissance of Steinbeck criticism in 1966.

Today many aspects of Steinbeck literature have been brought to light by active scholars in the United States, Canada, and England, as well as Japan. Steinbeck and the Arthurian theme, female characterization in Steinbeck’s fiction, Biblical references in his novels, textual criticism of some of his works, the exhaustive studies of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the study of Steinbeck in film are among the many fruitful directions of contemporary criticism. All this research has done much to elevate Steinbeck criticism and hopefully will contribute to the
understanding of the essential aspect of his versatility which past criticism has attacked so vehemently.

Kazin wrote as early as 1942 that Steinbeck’s versatility was “but a need to feel his own way...” without explaining what “his own way” might mean. The work “versatility” comes from the Latin verb vertere, meaning “to turn around or to revolve around.” Thus the essence of the term is that there is a central idea around which something turns or revolves. Unless we ask ourselves what this something was in Steinbeck, we cannot pinpoint “his own way,” nor can we grasp the true aspect of John Steinbeck as writer.

It seems to me that recent critical achievement in Steinbeck studies has, collectively, come to reveal just what was Steinbeck’s own way, and at the same time has unmistakably shown that such hackneyed labels as “guinea pigs” and “symbolic marionettes” describe no more than the surface realities of his characterization and are thus far from convincing.

Steinbeck’s principal thematic method is closely tied to his well-known teleological thinking. And this thinking is in turn closely tied to an “ecological” point of view, which is derived from his pastoral impulse. It is interesting that Steinbeck used the term “ecology” more than twenty years before the word became so popular. Steinbeck’s main contribution is his thematic method rather than any original thematic idea, because we have learned from Richard Astro’s exhaustive research that “the non-teleological thinking essay was written not by Steinbeck but by Ed Ricketts and was reproduced almost verbatim in The Log from the Sea of Cortez.”
Betty L. Perez has observed that "Sea of Cortez was conceived not as a supplement to Steinbeck’s fiction, but as a work of feeling, meaning, and beauty in its own right."18 We support her observation if we agree with Steinbeck that "the design of a book is the pattern of a reality controlled and shaped by the mind of the writer"19 just as is the case with poetry or fiction. Perez’s essay is one example of the maturity of today’s Steinbeck scholarship. In her article she refers to key Steinbeck books by Lisca, Fontenrose, French, Lester Jay Marks, and also to the well-known essay by Frederick Bracher. It would appear, however, that her point of view owes much to Astro’s John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist. While it is too soon to summarize the nature of Astro’s achievement in the history of Steinbeck criticism, we can say that while he realizes the importance of non-teleological thinking in the Steinbeck canon, he sees that thinking not as Steinbeck’s philosophy but rather as a Framework for his fictional structure. If viewed as a philosophy, Steinbeck’s non-teleological thinking might indeed be seen as “homespun,” but when viewed as a framework or vehicle for a fictional structure, it is, as attested in Astro’s logical presentation, entirely effective. Astro’s perspective seems to offer one of the most effective means thus far of understanding the Steinbeck canon. On this point I am sure he would be the first to insist that he owes a great deal to French, Fontenrose, Lisca, Joel Hedgpeth, and other predecessors in Steinbeck Scholarship.
As to how Steinbeck criticism will develop in the future, I cannot say for certain. More detailed examinations will surely be made of his individual work. And perhaps the efficacy of non-teleology as a critical tool will be tested in studies of Steinbeck novels dealing more with the soul of the individual, such as *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

It may also be useful to re-examine *Cup of Gold*, which Astro has condemned on the grounds of thematic incompetence. Astro writes:

> It is fruitless to speculate how *Cup of Gold* might have differed had the novelist known Ed Ricketts while writing it. All one can say is that *Cup of Gold* fails largely because of its thematic incompetence, a tendency in Steinbeck's writing which disappeared after his friendship with Ricketts began.²

I find this statement questionable on two points. It is true that it was in 1930, one year after *Cup of Gold* was published, that Steinbeck met Ed Ricketts, his mentor, and it is also true that Steinbeck acquired his non-teleological viewpoint while under Ricketts's guidance. I believe, however, that in order to have a truly meaningful encounter with a mentor or a friend, one must himself be already sympathetically compatible. It would, therefore, be more logical to assume that in 1929 when he wrote *Cup of Gold*, there was already in Steinbeck some element corresponding to Ricketts' established thinking, Steinbeck's interest in biology, particularly in marine zoology, was already awakened when he was a student at Stanford University. It was only intensified and given a focus by his friendship with Ricketts.

Steinbeck, for his inheritance, took the orchards and growing fields of California, the wasteland of the Depression, the refuse Camps of rebels and the slums
of poverty. He helped himself also to a scientific laboratory and certain places into which men retire to meditate. He, too, found pity and terror among his fellow human beings but, like Fitzgerald, he also found beauty, charm, and wit. Though the two men would never have thought of themselves as collaborators, they shared the responsibility of presenting in fiction all the conflicts that have confused our time and yet confirmed its aspirations.

Steinbeck speaks to us with special immediacy because in curious way he anticipated attitudes toward the human experience, which have particularly engaged the intelligences of the young in recent years. Many of Steinbeck’s Characters seem to have been the forebears of the rebels who have gathered in centers of protest from Greenwich village to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. What can the dissidents of *Tortilla Flat, Canary Row,* and *Sweet Thursday* be called but dropouts from society who have the same reason for rejecting old patterns of belief as to members of the hippie generations? On the negative side the Credo of today’s young revolutionaries seems, like that of Steinbeck, to have been influenced by a pervasive disillusionment with the gospel of success, by contempt for what seems to them to be cynical commercialism, and by resentment of arbitrary authority. On the positive side, as their banners insist, they wish to be guided—again as were the group—conscious residents of *Cannery Row*—by a preference for love over the destructive impulses of human mature. Steinbeck accepted as early the 1930’s the obligation to take a stand in his writing against tendencies in the American way of life to which the campus rebels of the present have been making vigorous objection.
More than this, Steinbeck never forgot the crucial character of the confrontation between man and his destiny. In the least sober of his books *Sweet Thursday*, he slipped in a statement which succinctly sets forth his own fundamental belief:

> Men seem to be born with a debt they can never pay no matter how hard they try. It piles up ahead of them. Man owes something to man. If he ignores the debt, it poisons him, and if he tries to make payments the debt only increases, and the quality of his gift is the measure of the man.²¹

The novels, plays and short stories of this conscientious artist represent successive efforts to play his debt to man. Wide in range of their interests, diverse in mood, passionately concerned in their sympathies, they all celebrate the worth of man. For that integrity Steinbeck demands justice and respect; to that integrity he lends the support of his own Conviction that all men everywhere are and must be inextricably identified with their kind. Much more clearly than in the instance of any other American writer of his time Steinbeck's consistent effort to establish the dignity of human life offers the measure of the man.

A curious view of Steinbeck, expressed by some of his critics, presented him as a kind of native natural genius who, having limited resources of technique and an even more severely limited vocabulary, blundered occasionally into displays of impressive, if brutal, power. Closer examination of his way with words should have to dispel that illusion. He was, in fact, a stylist of originality and grace. Just as he set up the structure of each of his best book in accordance with a well-planned architectural design, so he brought together the elements of his sentences with an
artist’s disciplined awareness of his own values. He expressed his attitudes, his sympathies, and his ideas in figurative language that remains fresh because his metaphors were entirely his own.

The faults and limitations of Steinbeck’s style have to do with matters of taste. Here, indeed, he did sometimes falter. It must be pointed out, however, that certain charges of grossness brought against books like Cannery Row would suggest themselves only to readers of parochial sensibility. The candor of the light entertainments belongs as surely to their themes as the bluntesses of Rebelais, Sterne, and Swift belong to their satiric material. To have turned away in timidity from the obligatory scenes of grotesquerie would have amounted to artistic irresponsibility. Yet it is true that Steinbeck was capable of strewing a page or two with ribaldries that are conspicuously inappropriate to character and mood. The Winter of Our Discontent puts into the mouth of a cultivated man, Ethan, bits of verbal outrageousness that would have shocked the outspoken residents of Cannery Row.

The charge that Steinbeck’s style is heavily laced with sentimentality should be examined closely on suspicion of bias. Some readers of The Grapes of Wrath brought it against him disingenuously, hoping to discredit his social attitudes by demeaning his way of expressing them. Disinterested analysts of his work were more perceptive even amid the near hysteria that greeted the book’s appearance. Still, one must admit that he yielded to the temptation to be extravagant, at crucial movements, in presenting scenes of sentiment. Though he often used the word
“gently” with ironic intent he used it far too often as he also overworked the even more lush “tenderly.” And if sentimentality may be defined as the deliberate distortion of the probable in the interest of what is strikingly picturesque, then it is true that Steinbeck is sometimes sentimental, twisting his characters into dubious postures of nobility. The last scene of *The Grapes of Wrath* provides an example. In it a girl who has just lost her child at birth gives her breast, charged as it is with milk, to a man who has collapsed of starvation. Humanity, one understands, owes something to humanity which it must cross any gap to pay. But the symbolic act fails of its own excessive strain. It is patently a theatrical gesture used to bring down the curtain on an artificially composed tableau.

But, considering Steinbeck’s temperament and the abundance of his imagination, it is remarkable that such excesses were few. His style contributed warm benefits of sympathy and spontaneity to each important book. Reappraising his work, one is reminded that style is the man and that this was a remarkably whole and wholesome man.

A special dimension is evident in Steinbeck’s work when it is compared with that of most of the writers of his time. He was not content to be merely an observer of mores and recorder of the movements of the moment. His books were all products of a speculative intelligence. The writing of fiction was for him a means of trying, for his own benefit and that of his readers, to identify the place of man in his world. His conception of that world included not merely the interests of economics and
sociology but those of science and the realm of the spirit as well. Into the bloodstream of his work he released a steady flow of ideas to enrich its vigor.

An apprentice chemist in his youth and, in his middle years, part owner of a laboratory of marine biology, Steinbeck had always a semiprofessional interest in science. The scientific studies he engaged in, which were guided by a highly trained friend, Ed Ricketts, reinforced his belief in the oneness of all life—organic and inorganic, animal, vegetable and aquatic. The book *Sea of Cortez,* written in collaboration with Ricketts, is in part of statement of that belief. It is also an account of a voyage up and down the Gulf of California to take specimens for a collection which, it was hoped, would constitute in it self a history of the marine life of the region.

What the investigators felt that they found in each tide pool they visited was “a world under a rock,” a tiny microcosm of the universe. They comment:

....it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious...is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is...related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable. This...profound feeling...made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each...reaffirmed...the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things—plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and a expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time.22

Such passages have baffled some of Steinbeck’s readers, leading them to the conclusion that his personal philosophy amounted to nothing but animalism, the denial that man has a spiritual nature. It is curious that his testimony should have
been so misread. In his Nobel address he made two significant declarations: first, that he lived, as a writer, to “celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit, courage, compassion and love”: second, that “a writer who does not believe in the perfectibility of man” cannot claim to have a true vocation. These might be dismissed as the afterthoughts of an elderly convert, apologizing for the heresies of his youth, if Steinbeck had not anticipated such affirmations many years before in *Sea of Cortez*. There he made it clear that a sense of man’s oneness with the universe should not drug the mind into passivity. Man is not merely the creature of an unknowable pattern of existence. He has made himself unique among animals by accepting responsibility for the good of others. Only he has this “drive outside of himself,” that is, toward altruism. It is the “tragic miracle of consciousness” that has re-created him. “Potentially man is all things” and his impulses urge him often to be greedy and cruel. But he is also “capable of great love.” His problem is to learn to accept his cosmic identity, by which Steinbeck means: to become aware of himself as an integral part of the whole design of existence. Tom Joad said it for him more succinctly in *The Grapes of Wrath*: “Well, maybe...a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one.”

The theme of oneness is developed in *Sea Of Cortez* with illustrations drawn from scientific observation. In an illuminating passage he describes the phenomenon of interdependence among aquatic creatures:

The schools swam, marshaled and patrolled. They turned as a unit and dived as a unit...We cannot conceive of this intricacy until we are able to think of the school as an animal itself, reacting with all its cells to stimuli which perhaps might not
influence one fish at all. And this larger animal, the school, seems to have a nature
and drive and ends of its own...a school intelligence.26

His sense of unity stirred once more, Steinbeck pushes the speculation on: “And
perhaps this unit of survival [the school of the fishes] may key into the larger animal
which is the life of all the sea, and this into the larger of the world.”27

This is the same concept which animated Steinbeck’s imaginative re-creation
in The Red Pony of the movement which he calls westering. As the old man who has
been the “leader of the people” remembers:

It wasn’t Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It
was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast... Every man wanted
something for himself, but big beast that was all of them wanted only
westering....We carried life out here and set it down the way those ants carry
eggs...The westering was as big as God, and the slow steps that made the
movement piled up until the continent was crossed.28

So, as he might have said, the movement of westering keyed into the life of the
continent and that into the life of the world.

It was the readiness to search behind the facts of life for a philosophical
resolution of their complexity that gave depth and a rich texture to Steinbeck’s
picture of the life of his time. He had the rare ability to blend speculation into his
fiction, making it an integral part of a narrative plan. Only a few of his
contemporaries attempted to establish so broad a rapport with the minds of readers.
Of such writers Thomas Mann offers the century’s most brilliant example. As Joseph
Wood Krutch once pointed out, Steinbeck’s name must be linked with that of his
European counterpart in any discussion of the novelist as thinker. Mann explored his
*Magic Mountain* and Steinbeck his shimmering sea of contemplation but in doing so
neither sacrificed the authority of his voice as storyteller.

Alexander Cowie has suggested, thinking of Steinbeck: "perhaps this is the
final responsibility of the novelist: he must be true to his time and yet save himself
for time." Steinbeck was certainly true to his time in his eagerness to be identified
with scientific enterprise and his willingness to take the guiding principles of science
as his own. He might be called a moral ecologist, obsessively concerned with man's
spiritual struggle to adjust himself to his environment. It is significant that this
storyteller, conscious of a mission, undertook to popularize theories about the
salvation of man's total environment long before public attention focused on the
discipline of ecology.

Steinbeck also nourished within himself the attitudes toward social reform that
were growing slowly in the national consciousness of his time. His protests, his
rejections as well as his affirmative convictions about the hope for regeneration, were
exactly those that have been taken up by leaders of opinion in a later day enabling
them, as teachers, theorists, and legislators, to change our minds in the direction of
greater sensibility concerning human rights. Always the artist, never a practicing
reformer, Steinbeck dramatized situations in American life and espoused beliefs
about the need of room for growth in a way that helped to awaken the conscience of
his fellow Americans.
Steinbeck was in addition a kind of working Freudian in the broad sense that he used the novel to remind readers that the myth of the past contain the wisdom of the race, that they tell us more about ourselves than sources of factual information can convey. Many, perhaps most, of the novelists of the 1930's and 1940's were deeply imbued with the same idea. But Steinbeck, consciously and conscientiously exploring the suggestions of Frued (and of Frazer whose work he may have known even better), covered a far broader field than did his fellow writers. His was an ambitious and inclusive effort to relate contemporary about "the human condition" to that of the great witnesses of the past. His work suggests again and again that the story of humankind is a steadily continuing one, full of passions that seem as familiar in a setting of two thousand years ago as they do in our own time. It is a sense of the past made present that gives Steinbeck's best books their universality of tone. Old perils the like of which still surround us, old aspirations renewed as commitments by our restatement of them—these are the elements that contribute the essence of drama to his stories and give them distinction.

Steinbeck said that the one commandment of life is "to be and survive." His work may be said to fulfill that commandment. In 1962, when Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, his long-running feud with the critics reached its peak. There can be little doubt that Steinbeck was deeply wounded, particularly during the final two decades of his life, by what he regarded as the general lack of critical understanding of his work. Stopping off in England on his way home to America from Stockholm, he told one interviewer: "I've worked very hard on my
books, and maybe people will look at them a little more closely now to see what I've tried to do there."^{30}

From the beginning of his career, he had nursed an uneasy suspicion of the critical establishment and had frequently been in the habit or reacting in typical fashion to its deliberations and judgments. "Critics are stupid b...," he had told another British interviewer a year previously. When this interviewer pointed out that that was a generalization, Steinbeck agreed: "Yeah, but it's one I like."^{31} In his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech he could not forebear even moment of triumph, to return to the attack. "Literature, he declared, "was not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches..."^{32} It was, as far as his own career was concerned, a point well made. Lack of critical acclaim had not diminished continuing and consistent popular recognition.

One member of the "pale and emasculated priesthood" to which Steinbeck referred was undoubtedly Arthur Mizener. In an article which appeared in the *New York Times* Book Review only the day before Steinbeck received the award from the hands of the King of Sweden, Mizener had posed the question: "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" and had concluded that it was "difficult to find a flattering explanation for awarding this most distinguished of literary prizes to a writer whose real but limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing and, in his worst books, is overwhelmed by it."^{33}

While there is a certain validity in what Mizener says, it is not altogether clear just what he means by "tenth-rate philosophizing" or by what assumed yardstick he
purports to grade it. There is much more validity, surely, in Steinbeck’s hope that his work would, as a direct consequence of the Nobel Prize, attract more heedful attention. Too few of the established critics of the day had seemingly ever attempted to understand what he had been doing. It was comparatively easy for them to be clever in attacking or ridiculing the admittedly cracker barrel surface philosophies he put into the mouths of his characters and perhaps too frequently into his authorial interpolations, thus overlooking the other more significant underling philosophical truths he was positing as a careful reading of, for example, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* would have revealed to them.  

Long before “ecology” became an emotive word in the world’s vocabulary, Steinbeck was, in such books as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez, Travels With Charley* and even *Sweet Thursday*, warning us of the dangers threatening the environment as a result of man’s inherent greed and carelessness. When one applies the non-teleological approach to a study of the animal kingdom and to Steinbeck’s characters, one can clearly appreciate how limited is the control these animals, these creatures of the tide pool, these bindlestiffs and migrant workers can exercise over their own destinies. His concern over the cancerous spread of the materialistic element in society dates from his very first book, *Cup Of Gold*, and is expressed in every subsequent book he published. “All my writing life has been aimed at making people understand each other” he maintained, and of *East of Eden* he wrote: “I want to make this book so simple in its difficulty that a child can understand it.”

The holistic viewpoint so frequently adopted in his books, proclaiming as it does the
The oneness of all creation, exemplifies one manifestation of this desire of his to promote understanding and unity between peoples, while the deceptive clarity of his style and his thought processes should not be regarded as evidence of any lack of intellect on his part. The surface philosophies he expounds are the warm human philosophies that the ranch-hand and the man in the street can assimilate, appreciate, and identify himself with. As such, it should be remembered, they are far more replete with simple wisdom than the detached, intellectually-presented philosophies of academicians. It was clearly this firmly-held anti-intellectual stance, together with his possibly ill-advised public pronouncements and his continuing popular success despite the marked falling-off in the quality of his work, which, after the brief honeymoon period in the mid and late 1930s, eventually alienated various sections of the establishment and attracted their scorn.

Acknowledging the multitudinous riches he has given us, we can forgive Steinbeck his occasional lapses (Burning Bright, in particular), and can even accept the inevitability of the more or less steady regression of his literacy importance during the post-war years. The war does indeed appear as a very definite watershed in his career. Writing in the April 1941 issue of The Congregational Quarterly, J.S. Noack gave expression to what all Steinbeck's admirers were at that time thinking:

It will be curious to see what the war will do to Steinbeck, to his viewpoint, to his selection of subject-matter. In a world changing as rapidly as this, no man could appear to have better qualifications than he for reflecting and interpreting important phases of the picture, regardless of what it is to be.
We know, now, of course, that the promise was not fulfilled, that instead of encompassing in his work the broad thematic patterns of *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* and recapturing the essence of the individual life going on among the mass movements of people and in the shadow of great events he seemed to become (*East of Eden* possibly excepted) more introspective and parochial, often disguising his increasing unease with the contemporary world under an inadequate cloak of facetiousness. In 1945, the year the war ended, he declared:

> A couple of years from now I think I'm going to be able to write a book about the war, based on the things I've seen. It takes a year or two for things to percolate through me and then I can write about them.\(^{38}\)

But during those next two or three years Steinbeck was otherwise preoccupied. His second marriage was breaking up. He was deeply involved with the film director Lewis Milestone and the actor Burgess Meredith, among others, in projected film versions of some of his novels and short stories, of which only *The Red Pony* eventually came to fruition. His reading public waited in vain for the great war novel from his pen, and had to be content with the reprinting in 1958 of most of his 1943 wartime dispatches for the *New York Herald Tribune* in the volume *Once There Was a War*.

For the benefit of those more vociferous of his critics, who, pointing to the post-war decline, still suggest either by insinuation or by direct accusation that Steinbeck was perhaps in the end guilty of prostituting his art for the sake of continuing popularity and financial gain, it would be pertinent to remind them of this following passage from *Journal of a Novel*:
The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness. In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable. And sometimes if he is very fortunate and if the time is right, a very little of what he is trying to do trickles through—not ever much. And if he is a writer wise enough to know it can’t be done, then he is not a writer at all. A good writer always works at the impossible.39

If Steinbeck was guilty of anything at all, it was certainly not of prostituting his art, but rather of immense artistic courage. He was never content to rest on his laurels, as he might easily have done, by continuing to reproduce what he had already demonstrated he could do supremely well. Had he steered the safe, well-tried course, it is just possible that he may have been a greater writer in the last analysis, if not, because of his unpredictability, such an exciting one.

Steinbeck’s work is firmly established in the mainstream of traditional American literature, the mainstream formed in part from the three converging streams of transcendentalism, vernacularism, and regionalism, in each one of which the undying vestiges of Old World literary traditions are still very much alive. There is, for all his endless (but in one sense limited) experimentation with style and subject matter, a quality of intrinsic and reassuring classical simplicity about Steinbeck’s work. He learned his lessons well from the old masters. It is this quality which endows his books with their aura of enduring stability, timelessness even, so that in the long run one can speculate with some assurance his work will date neither as rapidly nor with such finality as the work of some of his more stylistically daring and currently more highly regarded contemporaries.
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16-Kazin, p.394.


20-Astro, pp.80-81.


34-Richard Astro, *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*.


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