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The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provide representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by the volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

This volume is the first to collect the critical responses of Steinbeck's generation to his many fiction and nonfiction works as they appeared from the late 1920s on. The articles trace the record of his progress through the 1930s, a decade capped by the publication of his two masterworks, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. They go on to reflect Steinbeck's achievements through the 1960s, including his attainment of the Nobel Prize in 1962. These articles offer at last a means of seeing Steinbeck's writings as they were perceived by his contemporaries, whose task it was to be first to evaluate and interpret them for an ever growing readership.

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Series Editor's Preface

The American Critical Archives series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editor of each volume has provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired—be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases Great Britain, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

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Introduction

John Steinbeck did not particularly like book critics, "these curious sucker fish who live with joyous vicariousness on other men's work and discipline with dreary words the thing which feeds them."[1] It is hardly surprising. Each book published in his lifetime was attacked by prestigious reviewers, and for a highly sensitive man the criticism bit deeply. "Once I read and wept over reviews," he wrote in 1954; "then one time I put the criticisms all together and I found that they canceled each other out and left me nonexistent."[2] That complaint points to the central feature of this collection of reviews. With the publication of each book, Steinbeck was both roundly attacked and as widely lauded. Reading the reviews in American, English, and Canadian magazines and newspapers, one is struck by the consistency of dissent; even books considered his weakest—*Burning Bright* and *The Wayward Bus*—received plaudits from important reviewers. There was never a consensus on a Steinbeck text.

Still, a common and persistent misconception about Steinbeck's work is that critics panned the post-*Grapes* fiction. That assumption became commonplace in the 1960s. Writing in the *Saturday Review* in 1969 about the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel*, Lawrence William Jones posited this view of Steinbeck's career: "Steinbeck's post-war reception was one of nearly unrelieved and often misdirected hostility. Of the eight fictional works published during this period, only *The Pearl* was even fleetingly praised, and it has inevitably suffered from constant comparison with Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*." The only specific truth articulated in that statement is that Steinbeck was with some regularity compared to Hemingway, as when, in 1952, they published within weeks of one another *The Old Man and the Sea* and *East of Eden*—both late and, to some minds, stunning novels. It is also true that many felt critical disdain toward Steinbeck for supposedly compromising his talent. For them, his later work was frivolous, artificial, ponderous, or trite, whereas the work of the 1930s resonated with a clarity and force absent in the later books. But false and misleading is the suggestion that Steinbeck's postwar reception was one of nearly unrelieved hostility. What the reviews in this volume teach us, first, is that the "great" social novels of the 1930s produced no such positive consensus during that decade, and, second, that each subsequent text was met with broadly divergent opinions. Some, in fact, called *East of Eden*, *Cannery Row*, and even *Travels with*

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Charley the writer's greatest. The word "delightful" repeatedly described *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. For Norman Cousins, *Burning Bright* was Steinbeck's "most mature" book because it "tries to emancipate men from the tyranny of the personal self. It tries to develop an aspect of man's nature, too often hidden, which hungers truly for larger understanding and mutuality in life." Hemingway, in contrast, seemed "too close to the ego and not close enough to the human heart." In short, John Steinbeck, who resolutely resisted pigeonholes and declared each new work an experiment, as frequently puzzled as amazed his critics with his virtuosity.

The consistently mixed reviews can be explained, in part, by the Steinbeck legend. By 1940, his stature was unassailable and each new book an event. Certainly he lacked Hemingway's charisma and Faulkner's celebrated obfuscation, but Steinbeck was, like them, a writer with whom one had to contend. This said, however, he never quite seemed to make the mark. Expectations were high; disappointments, inevitable. Critics were dealing with an enormously popular and salable author, one whose public reception seemed to some unwarranted. The demand for *The Moon Is Down* in 1942, for example, was exceptional: A week before its formal publication, Viking had sold 70,000 copies; one month afterward, approximately 500,000 copies had been purchased, according to the *Life* reviewer. Beginning with *Of Mice and Men*, five books were Book-of-the-Month Club selections. *The Winter of Our Discontent* was a Literary Guild choice as well; it was the first time that both clubs had offered the same book as a selection for their members. A 1962 review of *Travels with Charley* by Van Allen Bradley noted, "A few years ago a United Nations survey placed John Steinbeck in third place, as I recall it, among those living writers whose books are most widely translated and distributed through the world." Perhaps critics felt an unconscious need to prick the balloon, to note the ways in which Steinbeck was not quite of the first rank. It appears that this tendency, exacerbated by acknowledged discomfort on the part of the eastern literary establishment with this unpredictable westerner, played a major role in shaping Steinbeck's complex reception as it developed through roughly four phases.

I. Apprenticeship: 1929–1935

Reactions to *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), and *Tortilla Flat* (1935) constitute the first phase, and in the distinctively different natures of these works lies one reason for the wide variety of reactions to Steinbeck thereafter: Was one dealing with a writer of adventure romances, a symbolic realist, a mythic and perhaps mystic fabulist, or a devil-may-care humorist? By what standard should one evaluate him? Like a Californian of the previous generation, Frank Norris, Steinbeck initiated his career with an extraordinarily diverse series of fictions, although the first commercially successful one, *Tortilla Flat*, established the popular image

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of an offbeat, comic author defying the values associated with the Protestant work ethic as he reveled in the amoral antics of the Mexican-American underclass in Monterey.

Although the first three books received scant attention, their reviews show a surprising consistency with subsequent assessments: They were mixed. *Cup of Gold* is, in fact, a better book than William Faulkner's first, and the smattering of notices given the novel acknowledged its drama, its "thoroughly masculine" appeal, and its facility with characterization. Perceptive critics identified protagonist Morgan as "always the child reaching for a dream," a thematically significant image that long held the writer's interest. It was, according to longtime friend and New York *Herald Tribune* critic Lewis Gannett, who wrote a preface to the 1936 edition of *Cup*, the key to understanding Steinbeck's work. Also apparent was resistance to Steinbeck's troublesome tendency to write "brutal" fiction—"decidedly not for juvenile perusal," as the St. Louis *Star* reviewer noted. Three strains of Steinbeck criticism were already noticeable: Critics repeatedly focused on his restless dreamers, measured his relative success in casting believable characters, and debated his frank language and bold choices of subject matter. Throughout a publishing career of nearly four decades, the "coarseness" of several books would both offend and be defended: His language became a focus of debate. While most praised Steinbeck's fine ear, to some his prose seemed stark, his language uncultivated—or downright crude—and his themes dark. "Mr. Steinbeck knows how to write about and handle the gloomy substance of his thoughts," wrote J. E. S. Arrowsmith of *The Pastures of Heaven*. Steinbeck's reputed "fascination with the abnormal" became a frequent lament. But that book, with *To a God Unknown*, received a majority of positive reviews acknowledging the young writer's promise. This author, declared a discerning Gerry Fitzgerald when reviewing *Pastures*, is a "romantic realist."

Until the publication of *Tortilla Flat*, the romantic realist's gloom may have been warranted. A promising career as a novelist seemed well out of reach. Determined to be a writer since age fourteen, Steinbeck had practiced his craft doggedly in the intervening years, publishing three books and a handful of short stories for an indifferent world. The stories he wrote from 1932 to 1934, however, gave clear evidence of his mature powers. These are the years in which he composed "The Promise," "Chrysanthemums," and "Flight"—later collected in *The Long Valley*—as well as *Tortilla Flat*, a book seven times rejected by New York publishers. But the world caught up with Steinbeck in 1935. *Tortilla Flat* was a stunning success. "The trouble with a book like this," wrote one of Steinbeck's most loyal supporters throughout the 1930s—friend, novelist, and San Francisco *Chronicle* reviewer Joseph Henry Jackson—"is that you can't describe it. The best you can do is to indicate it—faintly, in the sketch book manner. . . . I can't reflect the charm, the humor, the pathos, the wit and wisdom and warm humanity which illuminate

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every one of Mr. Steinbeck's pages. . . . Simple as it is, it has in it all the elements that go to make the best stories." Jackson here uses words that would become leitmotifs in Steinbeck criticism. Many subsequent reviewers relished these qualities in the author, compared him to both Dickens and Twain, and embraced the "lovable characters" in the "lighthearted" books: *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday*, and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. Edmund Wilson, four years after his much quoted discussion of Steinbeck's "subhuman" characters in *The Boys in the Back Room* (1941), would claim that he'd never enjoyed Steinbeck more than when he read *Cannery Row*.

There were in 1935—and would be with the publication of each comic novel—dissenting voices claiming that Steinbeck had romanticized drunken bums, exploited his subjects, and celebrated "amoral" characters. The sensitive author heeded those words, perhaps unfortunately, for he added a disclaimer to a subsequent edition of *Tortilla Flat*: In a foreword to the 1937 Modern Library edition, he wrote that he would "never again subject to the vulgar touch of the *decent* these good people of laughter and kindness, of honest lusts and direct eyes, of courtesy beyond politeness."[3] It was the first of several public responses to his critics and reviewers who, he felt, did not always comprehend his work. He had a point. Few knew quite what to say about the dark ending of *Tortilla Flat*, and fewer still could get a handle on the Arthurian parallels. Several wanted the book to include a moral; indeed, in his own review Joseph Henry Jackson would take to task the *Nation*'s reviewer, Helen Neville, for demanding that Steinbeck write more socially conscious fiction. But Steinbeck, like Wallace Stegner after him, was fundamentally a westerner. His easy way with language and people, his feel for the land and sea, his nonteleological acceptance of "what is," and his fierce independence as an artist left some uncomfortable. His *paisanos*, like his *Cannery Row* bums, are in essence westerners—untrammeled and virtuous, raw and loyal. "The West . . . could use a little more confidence in itself," wrote Stegner, "and one way to generate that is to breed up some critics capable, by experience or intuition, of evaluating western literature in the terms of western life. So far, I can't think of a nationally influential critic who reads western writing in the spirit of those who wrote it, and judges them according to their intentions."[4] Both western writers felt abused by the eastern critical establishment, which seemed to demand they publish to its tastes. Throughout his career, whether writing about California or about Russia, Steinbeck voiced in letters doubts that his intentions were clear, as often they seemingly were not for critics stubbornly expecting what Steinbeck as resolutely refused to deliver on order: socially conscious fiction. But West Coast critics, particularly Joseph Henry Jackson, fell into the practice of defending Steinbeck against eastern misunderstanding; Wilbur Needham of the Los Angeles *Times* consistently lauded the independent-minded author who "always has his feet on the ground—rooted in the

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earth and the things of earth," as he wrote in his review of *Of Mice and Men*.

II. Steinbeck and the Working Man: 1936–1939

The smile of the *Tortilla Flat* humorist disappeared from Steinbeck's public visage in the late 1930s as he mordantly exposed, with the somberness of a New England conscience, how the "other half" is preyed upon in a capitalistic economy within the larger framework of Darwin's nature. Steinbeck's new course was determined in large part by his politically conscious wife, Carol. The unsigned *Nation* review of *The Pastures of Heaven* noted that if Steinbeck "could add social insight to his present equipment he would be a first-rate novelist," a remark that makes successful writing look surprisingly like a cookie recipe. But, in fact, that is more or less the approach Steinbeck adopted. Goaded by his loyal and liberal wife, he attended meetings of the John Reed Club in Carmel, and the staunchly apolitical Steinbeck awoke to the socioeconomic turmoil that was California in the 1930s. His labor trilogy became his life's most significant work; it became a body of prose fiction that critics, however divided on its value during the 1930s, would look back to with great frequency as Steinbeck's main contribution to twentieth-century literature.

When *In Dubious Battle* was published in 1936, Wilbur Needham declared in the Los Angeles *Times*: "The man is unpredictable; he never writes in the same way in any two novels, and he never uses the same emotional or intellectual points of view." That unpredictability became, in fact, the source of an opening line for reviewers for the next thirty years. After the raucous *Tortilla Flat*, the weighty, "brutal" proletarian novel was unexpected—but Steinbeck was again lauded by a majority of reviewers. What impressed them was that Steinbeck's text transcended the generic "strike novel." He did not take sides. "He keeps himself out of the book," wrote Fred T. Marsh for the *New York Times Book Review*. Marsh was pleased to find "no editorializing or direct propaganda." It may have been the evenhandedness of Steinbeck's treatment of common people that won him readers for decades; that essential trait certainly ensured the popularity of his work of the late 1930s. Steinbeck, proclaimed Joseph Henry Jackson in his 1936 evaluation of *Cup of Gold*, is a writer with "integrity."

But to reiterate what became commonplace: One dissenting voice in particular touched a nerve in the author. Mary McCarthy's "Minority Report" was just that. In a letter to Louis Paul, Steinbeck responded to her article on *In Dubious Battle*:

> The pain occasioned by this review is to some extent mitigated by the obvious fact that she understood Caesar's Commentaries as little as my poor screed, that she doesn't know her Plato very well, and that she hasn't the least idea of what a Greek drama is. Seriously what happened is

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> this—Mary Ann reviewed *Tortilla Flat*, saying that I had overlooked the fact that these paisanos were proletariats. Joseph Henry Jackson, critic on the S.F. Chronicle took her review and played horse with it. So Mary Ann lay in ambush for me to give me my come-uppance. And boy, did she give it to me. Wurra! Wurra![5]

What this letter tells us about McCarthy may well be inaccurate, but her attack was unwarranted from an artistic standpoint. Her critique, like many published during the next few years, was more ideological than aesthetic. What stung the author was that she belittled his art because she disagreed with his ideas. Hers was a repeated stance of reviewers not with Marxist leanings per se but with a liberal gaze that scrutinized Steinbeck's politics. For the next few years, Steinbeck as frequently would be judged for his ideology—or seeming lack of it—as he would be appraised on his merits as an artist.

Of Mice and Men (1937) and, in particular, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) also touched off heated sociological debates, while both were being lavishly praised by a growing readership. Advance orders for Steinbeck's "big book" nearly trebled those for all previous Steinbeck titles put together, reported Burton Rascoe in his *Newsweek* review of *Grapes*. In part, his popularity was the result of a series of astonishingly well-publicized creative endeavors. Written as a "playable novel," in Steinbeck's words, *Of Mice and Men* was the novelist's first Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The Broadway-play version opened in November of that same year and was awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as the year's best play. The Lewis Milestone *Mice* film premiered in December 1939, eight months after publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. John Ford's film about the Joads' trek was released on 24 January 1940. *Grapes* received both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. *The Grapes of Wrath*, noted Louis Kronenberger, "makes one feel that Steinbeck is, in some way all his own, a force." Undoubtedly, some of his success can be attributed to the fact that he published three books on labor at the precise moment when the country was ready to read them. If movies and art of the decade were often escapist, if writers of the "hard-boiled school" were increasingly grim, Steinbeck seems to have struck a needed balance between sentiment and uncompromising realism. "What gives [*Of Mice and Men*] an almost irresistible fascination," wrote Walter Sidney of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, "is the contrast between the horror of the theme and the poetic tenderness with which it is told." The most consistently supportive of Steinbeck's critics, Lewis Gannett of the New York *Herald Tribune*, concurred: "And it is, perhaps, that compassion, even more than the perfect sense of form, which marks off John Steinbeck, artist, so sharply from all the little verbal photographers who record tough talk and snarl in books which have power without pity." Reviewer after reviewer noted the "quality of

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mercy in the depiction of the small man" (Theodore Smith) in a novel of "gripping" power and "immemorial theme" (Fred T. Marsh). This compassion was to remain a benchmark for those measuring his talent. In *Of Mice and Men*, George and Lennie articulated the dreams and frustrations of a nation. And the Joads of *Grapes* lived the dream for a restless population. In his assessment of "American Novels: 1939," Bernard DeVoto put *Grapes* at the top of the list because "one is so engaged with the lives of its people that their experience becomes one's own."

If Steinbeck's empathy won him devoted readers—loyal for the next three decades—dissenting voices on both texts were characteristically shrill. If the artificiality of *Mice* rankled some, by far the most persistent objections were directed, first, to Steinbeck's language (a complaint that resulted in *Of Mice and Men*'s top ranking on lists of banned books) and, second, to his treatment of Lennie as "sentimental wallowing." Joseph Wood Krutch asked whether the dramatized version was "really a tale of eerie power and tenderness, or whether, as it seems to me, everything from beginning to end is completely 'literary' in the bad sense, and as shamelessly cooked up as the death of Little Nell." (Joseph Henry Jackson responded to that charge as well in "A Bookman's Notebook," 18 December 1937.) Steinbeck would long face similar charges of sentimentalism, one of the most persistent and damning of the objections made to his characters. "Steinbeck's sentimentalism is good in bringing him close to the lives of his people," asserted Louis Kronenberger, "but bad when it blurs his insight." In short, he seemed to walk unsteadily the line between emotive power and emotionalism, drama and melodrama, the tragic and the sensationally pathetic. The terms were repeatedly used when Steinbeck was weighed. In fact, what both novels touched off was a lively and often incendiary debate on the nature of realistic writing. Is sentimentality realistic? Must language be unexpurgated to be authentic? Must the author of *Mice* portray life in its meanest guise, "serving his strong meat fresh and still warm from life's slaughter house" (Maxine Garrard) and focusing on "subhuman" types (Mark Van Doren's epithet)? Is Steinbeck insistently didactic? With the 1939 publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the question became especially highly charged for many Californians and Oklahomans: Does this "termite," "liar," and "communist" tell the truth about our state and our citizens?

Grapes, in fact, polarized the country in a debate over the province of realism. Long anticipated, this book was as long praised and vilified, spawning a controversy matched only by the literary and political frenzy that had greeted *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On one side, reviewers used rapturous prose: "Here at last," wrote Michael March of the Brooklyn *Citizen*, "is the great proletarian novel, a bitter, anguished, brutal saga, alive with human aspiration and struggle and defeat, peopled with human beings vividly portrayed and deeply understood." Precisely those qualities that he and like-minded reviewers

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across the nation praised, others lambasted. The book was too brutal, the characters idealized with "too little of the fine-point etching" (Art Kuhl), and the subject matter unsavory. The novel's didacticism was called heavyhanded. But two charges, offensive language and inaccuracy, became central. The "vile" language made some foam with disdain, for example, Randolph Bartlett: "The canine imprecation is strewn upon the pages with a pepperbox, and becomes so meaningless that when it drops casually from the lips of a twelve-year-old girl in the later episodes it is barely shocking. The various appellations of deity roll lazily from every tongue." As to the subject, Bartlett on Steinbeck recalled Thackeray castigating Jonathan Swift: "Sexual aberrations abound. Filth and slime, references to sanitary matters, entrails of animals, dirt, dirt, and still more dirt—these are the decorations with which Mr. Steinbeck has adorned his tale. And all without purpose." In Buffalo, New York, *Grapes* was publicly burned for its "vulgar words," and in Kansas City, Missouri, the "obscene" book was banned from public libraries.

What kept *Grapes* to the fore in the public's mind, however, was charges made against its accuracy. Representative Lyle H. Boren of Oklahoma, for one, practiced book reviewing on the floor of the House of Representatives: "I cannot find it possible to let this dirty, lying, filthy manuscript go heralded before the public without a word of challenge or protest." The Associated Farmers of California wooed Los Gatos author Ruth Comfort Mitchell to give "California's Answer to *The Grapes of Wrath*," which she did in *Grapes*'s longest "review," her novel *Of Human Kindness*, published in 1940. Harold E. Pomeroy, executive secretary of the Associated Farmers, delivered a speech on 14 August 1939 to the Bakersfield, California, Kiwanis Club, in which he attacked both *Grapes* and Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field*. Steinbeck had "built his story on a few shreds of truth and distorted his presentation of the migrant situation in California." Pomeroy further declared, "Now is the opportunity for true Americans to use initiative in combating the evil forces of radical labor leaders and communistic minority groups who are pounding against the principles of democracy."[6] Newspapers across the country covered this story as it developed. Kern County, California, banned *Grapes* from schools and libraries that August, and the proscription was not rescinded until January 1941.

III. The Novelist as Virtuoso: 1940–1952

Steinbeck's retreat from the fray is hardly surprising. He decided to become a serious student of marine biology and, to the puzzlement of some critics who scarcely knew what to say about a scientific narrative, in 1941 published a book with friend and marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts about their 1940 voyage cataloguing marine life along the Baja peninsula. Critics found *Sea of Cortez*—part narrative account of the voyage and part scientific study, part comical and part philosophical—either puzzling or brilliant, but impossible

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to classify, seemingly a new type of book. John Steinbeck "abhors the conventional," wrote Harry Hansen, a widely syndicated reviewer, "and he did not write a conventional scientific monograph." Indeed, Steinbeck would never choose a conventional course, never repeat himself. Nonfiction such as *Bombs Away* (1942) and *A Russian Journal* (1948) seemed to belie his talent, whereas the propagandistic *The Moon Is Down*, the 1942 novel and play, provoked doubts about the writer's patriotism. Remarkably dissimilar novels—*Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), and *Burning Bright* (1950)—even more clearly marked a break from the fiction of the late 1930s, challenging reviewers to see the Steinbeck of eclectic propensities as either a successful or failed virtuoso. They found it especially difficult to draw a bead on the protean author who would try who-knows-what next. It was almost a mercy to the reviewers that Steinbeck allowed them to recall the point of reference that was *Grapes* when he published another "big book," *East of Eden*. The major novel he was long expected to write finally came before them in 1952.

There is little need to reiterate those qualities that readers liked and disliked in Steinbeck's work, a relative constant after the mid-1930s. What intrigues in the third phase of reviewer response is, first, the incisive attempts by his critics to give shape to his career. "*Sea of Cortez*," noted the Boston *Herald* reviewer, is "not another *Grapes of Wrath*, and yet a certain common denomination can be found for both books in the intense interest Mr. Steinbeck has in man as a species." The best reviewers of Steinbeck's work traced such parallels between earlier and new works; others simply noted a decline in his talent after the "great" period of Depression Era fiction. "Don't forget," Steinbeck wrote to his literary agents, McIntosh and Otis, in 1937, "that criticism of my work now is not aimed at the thing in itself, but is conditioned by the others,"[7] that is, his other books. How much more true after 1939, when many waited for him to return to socially conscious fiction. During the next two decades, few books published in America received weightier notices than *The Moon Is Down, The Wayward Bus, East of Eden,* and—in the next phase—*The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). Finally, reviewers across the nation gave Steinbeck, for the most part, evenhanded commentary. Far from lashing into him, most seemed more inclined to forgive his lapses and appreciate each experiment for what it was.

It is revealing to follow the changes in a single newspaper's stance or one reviewer's attitude. Two critics who regularly reviewed the books and also produced critical overviews and biographical sketches assessed Steinbeck's 1940s work quite differently. Heretofore staunchly supportive, Joseph Henry Jackson gave a lukewarm notice to *The Forgotten Village* (1941), an illustrated book accompanying a film about a cholera epidemic in a Mexican village. Jackson disliked the "mystico-poetical text [that] succeeds only in talking down to the reader. Some day," he continued, "a critic will take time

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to analyze the curious, fatherly-godlike love that Steinbeck manifests for his characters, to examine the chastiseth-whom-he-loveth attitude implicit in so much of Steinbeck's work, the insistent diminishment of his human characters (no not his turtles) by which the author-creator unconsciously magnifies himself in relation to them." He pinpoints better than any the quality that sharply divided readers on Steinbeck's treatment of *paisanos*, bums, Okies, and misfits, and his primitivism that both attracted and repelled. (See, for example, the Edmund Wilson essay closing the *Grapes* section.) Jackson also disliked *Cannery Row* and found the characters in *The Wayward Bus* "dehumanized. . . . Add to this something which has always been something of an obsession with Steinbeck—his interest in the non-wholeness of people—and you have a tendency which is growing, I think, to the point where it is damaging to his work." Lewis Gannett, on the other hand, was undaunted. He was one of the few to understand that *Sea of Cortez* discloses aspects of Steinbeck's personality that are essential to one's understanding of both the novels and the man. And in a sympathetic review of *Bombs Away*, the 1942 propaganda piece on bomber crews that Steinbeck wrote on assignment for the War Department, he offered a character sketch that goes a long way in explaining Steinbeck's gradual mid-career shift from treatment of the group, aggregate humanity, to assessment of individual character in his writings:

> John Steinbeck is half-Irish, and he has a conscience, perhaps inherited from the New England missionary who was his grandmother on the other side. When an Irishman gets mad he wants to fight, and when a New Englander gets mad he begins by preaching. Steinbeck, moreover, started out to be a biologist before he took to writing stories: in a way he is still a biologist. And he is forty years old. Put that all together and you may understand how John Steinbeck came to write *Bombs Away*.

Much later, shortly after Steinbeck's Nobel Prize was announced in 1962, he wrote that Steinbeck "retain[s] the primitive's or the child's capacity to move from joy to rage in seconds [and] is one of the modern world's consummate story tellers."[8] Both Gannett and Jackson, friends of the author's, understood the man and his work.

When, in 1942, Steinbeck published his first novel after *Grapes*, a play-novelette about an occupied European town, *The Moon Is Down*, it was a thin, "message"-driven one, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and, surprising to modern readers, as widely reviewed and as hotly debated as *Grapes* had been. Observed the *New Republic* reviewer: "A few weeks ago we predicted the controversy over John Steinbeck's new novel would be prolonged and bitter, but we didn't realize at the time that it was going to develop into all-out warfare on the literary front." Steinbeck's timing seemed unerring (as it had been with the publication of *Grapes*). "Here, without doubt is the

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book the world has been waiting for," declared the Youngstown (Ohio) *Vindicator*; "Since the fall of France, a bewildered public has expected some artist, some dramatist, some poet to distill out of the chaos of fears and hopelessness an elixir of new faith and new confidence in the basic principle of human freedom." Repeatedly *The Moon Is Down* inspired critics with patriotic fervor like that expressed by Cara Green Russell in the Greensboro (N.C.) *News*: "He projects and brilliantly dramatizes the idea, wonderfully consoling to us just now, that the totalitarian use of naked force to conquer a people accustomed to freedom is sure to fail." Once more, Steinbeck ministered to the public heart—with two prominent and well-spoken exceptions: Clifton Fadiman, writing for the *New Yorker* twice; and James Thurber, whose acerbic critique appeared in the *New Republic*. Both claimed that what the moment called for was not such flaccid idealism but "raw reality." "The Nazis believe in evil and make no attempt to disguise the fact," Fadiman asserted. Steinbeck's Nazis were, they charged, too humane. To Fadiman, Steinbeck appeared deluded, and "comfortable agreement with Mr. Steinbeck's reasoning will lead to dangerous inaction." Once again, then, Steinbeck was subjected to ideological mud slinging—not too strong a descriptive phrase—and the controversy went on for months, because it was renewed by the Broadway dramatic production and—as was the case with *Grapes*—the film version released in 1943. Some novelists would revel in the attention, perhaps, but Steinbeck was stung by attacks on his motives, his patriotism, and his supposed lack of sophistication. From this and the *Grapes* reception he never recovered respect for critics, if ever he had possessed it. Too often, in Steinbeck's eyes, they wrote from their own insularity.

For many reviewers, no novel of the 1940s seemed big enough or serious enough to satisfy. *Cannery Row* is a "miniature gem" wrote A. C. Spectorsky in the Chicago *Sun*, but to others it seemed merely "charming," sadly "transparent," and objectionably escapist. Still others complained of the writer's continual fascination with low life, and a few asserted that the great documentarian of the 1930s was coasting. Malcolm Cowley coined an epithet that stuck: The novel was a "cream puff"—though a "very poisoned" one. Steinbeck is reported by Toni Jackson Ricketts to have retorted that "if Cowley had read it yet again . . . he would have found how very poisoned it was."[9] In the author's mind, reputable critics repeatedly failed to comprehend all that he was up to. Certainly publication of *The Wayward Bus* in 1947, another Book-of-the-Month Club selection, did not improve his status. Viking touted the work as his first full-length novel in eight years, and reviewers applauded his return to "serious" themes; they also debated the worth of his allegorical intentions, and *Bus* was termed by Daphne Alloway McVicker a "dreary" story about "horrible little people." But a constant throughout his career—unexpected with minor books—was the fact that serious, incisive, and famous critics were engaged by Steinbeck's texts: Bernard

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DeVoto praised the "craftsmanship" of *Bus*, and Carlos Baker suggested that the book "might even be good for one's soul." Norman Cousins marked the occasion with an incisive little essay on realism, regretting the writer's tendency to "extraneous realism," mere details recorded without moral force. Orville Prescott was more severe: He noted that Steinbeck had not even measured up as a literary naturalist. It may well be that Steinbeck is our best measure of the inadequacy of mid-twentieth-century critical categories: a writer with one foot in the realism/naturalism camp, one dug into an ecological perspective few then noted, and another tripping over the modernists' experimental approaches to the novel (a genre he declared "dead" as early as the 1930s). That makes him a three-legged creature, which he seemed to those critics who attempted to type him conventionally.

So-called slight books both preceded and followed publication of the epical *East of Eden* in 1952. Far less controversial than *The Wayward Bus, The Pearl* was, the same year, either labeled "fake primitive" or lauded as a luminous parable, a rarefied "cultured" pearl. "It returns to the style of Genesis," stated a sympathetic Bill Bedell of the Houston *Post. A Russian Journal*, an account of a 1947 tour of Russia with photographer Robert Capa, was regarded as thin. It was described in the New York *Times* as "pleasant reading but it doesn't add up to much"—an assessment later given to the pieces in *Once There Was a War*, written while on overseas assignment in 1943 and collected in 1958. Insubstantiality was a charge often brought against Steinbeck's journalism, which he wrote with greater frequency in the 1940s and 1950s. He could be good on seemingly insignificant topics—or he could be just inconsequential. Yet the absence of the ponderous, or the lightness of touch, in Steinbeck's nonfiction was seen by others as the very source of his appeal: *A Russian Journal* was written by an author described as approachable, eminently readable, and one who, noted William McFee, possessed an "observant eye, a deadpan humor, and a command of the English language unsurpassed by any American of our time." The book's outstanding quality, wrote Richard Watts in the *New Republic*, "is its friendliness and its refusal to take itself too seriously." *Travels with Charley* (1962) would be embraced for precisely the same warmth. As the reviewer of the Newark (N.J.) *News* related, *Travels* "gives us a chance to meet a man, which is what most of us want to do with every book. This one is worth knowing—unaffected, simpatico, with the tolerance of approaching age." Unlike Faulkner and Hemingway, Steinbeck was reviewed and read appreciatively by people who, quite simply, liked him. Slouchy dresser, champion of the small man, novelist of compassion, he appeared a regular guy and wrote accessible prose. You might find fault with such a writer, but you stuck with him, even through a "high art" experiment such as *Burning Bright*, although Lewis Gannett found its prose "fatal on the printed page."

Burning Bright, however, was seen as obviously signaling an important

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change in Steinbeck. Famous for his social vision in the late 1930s, he was increasingly recognized for his sensitivity to the individual and his moral condition. "John Steinbeck has enrolled . . . on the side of individual worth and human dignity," wrote Orville Prescott when reflecting on the focus of *Burning Bright*. In 1952, Robert R. Brunn unwittingly disagreed with Prescott but made a like observation concerning *East of Eden* in the *Christian Science Monitor*. He proclaimed that Steinbeck "wrestles with a moral theme for the first time." It was *Eden* that won Joseph Henry Jackson back to Steinbeck's camp, largely for the same reason: "The whole novel turns upon the qualities in men which make them more than animals, not less." This large and "ambitious" novel that he published only a few weeks after Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* also indicated, in the eyes of many critics, that both writers were again working up to par. Steinbeck's book was exhaustively reviewed with, however, the usual mixed results. Its best qualities were those of an eighteenth-century novel—expansive, ambitious, vital. Joseph Wood Krutch liked it because it held "the attention to an extraordinary degree throughout the six hundred long pages." On the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, Mark Schorer declared it "probably the best of John Steinbeck's novels." Orville Prescott, also writing for the *Times*, said that "he has achieved a considered philosophy and it is a fine and generous one." But *Newsweek* hated the "shambling, stuttering Sherwood Anderson prose." Granville Hicks disliked its "helter skelter" form. Anthony West and Leo Gurko regretted the melodrama. And nearly everyone felt uncomfortable with the heroine, Cathy. If Steinbeck's name was still associated with conflict, the discussion was, happily, carried out on new ground, not sociological but artistic, aesthetic, or formal, as can be seen especially in Mark Schorer's review. To a significant degree, Steinbeck was at last being liberated from the ideological matrix in place since the 1930s.

IV. The Final Phase: 1953–1968

The many who stuck with Steinbeck through thick and thin were rewarded in 1954 with the sequel to *Cannery Row*, *Sweet Thursday*—a book that delighted those whom Carlos Baker termed the "unregenerate thousands whose intellectual bridgework still permits them to relish salt-water taffy." As Edward Weeks explained in the *Atlantic*, those readers would appreciate its "comedy—bawdy, sentimental, and in places implausible"; when "read in the spirit with which it is written, [*Sweet Thursday*] is good fun." But the last phase in the long-developing author-reviewer relationship was once more characterized by controversy as Steinbeck again proved to be Steinbeck. From the high seriousness of *East of Eden*, he had "descended" to the comical nether realm of *Tortilla Flat*. He set his new book in Monterey among the wacky, often cartoonlike characters familiar to readers of *Cannery Row*, and his return to that landscape was disconcerting to many reviewers ready for

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another *Eden*. Further, *Sweet Thursday* did not at all prepare them for his next jaunt in 1957, to France, for his *Candide*-inspired satire in *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. And in 1961 Steinbeck performed another about-face: Before he amiably returned to nonfiction in *Travels with Charley*, the Voltairelike "smile of reason" seen in *Pippin* vanished as he brooded over modern morality in his last "big book," *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Whereas *Newsweek* celebrated the return of "The Old Steinbeck," discontent with *Winter* and a good many of Steinbeck's other works was uttered in a remarkable way by Arthur Mizener. In 1962, one day after Steinbeck was recognized for his achievements by the Swedish Academy, Mizener's "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?" appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*.[10] That headline encapsulates Steinbeck's treatment by many critics: It's a question; it's mean-spirited; it looks backward; and it grudgingly acknowledges that he's won. The issues of a career, then, greeted his last novel, another Book-of-the-Month Club selection, which won praise for its trenchant criticism of modern life but was as often dismissed as a dud. Extolled for its compelling moral vision, *Winter* was, paradoxically, also cited for lacking moral conviction: Whereas some saw Robert Poole's "Resurgent Steinbeck" reemerging "as one of America's most subtle and human writers, one whose work gathers enormous power from the calm restraint of the writing," *Time* found his style "overworked." John K. Hutchins noted "implausibility at the heart of" *Winter*. "In it," concluded Fanny Butcher, "are to be found Steinbeck at both his best and his worst. It is almost two different books," one amusing and one profound.

That split would remain a Steinbeck legacy. "We have come to think of John Steinbeck as a writer with two literary faces, the one gleeful, the other outraged, but both startlingly and memorably alive," noted Virgilia Peterson in a positive review of *Winter* for the New York *Herald Tribune*. The last two of his books published during his lifetime, neither fictional, embody those two faces: that of the genial novelist who traveled with Charley and that of the moralist whom Walter Havighurst of the Chicago *Tribune* found appraising America with "curiosity, impatience, love and anger" in his final book of essays on issues facing his country, *America and Americans* (1966). In short, Steinbeck was a man of multiple interests and tastes, and, despite the many consistencies in his writings, his works are properly, and fairly, described only when their multiple discrete forms and the intentions giving rise to them are recognized. Each work begs for consideration as, if not wholly original, a unique attempt by Steinbeck to move in a new direction and through new experiences, both personal and literary. Reviewers who did not approach his books thus were at odds with others who did—hence many of the radical disagreements recorded in these reviews. Indeed, it may prove impossible to determine any consensus regarding individual titles, and, if one finally does, many qualifications would typically be necessary. A primary value of this vol-

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ume, then, is that it puts a present-day student of the history of American literary taste in touch with the complex, often contradictory critical reception of an evolving literary canon, positioning him or her in light of the reviewers' valid insights, as well as their faux pas, to determine what are now the most appropriate approaches to understanding and appreciating Steinbeck.

As one contextualizes the books vis-à-vis the reviews for the sake of developing a historically informed perspective on the canon, one other factor should be kept in mind: Steinbeck's own view of what each new work meant to him as an opportunity for continued development as an artist. "I don't care about the critics," Steinbeck told Art Buchwald in 1955. "The only joy for the writer should be the doing, not the end. Reception of a work should not be a part of the pleasure of writing. There is no creative satisfaction when a thing is finished. The thing I want to learn to do is write as freshly as when I first started. A writer should never learn to write. He must continually experiment or his technique will take over and he'll never write anything good again."[11] Here was a man who never quit writing and whose prose shaped each day of his professional life. This is the Steinbeck seen in full in two posthumous publications, journals recording what it meant to be ever striving for a better "doing" of his craft: *Journal of a Novel: The* East of Eden *Letters* (1969) and *Working Days: The Journals of* The Grapes of Wrath (1989). The reviews of these books, like those of the others, aid us in our critical discriminations. However, their contents, like other reflections by Steinbeck on his craft, are just as significant as the reviews if one believes, as we do, that an understanding of authorial intention is as important as reviewers' judgments to anyone seeking to come to terms with what John Steinbeck wrought.

This volume was initially conceived as a means of providing an overview of Steinbeck's critical reception, as comprehensively as possible within the standard space limitations of the series of which it is a part. This meant, we soon discovered, that a writer reviewed so widely had to be treated selectively: We had to identify representative and especially noteworthy reviews of his works for reprinting and relegate the remainder to the lists of "Additional Reviews" at the ends of most of the sections devoted to individual titles. Also, for so productive a writer, even already modified ambition had to be further curbed. We had to draw the line for the number of works to be treated at 32. Omitted are items in the following categories: films for which Steinbeck wrote the script (published or unpublished); anthologies such as the 1943 *Steinbeck* in the Viking Portable Library series; books including the first publications of letters by Steinbeck, such as *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (1975); and limited editions such as *Their Blood Is Strong* (1938; published again as *The Harvest Gypsies* in 1988). Two publications, however, are given special treatment: the 1936 edition of *Cup of Gold*, a novel that received relatively little attention when first published in 1929, and the small-circulation, deluxe 1937 edition

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of *The Red Pony*, because of the immediate attention it received from reviewers and 1938 reviewer reaction to the inclusion and expansion of its story-sequence in *The Long Valley*.

The reviews were condensed editorially when plot summaries proved essentially repetitive of those given earlier in the chronologically arranged reviews; when reviewers turned to other authors and works, and their commentaries were not directly related to Steinbeck's writings; and when reviewers indulged themselves, normally at the beginnings of reviews, in general reflection deemed not immediately pertinent to the evaluation of the work by Steinbeck at hand.

It is assumed that the reviews that are reprinted provide the "main story" regarding how Steinbeck fared with his critics; but the reader is encouraged to trust his or her own judgment finally, by both consulting the reviews only listed at the ends of sections and continuing the search for as yet unrecovered reviews of Steinbeck's works.

Notes

1 *Journal of a Novel: The* East of Eden *Letters* (New York: Viking, 1969), 141. Quotations from, and references to, writings about Steinbeck in this introduction are identified in notes only when those writings are not reprinted in this volume and are not listed at the ends of the sections on individual works. The Index directs one to the pages on which commentators' pieces are reprinted or listed; unsigned reviews can be located via indexed periodical titles.
2 Quoted in Bernard Kalb, "Trade Winds," *Saturday Review*, 36 (27 February 1954), 8.
3 New York: Modern Library, 1937, pp. ii–iii.
4 *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Viking, 1993), 141.
5 Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten, eds., *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking, 1975), 121.
6 "Pomeroy Flays Two New Books," Bakersfield *Californian*, 14 August 1939, pp. 9, 13.
7 Quoted by Lewis Gannett in "Introduction," *Steinbeck*, enlarged edition in the Viking Portable Library series, ed. Pascal Covici (New York: Viking, 1946), 23.
8 "John Steinbeck," New York *Herald Tribune*, 28 October 1962, Section 6, p. 1.
9 See Tony Seixas, "John Steinbeck and the Non-teleological Bus," in E. W. Tedlock and C. V. Wicker, eds., *Steinbeck and His Critics* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957), 275–80.
10 112 (9 December 1962), 43–5.
11 Art Buchwald, "PS from New York," New York *Herald Tribune*, 29 March 1955, p. 21.

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