

INTRODUCTION

Loving and Hating Steinbeck

The crowds had gathered at San Jose State University to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Leslie Fiedler, the fiery critic known for his controversial psychoanalytical readings of American literature, was to deliver the keynote address. How would Fiedler, the great American critic, account for the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* – the Great American Novel, some would claim, the novel largely responsible for Steinbeck winning the Nobel Prize for Literature? Fiedler's answer brought members of his audience to tears. Steinbeck's novel, he argued, was middlebrow schlock. It was ruined by didacticism, sentimentality, and melodrama, by hopelessly contradictory politics and equally sloppy writing. To admire Steinbeck, thought Fiedler, was to have a second-rate mind.¹

By the time of the San Jose conference in March 1989, critical frostiness toward Steinbeck's writing was well established. If his works had generated divided, often extreme reactions through the 1930s, then by 1940 the East Coast critical establishment became settled in its view. "None of [Steinbeck's novels] that I have read seems to me precisely first-rate," wrote Edmund Wilson in an influential essay. Steinbeck fails at representing human beings, Wilson remarked, because he reduces them to the level of animals and produces them with stagey self-consciousness, leaving them like "actors giving very conscientious performances in a fairly well written play."² When Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in 1962, Arthur Mizener in *The New York Times* dismissed the award as mere nostalgia for a moral vision of the 1930s, a nostalgia blinding readers to the "tenth-rate" philosophizing that overwhelms Steinbeck's books.³

The degree of animosity marking these overviews has continued in more recent criticism. Writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 2008, for example, Robert Gottlieb concluded that the Library of America's decision to reprint Steinbeck's entire canon was a mistake; his work was appropriate only for junior high school readers.⁴ Certainly, Steinbeck has had his

dedicated followers and fans over the years, including many critics who *only* work on Steinbeck.⁵ And without doubt, Steinbeck has an enormous general readership (virtually all of his works are in print), an important place in the curriculum (if not typically at elite universities),⁶ and an iconic presence in twentieth-century American culture. In 2016, Barack Obama included Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) as the only novel on a shortlist of "essential reads."⁷ Two years later, PBS canvassed public opinion to rank *The Grapes of Wrath* in twelfth position on a list of 100 "Great American Reads," far higher than anything by other American Nobel laureates Ernest Hemingway and Toni Morrison (William Faulkner is not mentioned).⁸ But still, a significant and troubling disconnect separates Steinbeck and many literary scholars. Even when scholars recuperate the left-leaning culture of the Great Depression and the "Popular Front," Steinbeck's work is considered too politically ambivalent or "successful" to completely fit.⁹ Steinbeck has been omitted from leading-edge critical debates owing to assumptions that his "extra-literary urgency," in the words of Jonathan Yardley, lies in the past.¹⁰

Yet Wilson's resounding claim that Steinbeck is more concerned with animals than humans looks very different from recent perspectives that seek to decenter the human from a view of history, making us aware of our "species-ism" (even Wilson begrudgingly admitted that something of value may lie in Steinbeck's biological interest in the process of life itself).¹¹ Opportunities await to develop emerging recognitions of Steinbeck's importance for environmental and ecological study, his concern with how we are altering our planet, with climate migration, and with species codependency and extinction.¹² Recent attention to Steinbeck's groundbreaking representations of Asian American characters could be linked to his much broader, and often problematic, interest in race.¹³ Steinbeck's lifelong fascination with Mexico, I argue, should place his work at the forefront of American approaches to hemispheric studies and the Global South. And as we will see throughout this book, Steinbeck is also a significant and complex thinker about topics such as mental development, disability, and group behavior, in addition to his more recognized attention to poverty, inequality, and social justice. It would be difficult to find another American writer more interested in a radical interdisciplinarity capable of fusing the "two cultures" of humanistic and scientific inquiry.

Before turning to recuperation, it is worth pausing for a moment longer on the reasons for the critical disdain toward Steinbeck that runs through Wilson's and Mizener's responses and that culminated in Fiedler's San Jose

address. It needs to be taken seriously because it persists. Mizener confessed to being made “uncomfortable” by Steinbeck’s work, its demonstration of limited talent being overpowered by the corny and the third-rate.¹⁴ Wilson likewise seems confused by the mixture of seriousness and trashiness in Steinbeck’s work: “there are passages in some ways so brilliant that we are troubled at being forced to recognize that there is something artistically bad about them.”¹⁵ Fiedler draws from Wilson’s judgment that Steinbeck’s novels “mark precisely the borderlines between what is definitely superior and work that is definitely bad” in his characterization of Steinbeck’s oeuvre as *middlebrow* – by which he means not the middle position along a spectrum of taste but an inherent contradiction that emerges from being both highbrow and lowbrow at once.¹⁶ Critics seem confused, that is, by Steinbeck’s variety, both between and within individual works. We might explain Steinbeck’s fall from critical favor by comparing him with William Faulkner, whose recognizable brand of high modernism makes him central to his literary period. Faulkner also worked through a variety of modes, ranging from modernist stream of consciousness to the humor of the Old Southwest. And like Steinbeck, Faulkner wrote screenplays and was fascinated by film. But Faulkner did not, like Steinbeck, coauthor a marine biology textbook, write an award-winning Broadway play, produce recruitment propaganda for the US Armed Services, plan theses for John Cage to set to percussion music, translate an Arthurian classic from Middle English, or research a history of a leader of the Mexican Revolution. Faulkner may have remade the novel, but he did not, like Steinbeck, try to dispense with it altogether. At a basic level, to encounter Steinbeck is to grapple with a bewildering series of formal transformations to the extent that, as Wilson recognized, “when his curtain goes up, he always puts on a different kind of show.”¹⁷ Steinbeck may not be an experimental writer in the way that Fiedler considers Faulkner an experimental writer. But from another perspective, we can reclaim Steinbeck as twentieth-century American literature’s *most* experimental writer – and not least for his engagement with scientific experiments, which made him biological researcher and novelist both.

The variety that most concerned Wilson, Mizener, and Fiedler was internal to Steinbeck’s works. These critics detected an uncertainty of aesthetic tone, an unevenness in which low-status forms, such as sentimentalism and melodrama, frustrate the compelling, even poetic prose of a social realist. Good writing jostles bad. In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with Fiedler that Steinbeck’s writing is, quite frequently, “problematical.”¹⁸ But problems are interesting, just as the sentimental –

to seize on a label often applied to Steinbeck – is a complex literary mode that can serve conflicting ethical purposes. We might agree with his harshest critics that Steinbeck’s work stutters in several ways. What, however, is the nature of those breakdowns and contradictions? What do they tell us about the power and the limits of literature’s claims to social power, epitomized by Steinbeck’s famous remark about *The Grapes of Wrath* that he was attempting to write history while it was happening?¹⁹ He may have gotten that history wrong on several fronts. As critics and historians have been quick to note, the striking laborers in *In Dubious Battle* and the migrant workers in *The Grapes of Wrath* were by no means as white as Steinbeck would have us believe.²⁰ But criticism should not end there. Meaning proliferates from these problems, just as the true interest of Steinbeck’s writing lies in its clash of modes and styles, in the formal dramas that emerge from his literary experiments. If Steinbeck’s work is nostalgic, as Mizener suggests, and if it is often sentimental, as Fiedler and others claim, then what do we mean by these terms, and how can Steinbeck’s work offer new ways to understand and evaluate them? Is it true, as Fiedler argues when he turns to the “infamous schmaltzy” scene in the hamburger stand in *The Grapes of Wrath*, that Steinbeck “eschews evasive irony in favor of shameless sentimentality, thereby not only flattening out all nuances and ambiguity but also sacrificing plausibility for the sake of easy pathos”?²¹ At stake here is the question of how we read Steinbeck, and the aesthetic judgments that we bring to his work. In other words, how “flat” are Steinbeck’s engagements with the sentimental and the nostalgic, to choose the two faults he is typically said to display? And how might new interpretations of Steinbeck’s bewildering experimentalism – a frequent source of critical discomfort – emerge from such questions?

Curious Experiments

It is difficult to forget the scene in the hamburger stand, not least because it is staged so effectively in John Ford’s 1940 film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The scene begins with a close observation of something we find again and again in Steinbeck’s writing – an observation of work, in this case Al the counterman’s preparation of a hamburger sandwich, described in extensive detail:

He presses down a hissing hamburger with his spatula. He lays the split buns on the plate to toast and heat. He gathers up stray onions from the plate and

Curious Experiments

5

heaps them on the meat and presses them in with the spatula. He puts half the bun on top of the meat, paints the other half with melted butter, with thin pickle relish. Holding the bun on the meat, he lays the spatula under the thin pad of meat, flips it over, lays the buttered half on top, and drops the hamburger on a small plate. Quarter of a dill pickle, two black olives beside the sandwich. Al skims the plate down the counter like a quoit. And he scrapes his griddle with the spatula and looks moodily at the stew kettle.²²

Patrick McDonald and his two sons had opened their first hamburger stand on Route 66 in Monrovia, California, just two years before the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*; with it, they announced the democratization of the hamburger and the automation of its production. Uncannily intuiting the emergent (one of Steinbeck's great talents, as we will see), the methodical, assembly-line prose rhythms capture Al's moody entrapment in a labor process beginning to require greater homogeneity and speed. Al is attempting to cling to the craft of work, its joy (in the end, he spins down the plate like a quoit in a lawn game), but his vacant, uncommunicative stare at his griddle suggests that he is *becoming* this automated worker. A hallmark of high modernism is its recursive inclusion of metafictional concepts of artistic process: think of Ernest Hemingway's use of the bullfight in *The Sun Also Rises* (1925) to theorize his ideal of authentic feeling communicated in the graceful line of style. Steinbeck positions his metafiction at a different, "lower" level: Al's work with the spatula is also Steinbeck's work with the pen. The scene as a whole is slowly and patiently built up, like Al's hamburger itself, with the description unfolding materially in real time. And like a hamburger, Steinbeck's sentimental scene is easily accessible – taste is democratized – and composite in structure: Steinbeck sandwiches his juicy human-interest story between an external, roving narrative omniscience. (The novel as a whole works in a similar way, with closely observed dramatic episodes contained by the distancing poetics of the more philosophical interchapters.) The scene is a perfectly manufactured unit for us to take out on our journey through the novel.

Like a hamburger, Steinbeck's writing can indeed seem big and in your face ("New Start Big Writing," he jotted at the top of the manuscript of *Grapes*): hence the discomfort it creates in critics, the accusations of bad taste. But to say that Steinbeck's writing is then flat and simplistic is really to miss all the "fixings" that accompany it. Fiedler compares Steinbeck's sentimentalism with that of Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), a comparison that Steinbeck would surely have recognized.²³ To label Steinbeck sentimental does not close the matter, however, but opens

the fraught debate over the power of the sentimental itself. As Ann Douglas and Jane Tompkins debated in the 1980s, we can read the sentimental in competing ways. We can view it as a conservative mask for middle-class ideologies and a rationalization of laissez-faire economics, in which feelings of empathy emerge only when the capacity to act has been suspended, to paraphrase Douglas.²⁴ Or like Tompkins, we can read it as a realm of social power and of salvation through motherly love. Here the sentimental becomes an agent of social critique and a call for a radical transformation toward higher values, based on a democratic extension of humanity to others.²⁵ Either way, the sentimental is known for its overly scripted quality. But is this the case in Steinbeck's hamburger stand? Eric Sundquist reads the death of Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as an excessively staged scene that opens a space for our emotional participation and allows the transference of our sentiment from the white child to the enslaved person.²⁶ Steinbeck's hamburger stand stages a similar scene of transformation. The motherly emotions of Mae the waitress appear to have degenerated under capitalism. She reduces individuals to their ability to spend and consume. But this view changes when she confronts the deprived Okie children: "Is them penny candy, ma'am?"

Mae moved down and looked in. "Which ones?"

"There, them stripy ones."

The little boys raised their eyes to her face and they stopped breathing; their mouths were partly opened, their half-naked bodies were rigid.

"Oh – them. Well, no – them's two for a penny."²⁷

Echoing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and with ultimate literary self-consciousness, Steinbeck finds this scene of emotional transformation (Mae *has* to act) on the virtual death of the children within it: they stop breathing; their bodies become rigid. If anything, the scene is an experimental play with the sentimental rather than literary schmaltz, an experiment that leaves readers with a number of potential interpretations. Following Tompkins, we can read the scene as one of sentimental power. We ascribe humanitarian motives to Mae, who begins to care about the migrant family's future in California, hence aligning her feelings with our own (we wouldn't be reading the story if we didn't care about what happens to the characters). But given the dramatic nature of the presentation, we could equally read Mae as performing for the truckers who observe the interaction and who leave a hefty tip that more than compensates Mae for her generosity, just as Al wins on the slot machine at the end of the scene, literally making money from others' bad luck. Nothing really changes following this scene; actions

merely repeat themselves as new truckers arrive to order pie, and Mae returns to her disempowered position. Class relations remain intact as the suffering migrants move on. Indeed, the scene ends with the most unsentimental of lines: “The cars whizzed viciously by on 66.”²⁸ In essence, Steinbeck disrupts sentimentalism by refusing readers any comfortable footing. *Viciously* suggests that other emotions – anger and outrage – are the true agents of social power. “Anger is a symbol of thought and evaluation,” opined Steinbeck in the late 1950s: “I think anger is the healthiest thing in the world.”²⁹ In Steinbeck’s work, sentimental tenderness is often the flipside of sharp outrage.

If Steinbeck’s engagement with sentimentalism is dynamic rather than flat in the problems it provokes, then can we say the same for his nostalgia – that redolence of the 1930s that Mizener credits as the reason for Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize? To find this nostalgic sensibility, we might look no further than Steinbeck’s sketch “Breakfast,” first published in the *Pacific Weekly*, included in *The Long Valley* (1938), and then reincorporated into chapter twenty-two of *The Grapes of Wrath*, at the threshold of the Joads’ entry into the idealized government camp, Weedpatch. The sketch describes the narrator’s brief encounter, one frosty morning, with a family of migrant workers camping in a California valley – a young woman nursing a baby, her young husband, and his father – who invite the narrator to breakfast before heading to work. “This thing fills me with pleasure,” the sketch opens: “I don’t know why, I can see it in the smallest detail. I find myself recalling it again and again, each time bringing more detail out of a sunken memory, remembering brings the curious warm pleasure.”³⁰ Steinbeck was not alone in remembering the 1930s as “a warm and friendly time,” as he would recall in a later sketch, a time of happiness and mutual caring (a special “warm spot” is exactly how Mizener describes Steinbeckian nostalgia).³¹ True to the nostalgia that was first diagnosed among homesick Swiss soldiers in the seventeenth century, “Breakfast” is full of intensely remembered minutiae involving the human senses – the sucking sound of the nursing baby, the smell of the cooking bacon, the taste of the coffee.³² This vision of the virtuous folk provides a temporary sense of home for our wandering narrator; at its center lie a nurturing, Madonna-like mother and child. Corresponding to the happiness of the narrator, the pleasure of reading this text might return us to Steinbeck’s purportedly middlebrow aesthetic, or to what Roland Barthes calls the “readerly text,” one that gives pleasure without challenging us as readers.³³ The symbolist technique of the sketch lends an accumulating obviousness to the beatific vision. It is a moment of dawn, with light reborn from the

East. The father and son emerge from the tent (itself a religious image for our transitory time on earth), their heads wet as if from baptism, to form a trinity with the mother. The meal itself seems a holy ritual: the biscuits act as sacramental bread, and the younger man exclaims “Keerist!” (Christ) at their smell, to make the point more obvious still.³⁴ We learn that the father and son have had twelve days of work, as if this is the twelve-day festival of Christmas. And in case we missed it, the point is repeated with a holy exclamation about the meal, “God Almighty, it’s good.”³⁵ We leave the family finally bathed again in morning light.

None of this is difficult or contradictory, quite the reverse. But given this apparent “readerliness,” let’s consider the short final paragraph in more detail:

That’s all. I know, of course, some of the reasons why it was pleasant. But there was some element of great beauty there that makes the rush of warmth when I think of it.³⁶

Why that word “But” in the middle of the paragraph? It suggests not continuity between the various aspects of the story, but instead a tension. The final paragraph splits the story into three potential readings that correspond to the three sentences. The first reading: there is really no deeper meaning at all; the moment is just something that happened, something that does not necessarily add up to anything more. The third reading: the sketch is indeed the moment of nostalgic beauty described in obvious (or “readerly”) religious symbolism. But in the middle of the paragraph is another possibility: some deeper, perhaps even contradictory meaning lies in the sketch. In other words, there may be a difference between the obvious beauty, the warm pleasure of the scene, and the reasons why the narrator finds it pleasant, reasons not fully revealed to us (or not fully known to the narrator: he only realizes “some” of them). We might, then, interpret “Breakfast” more along the lines of what Barthes calls the “writerly” text, one that forces us into a critical engagement with it, challenging us as readers to reenact the actions of the writer as we attempt to understand the text’s shifting codes, hence giving us an enjoyment higher than mere pleasure or pleasantness.³⁷

When we know more about its original conception, the sketch becomes significant for what it fails to say. Steinbeck may have based his sketch on an experience he had when visiting migrant worker camps in the summer of 1934. He was talking to various labor organizers, looking for material for a creative nonfictional piece, a diary of a communist labor organizer — material that would eventually inform his strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*.³⁸

With this in mind, we might read the sketch's obvious religious imagery as *displacing* this context, turning a moment of labor unrest into a celebration of American workers able to transcend the Great Depression through moral resilience. This perhaps is a "reason why it was pleasant": it resolves the class antagonisms of the 1930s, sweeping under the rug any tensions that would disrupt a nostalgic view. In the same year as Steinbeck published "Breakfast," Dorothea Lange took her famous photograph "Migrant Mother," a picture of anxiety that draws stark contrast to the well-fed and feeding mother at the heart of Steinbeck's sketch. The apparently husbandless woman with her apparently fatherless children in Lange's photograph are replaced, in Steinbeck's sketch, by two strong men and a woman confident in her performance of femininity. The tent in Lange's photograph (made clearer in a companion photograph to "Migrant Mother," Figure I.1) acts as a stage to showcase poverty as hopeless stasis. The tent in



Figure I.1 Dorothea Lange, "Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is native Californian. Nipomo, California," March 1936. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-DIG-ppmsca-03054.

Steinbeck's sketch, however, presents dancing reflections of the mother's precise and graceful movements, the tent acting as a screen in a Hollywood rendition of the worthy poor (the men's dungarees are new, adding to this staged effect).³⁹

If Steinbeck was researching striking workers when he conceived of "Breakfast," then the sketch is thrown into further relief when compared with a related account, from the activist and journalist Ella Winter's autobiography, *And Not to Yield*:

I went to "Strike Headquarters," a small room with bare floor and one bench. A quiet spoken boy in a turtle-neck blue sweater pecked at a typewriter, and some Mexican women, their hair in matted plaits, sat around suckling their babies. Bits of paper tacked on a soiled board had ill-spelled messages in English and Spanish, and a list of names was printed in uneven letters on a gray cardboard from a Uneda soda cracker box. There were flies and a smell of sweat.⁴⁰

This may be a similar scene of women nursing their babies, but we have a very different sense of smell and presentation of food (here merely a label rather than actual substance; the box is empty and dismantled), highlighting again the romanticized nature of Steinbeck's description. And we are presented with a different racial situation: the presence of Mexicans along with whites seems more typical of the labor situation in the California fields at the time. As already mentioned, critics have noted how Steinbeck controversially omits nonwhite laborers from *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Elsewhere he seemed interested in the Okie immigrants *because* they were white, supposedly possessing a power to renew California with their Anglo-Saxon vigor – a question we return to later in the book. We might thus read the submerged secret of "Breakfast," the reason why it was pleasant, as a moment of racial harmony. This would explain the narrator's interest in generational continuity – father and son look much alike – just as images of mothers nursing babies were prominent in the era's romanticization of the racialized folk, most notably in Nazi Germany. With the constant sound of sucking in the background, we might go one step further and read the reason why it was pleasant as an erotic attraction to this racialized vision, announced in the ecstatic moment when the narrator first comes upon the scene: "Grey smoke spurted up out of the stubby stovepipe, spurted up a long way before it spread out and dissipated."⁴¹

To target Steinbeckian nostalgia, then, does not close off interpretation but instead opens up a fraught politics beneath the warm and friendly