

remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer-and
~~Which used to say, but which had killed his sisters, Benjamin Esch, and at once a happy~~
 younger sister, Mary. Never wealthy, the family was nonetheless prominent in the small
~~Mason of 1800, for both parents belonged to the Order of the Eastern Star and Steubler of The~~
 Wanderers, a women's club that traveled vicariously through monthly reports. While the
 elder Steinbecks established their identities by sending roots deep in the community, their
 son was something of a rebel. Respectable Salinas circumscribed the restless and
 imaginative young John Steinbeck and he defined himself against "Salinas thinking." At
 age fourteen he decided to be a writer and spent hours as a teenager living in a world of
 his own making, writing stories and poems in his upstairs bedroom.

To please his parents he enrolled at Stanford University in 1919; to please himself he
 signed on only for those courses that interested him: classical and British literature,
 writing courses, and a smattering of science. The President of the English Club said that
 Steinbeck, who regularly attended meetings to read his stories aloud, "had no other
 interests or talents that I could make out. He was a writer, but he was that and nothing
 else" (Benson 69). Writing was, indeed, his passion, not only during the Stanford years
 but throughout his life. From 1919 to 1925, when he finally left Stanford without taking a
 degree, Steinbeck dropped in and out of the University, sometimes to work closely with
 migrants and bindlestiffs on California ranches. Those relationships, coupled with an
 early sympathy for the weak and defenseless, deepened his empathy for workers, the

Flat (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

To a God Unknown, second written and third published, tells of patriarch Joseph Wayne's domination of and obsession with the land. Mystical and powerful, the novel testifies to Steinbeck's awareness of an essential bond between humans and the environments they inhabit. In a journal entry kept while working on this novel - a practice he continued all his life — the young author wrote: "the trees and the muscled mountains are the world — but not the world apart from man — the world and man — the one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know." His conviction that characters must be seen in the context of their environments remained constant throughout his career. His was not a man-dominated universe, but an interrelated whole, where species and the environment were seen to interact, where commensal bonds between people, among families, with nature were acknowledged. By 1933, Steinbeck had found his terrain; had chiseled a prose style that was more naturalistic, and far less strained than in his earliest novels; and had claimed his people - not the respectable, smug Salinas burghers, but those on the edges of polite society. Steinbeck's California fiction, from *To a God Unknown* to *East of Eden* (1952) envisions the dreams and defeats of common people shaped by the environments they inhabit.

Undoubtedly his ecological, holistic vision was determined both by his early years roaming the Salinas hills and by his long and deep friendship with the remarkable Edward Flanders Ricketts, a naturalist. Founder of Paectable, sma, wr2.6.385 0 Tdcstict — oc -or

by an equally compelling figure in his life, his wife Carol. She helped edit his prose, urged him to cut the Latinate phrases, typed his manuscripts, suggested titles, and offered ways to restructure. In 1935, having finally published his first popular success with tales of Monterey's paisanos, *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck, goaded by Carol, attended a few meetings of nearby Carmel's John Reed Club. Although he found the group's zealotry distasteful, he, like so many intellectuals of the 1930s, was drawn to the communists' sympathy for the working man. Farm workers in California suffered. He set out to write a "biography of a strikebreaker," but from his interviews with a hounded organizer hiding out in nearby Seaside, he turned from biography to fiction, writing one of the best strike novels of the 1900s, *In Dubious Battle*. Never a partisan novel, it dissects with a steady hand both the ruthlessness of the strike organizers and the rapaciousness of the greedy landowners. What the author sees as dubious about the struggle between organizers and farmers is not who will win but how profound is the effect on the workers trapped in between, manipulated by both interests.

At the height of his powers, Steinbeck followed this large canvas with two books that round-out what might be called his labor trilogy. The tightly-focused *Of Mice and Men* was one of the first in a long line of "experiments," a word he often used to identify a forthcoming project. This "play-novelle," intended to be both a novella and a script for a play, is a tightly-drafted study of bindlestiffs through whose dreams he wanted to represent the universal longings for a home. Both the text and the critically-acclaimed 1937 Broadway play (which won the 1937-1938 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play) made Steinbeck a household name, assuring his popularity and, for some, his infamy. His next novel intensified popular debate about Steinbeck's gritty subjects, his uncompromising sympathy for the disenfranchised, and his "crass" language. *The Grapes of Wrath* sold out an advance edition of 19 804 by 1939 mid-April; was selling 10 000 copies per week by early May; and had won the Pulitzer Prize for the year (1940). Published at the apex of the Depression, the book about dispossessed farmers captured the decade's angst as well as the nation's legacy of fierce individualism, visionary prosperity, and determined westward movement. It was, like the best of Steinbeck's novels, informed in part by documentary zeal, in part by Steinbeck's ability to trace mythic and biblical patterns. Lauded by critics nationwide for its scope and intensity, *The Grapes of Wrath* attracted an equally vociferous minority opinion. Oklahoma congressman Lyle Boren said that the dispossessed Joad's story was a "dirty, lying, filthy manuscript." Californians claimed the novel was a scourge on the state's munificence, and an indignant Kern County, its migrant population burgeoning, banned the book well into the 1939-1945 war. The righteous attacked the book's language or its crass gestures: Granpa's struggle to keep his fly buttoned was not, it seemed to some, fit for print. *The Grapes of Wrath* was a cause celebre.

The author abandoned the field, exhausted from two years of research trips and personal commitment to the migrants' woes, from the five-month push to write the final version, from a deteriorating marriage to Carol, and from an unnamed physical malady. He retreated to Ed Ricketts and science, announcing his intention to study seriously marine biology and to plan a collecting trip to the Sea of Cortez. The text Steinbeck and Ricketts published in 1941, *Sea of Cortez* (reissued in 1951 without Ed Ricketts's catalogue of species as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*), tells the story of that expedition. It does more, however. The Log portion that Steinbeck wrote (from Ed's notes) in 1940 - at the

same time working on a film in Mexico, *The Forgotten Village* - contains his and Ed's philosophical musings, his ecological perspective, as well as keen observations on Mexican peasantry, hermit crabs, and "dryball" scientists. Quipped *New York Times* critic Lewis Gannett, there is, in *Sea of Cortez*, more "of the whole man, John Steinbeck, than any of his novels": Steinbeck the keen observer of life, Steinbeck the scientist, the seeker of truth, the historian and journalist, the writer.

Steinbeck was determined to participate in the war effort, first doing patriotic work (*The Moon Is Down*, 1942, a play-novelette about an occupied Northern European country, and *Bombs Away*, 1942, a portrait of bomber trainees) and then going overseas for the *New York Herald Tribune* as a war correspondent. In his war dispatches he wrote about the neglected corners of war that many journalists missed - life at a British bomber station, the allure of Bob Hope, the song "Lili Marlene," and a diversionary mission off the Italian coast. These columns were later collected in *Once There Was a War* (1958). Immediately after returning to the States, a shattered Steinbeck wrote a nostalgic and lively account of his days on Cannery Row, *Cannery Row* (1945). In 1945, however, few reviewers recognized that the book's central metaphor, the tide pool, suggested a way to read this non-teleological novel that examined the "specimens" who lived on Monterey's Cannery Row, the street Steinbeck knew so well.

Steinbeck often felt misunderstood by book reviewers and critics, and their barbs rankled the sensitive writer, and would throughout his career. A bookba porst-ar t]TJO.0002 Tc -0.004 Tw -124.51 -1

"It is what I have been practicing to write all of my life," he wrote to painter and author Bo Beskow early in 1948, when he first began research for a novel about his native valley and his people; three years later when he finished the manuscript he wrote his friend again, "This is 'the book'...Always I had this book waiting to be written." With *Viva Zapata!*, *East of Eden*, *Burning Bright* and later *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), Steinbeck's fiction becomes less concerned with the behavior of groups - what he called in the 1930s "group man" - and more focused on an individual's moral responsibility to self and community. The detached perspective of the scientist gives way to a certain warmth; the ubiquitous "self-character" that he claimed appeared in all his novels to comment and observe is modeled less on Ed Ricketts, more on John Steinbeck himself. Certainly with his divorce from Gwyn, Steinbeck had endured dark nights of the soul, and *East of Eden* contains those turbulent emotions surrounding the subject of wife, children, family, and fatherhood. "In a sense it will be two books," he wrote in his journal (posthumously published in 1969 as *Journal of a Novel: The "East of Eden" Letters*) as he began the final draft in 1951, "the story of my country and the story of me. And I shall keep these two separate." Early critics dismissed as incoherent the two-stranded story of the Hamiltons, his mother's family, and the Trasks, "symbol people" representing the story of Cain and Abel; more recently critics have come to recognize that the epic novel is an early example of metafiction, exploring the role of the artist as creator, a concern, in fact, in many of his books.

Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *East of Eden* is a defining point in his career. During the 1950s and 1960s the perpetually "restless" Steinbeck traveled extensively throughout the world with his third wife, Elaine. With her, he became more social. Perhaps his writing suffered as a result; some claim that even *East of Eden*, his most ambitious post-*Grapes* novel, cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with his searing social novels of the 1930s. In the fiction of his last two decades, however, Steinbeck never ceased to take risks, to stretch his conception of the novel's structure, to experiment with the sound and form of language. *Sweet Thursday*, sequel to *Cannery Row*, was written as a musical comedy that would resolve Ed Ricketts's loneliness by sending him off into the sunset with a true love, Suzy, a whore with a gilded heart.

The musical version by Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Pipe Dream*, was one of the team's few failures. In 1957 he published the satiric *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, a tale about the French Monarchy gaining ascendancy. And in 1961, he published his last work of fiction, the ambitious *The Winter of Our Discontent*, a novel about contemporary America set in a fictionalized Sag Harbor (where he and Elaine had a summer home).

Increasingly disillusioned with American greed, waste, and spongy morality - his e J(Thut ,to sb,isiie)-1().)]

about a 1966 White House-approved trip to Vietnam where his sons were stationed. In the late 1950s — and intermittently for the rest of his life — he worked diligently on a modern English translation of a book he had loved since childhood, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*; the unfinished project was published posthumously as *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976). Immediately after completing *Winter*, the ailing novelist proposed "not a little trip of reporting," he wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, "but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creativity pulse." In 1960, he toured America in a camper truck designed to his specifications, and on his return published the highly praised *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), another book that both celebrates American individuals and decries American hypocrisy; the climax of his journey is his visit to the New Orleans "cheerleaders" who daily taunted black children newly registered in white schools. His disenchantment with American waste, greed, immorality and racism ran deep. His last published book, *America and Americans* (1966), reconsiders the American character, the land, the racial crisis, and the seemingly crumbling morality of the American people.

In these late years, in fact since his final move to New York in 1950, many accused John Steinbeck of increasing conservatism. True enough that with greater wealth came the chance to spend money more freely. And with status came political opportunities that seemed out of step for a "radical" of the 1930s: he initially defended Lyndon Johnson's views on the war with Vietnam (dying before he could, as he wished, qualify his initial responses). And true enough that the man who spent a lifetime "whipping" his sluggard will (read *Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath"* [1989] for biting testimony of the struggle) felt intolerance for 1960s protesters whose zeal, in his eyes, was unfocused and whose anger was explosive, not turned to creative sol03 Tw 19.275 hitsv6(1)]Tis 8 Tc -0

narratives (*Sea of Cortez*, *A Russian Journal*, *Travels with Charley*), a translation and two published journals (more remain unpublished). Three "play-novelettes" ran on Broadway: *Of Mice and Men*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Burning Bright*, as did the musical *Pipe Dream*. Whatever his "experiment" in fiction or journalistic prose, he wrote with empathy, clarity, perspicuity: "In every bit of honest writing in the world," he noted in a 1938 journal entry, "...there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love."