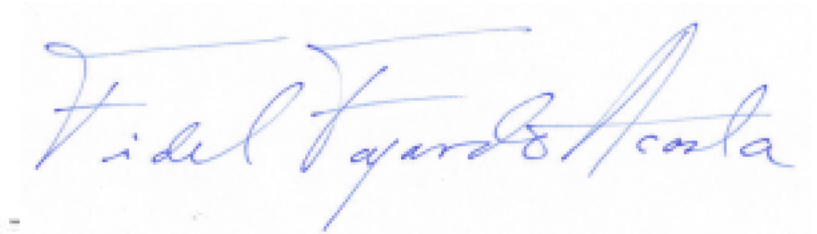




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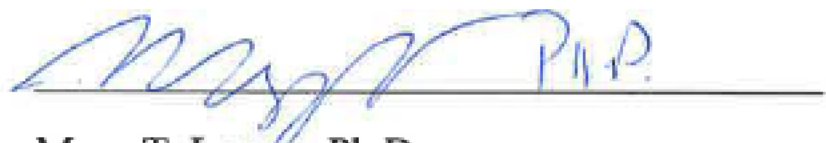
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FRAGMENTS OF A MAN: THE FRACTURING OF TIME AND MIND IN JOHN  
STEINBECK'S *EAST OF EDEN*

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By

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A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the Creighton University in Partial  
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English

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## Abstract

John Steinbeck (1902-1968) is one of America's most highly regarded authors, widely recognized for his Dust Bowl Trilogy, constituted by the novels, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). *The Grapes of Wrath*, in particular, brought Steinbeck fame and fortune, and was largely the reason why he was awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature. *Grapes of Wrath* also brought Steinbeck harsh criticism, threats, and anguish that forced him to move from California to the East Coast. Using a neo-historicist approach that takes into account biographical, cultural, and historical contexts, this thesis attempts to contribute to the ideas that the realism and social concerns of the Dust Bowl Trilogy are uncharacteristic of Steinbeck's writing; that the attribution of *Grapes of Wrath* to Steinbeck alone is problematic; and that the writing of *East of Eden* (1952), which Steinbeck considered his best novel, was part of efforts to sanitize his reputation, erase his past, and bury a number of troubling secrets. A postmodern, rather than a realist, Steinbeck did not favor historical or social realism and felt much more at home writing pseudo-historical and revisionist fantasies only loosely connected to historical and other realities. *East of Eden*, which Steinbeck also called "the only book I have ever written," is his most notable effort to distance himself from *Grapes of Wrath*. Written in the midst of the anti-communist hysterias of the late 1940s and 1950s, *East of Eden* is Steinbeck's plea to be considered a patriotic American in no way associated with communism. It is also Steinbeck's attempt to unburden himself of guilts apparently connected to the biblical stories of Cain and Abel, and Jacob and Esau. To those effects, the novel engages in a wholesale demolition and reconstruction of time, history, and the author's psyche and identity.

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And to my parents, who have given me the world.

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*“The last few years have not been short of events that might legitimately break our faith in the readability and writability of our ‘now.’ At the same time, they have also not been short of reminders... that in America the past continues to erupt into the present and remains key to understanding it...*

*... But what happens when history emerges as the overwhelming force shaping the entire unstable narrative of now?”*

- Jonathan Lee, "For Literary Novelists the Past is Pressing"

*“What is a good life? What is its opposite? These are questions to which no two men will give the same answers. In these our cowardly times, we deny the grandeur of the Universal, and assert and glorify our local Bigotries, and so we cannot agree on much. In these our degenerate times, men bent on nothing but vainglory and personal gain--hollow, bombastic men for whom nothing is off-limits if it advances their petty cause--will claim to be great leaders and benefactors, acting in the common good, and calling all who oppose them liars, envious, little people, stupid people, stiffs, and in a precise reversal of the truth, dishonest and corrupt. We are so divided, so hostile to one another, so driven by sanctimony and scorn, so lost in cynicism, that we call our pomposity idealism, so disenchanted with our rules, so willing to jeer at the institutions of our state, that the very word goodness has been emptied of meaning and needs, perhaps to be set aside for a time, like all the other poisoned words, spirituality, for example, final solution, for example, and... freedom.”*

- Salman Rushdie, *The Golden House*

*“These are the times we live in, in which men hide their truths, perhaps even from themselves, and live in lies, until the lies reveal those truths in ways impossible to foretell.”*

- Salman Rushdie, *The Golden House*

*“Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history.”*

- Novalis, German poet

## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Chapter 14 of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck stated, "There is so much to tell about the Western country ... that it is hard to know where to start. One thing sets off a hundred others. The problem is to decide which one to tell first."<sup>1</sup> Writing about Steinbeck—one of the most renowned and influential authors of American literature—might be no less daunting than he found writing his novel. Steinbeck's work and life have been thoroughly studied and criticized, reviewed and reimagined. Throughout my reading and re-reading of *Eden*, however, there were elements of the novel that never seemed to make sense to me. Some critics would attribute the unsettling effects of the novel on readers to his attempts at allegory and his technique of weaving two seemingly disparate family narratives together, resulting in a "strangely unblended novel."<sup>2</sup> Yet what I found most puzzling was Steinbeck's depiction of the passage and characterization of time. It doesn't take much, if any, reading-between-the-lines to notice his tendencies of jumping backwards into history and forward into the future, entirely at his whim and discretion, taking perhaps the liberties of an already established writer. This could be attributed to a desire to distance himself from *Grapes of Wrath* and show himself as less of a realist, certainly less of a socialist, in the process embracing the postmodernism flourishing around him. Steinbeck, however, might have been a true realist only in *Grapes*, a work that is the primary oddity in his oeuvre. I claim here that Steinbeck can be seen as a

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<sup>1</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 147.

<sup>2</sup> Levant, *Novels of John Steinbeck*, 234.

mostly postmodern writer, with works like *Grapes* deviating from that tendency.

Postmodernism is:

A cultural and intellectual trend of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries characterized by emphasis on the ideas of the decenteredness of meaning, the value and autonomy of the local and the particular, the infinite possibilities of the human existence, and the coexistence, in a kind of collage or pastiche, of different cultures, perspectives, time periods, and ways of thinking. Postmodernism claims to address the sense of despair and fragmentation of modernism through its efforts at reconfiguring the broken pieces of the modern world into a multiplicity of new social, political, and cultural arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

Though postmodernism is most visible in works from the post-World War II period, it was already evident, in the deliberate anti-rationalism and nonsense of the Dadaists and the irreverence of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), in the period during and after World War I, particularly in connection with the Roaring Twenties:

Dada was an art movement that occurred primarily in Europe, beginning in Zurich. Although the endpoints are a bit fuzzy, it began around 1915 and lasted until about 1925, when many Dadaists joined the surrealist movement. ...

Postmodernism is essentially a neo-Dada movement, updated and focused more specifically on social philosophical issues.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fajardo-Acosta, "Postmodernism."

<sup>4</sup> Locher, "Unacknowledged Roots," n.p.

What Dada and postmodernism have in common is post-war historical contexts and corresponding attitudes—less serious, less disciplined, more carefree—in keeping with the optimism and even consumerism of such times. As noted by Locher, an intermediate step between Dadaism and postmodernism was Surrealism, one of whose most representative works, Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), clearly points to the idea of the collapse, the melting, of time:



*Figure 1* Salvador Dalí (1904-1989). *The Persistence of Memory*. 1931. Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2022 Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>, Fair use. Permission granted by the Artists Rights Society, who represents the rights and permissions interests of the Estate of Salvador Dalí.

That Steinbeck is a postmodern writer may seem surprising at first, but it is entirely consistent with the more playful, lighthearted and whimsical treatment of time and historical realities, characteristic of Dada, surrealism, and postmodernism, and that permits a twentieth-century writer to craft pseudo-historical adventure novels -- such as *Cup of Gold: A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History* -- and make parallels between medieval Arthurian heroes and unemployed *paisanos* of multi-racial and multi-ethnic descent. The tampering with history and mixing of fantasy with elements of disparate times constitutes a flattening of historical time, echoed in the title of the novel, and a playful departure from reality. The postmodernism of *East of Eden*, I argue, is more mature than that of his early works, but evident in the reliance on a falsely objective narrative and an illusion of history that are not in keeping with the more genuinely historical spirit and style of *Grapes of Wrath*.

A confession of Steinbeck in one of his journal entries points to both a desire to stop time, in a catastrophic manner, and to abandon reason and consciousness, embracing instead a timeless unconsciousness which is the essence of *Eden*:

I feel that sometimes when I am writing that I am very near to a kind of unconsciousness. Then time does change its manner and minutes disappear into the cloud of time, which is one thing, having only one duration. I have thought that if we could put off our duration-preoccupied minds, it might be that time has

no duration at all. Then history and all pre-history might indeed be one durationless flash like an exploding star, eternal and without duration.<sup>6</sup>

To understand Steinbeck's unconventional representations of time and history in *East of Eden*, we must look at the larger picture of his life (and mind), to find why it is that he transitions, from the serious and responsible realism of *Grapes* to his original and native postmodernism, as seen in the juvenile fantasies of *Cup of Gold* and the folly of *Tortilla Flat*. This thesis will argue that *East of Eden* is a postmodern fantasy -- unmoored from time and reason but disguised by a façade of sanity and family history plots -- spun by Steinbeck in an effort to dissociate himself from *Grapes* and free himself of the ghosts of a dark past haunting him.

The contrasts between two of his most significant works, *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, are stark. This is particularly so in the varying ways in which he portrays a given reality in relation to the past and to the experiences of others. Thus, *Grapes* characterizes the present as a consequential circumstance of history, employing a logic of cause and effect in the rendering of events, as well as the continuous measurement of the private experiences of the Joads in terms of the collective experiences of others in the same situation. In *Grapes*, then, the conflict revolves around the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Joad family's experience is a microcosm of the plight of thousands of others during that period. Interwoven into the fabric of both the private and collective narratives, the ghosts of the past haunt the present, in some ways echoing Marx's understanding of historical characters and circumstances:

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<sup>6</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 11.

Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle. And the same caricature occurs in the circumstances of the second edition of the Eighteenth Brumaire.

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.<sup>7</sup>

Through the dialectic of personal and collective experience, the novel unequivocally denounces the failure of the market economy and of the U.S. government, particularly the administration of Hoover, as dramatized in the infamous Hoovervilles, but also that of Roosevelt, which offered some alleviation, suggested by the Weedpatch government camp, but no substantial solutions to the suffering of working people. The failures are not unique but a function of a history of the concentration of wealth, and political power, in a limited number of hands. By writing *Grapes*, Steinbeck brought these faults to the forefront of the national consciousness, which resulted in the huge popularity of the novel, and the wrathful pushback of the wealthy, who understood very well the message and dire predictions of the novel:

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<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Eighteenth-Brumaire*, n.p.

And the great owners, who must lose their land in an upheaval, the great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of the dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression ... And the great owners, who had become through their holdings both more and less than men, ran to their destruction, and used every means that in the long run would destroy them. Every little means, every violence, every raid on a Hooverville, every deputy swaggering through a ragged camp put off the day a little and cemented the inevitability of the day.<sup>8</sup>

In *East of Eden*, on the other hand, the validation of individual by collective experience is gone, and the historical discourse is out of sorts, more pretense of historicity than a serious attempt to ground the story within a real temporal frame., Time references in *Eden* are tangential and part of a warped portrayal of the passage time. In *Eden*, time is mythical and eternal. It does not pass and has become a place, geographically identified but as fixed as a biblical story voided of morality, a matter of choices, pure *timshel*, without consequences. The references Steinbeck makes to the wars and conquests of U.S. history are oddly interspersed throughout the text, and often differ

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<sup>8</sup> Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 306-307.

in their underlying implications of good and evil. The dissimilarity between the two texts is so apparent that some critics have gone so far as to say that the author of *Grapes of Wrath* is not the same person as the author of *East of Eden*; whereas we trusted the narrative voice(s) of *Grapes*, *Eden* is told by a thoroughly unreliable narrator.<sup>9</sup>

Chapter 1 of this thesis will discuss the earlier part of Steinbeck's life and his early works up to *Tortilla Flat* (1935), including the early stages of his friendship with Edward Ricketts and of his marriage to Carol Henning. Chapter 2 will address the more mature works of the second half of the 1930s, which were heavily influenced by Ricketts and Henning, particularly the so-called Dustbowl Trilogy, constituted by *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Chapter 3 will interpret *East of Eden* in light of the "interior drama and the overall arc of change Steinbeck underwent during that thirteen-year period from 1938-1951."<sup>10</sup> His experiences after *Grapes* radically transformed him, and as *Eden* demonstrates, not entirely for the better. Chapter 4 provides textual analysis of *Eden* which helps to substantiate the idea that Steinbeck is an unreliable narrator who was never the Realist he has sometimes claimed to be. Overall, the essay will endeavor to formulate the appropriate questions about him and his legacy, offering a new history of Steinbeck's life with the potential to illuminate his work, specifically *East of Eden*, in new and significant ways.

The specific questions the essay will raise involve Steinbeck's problematic treatment of time, place and character in *Eden*, which suggest a man, dislocated in time

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<sup>9</sup> DeMott, "Private Narratives," 128.

<sup>10</sup> DeMott, "Private Narratives," 128.

and space, descending into a state of psychological crisis precipitated by unresolved issues in the past. Important considerations will include establishing a contrast between the Steinbeck of *Grapes* and the Steinbeck of *East of Eden*, with attention to significant character changes after the publication of *Grapes* and his psychic disintegration into multiple personae represented in the characters of the latter work.

A key problem the discussion will address is the matter of evasiveness and artifice in what seems the author's attempt to confess and atone for obscure past misdeeds weighing heavily on his conscience. The exaggerated importance he places on what he called "the only book I have ever written" appears to be in fact a function of the "secrets hidden in this book."<sup>11</sup> In his *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*—a compilation of the daily journal entries addressed to his dear friend and editor, Pascal Covici—Steinbeck writes, "the innocent sound and the slight concealment are not done as tricks but simply so that a man can take from this book as much as he can bring to it."<sup>12</sup> By relating *Eden* to the events of the years after the publication of *Grapes*, it may be possible to discover the hidden Steinbeck, as well as fuller and more concrete lessons among the seemingly innocuous allegories of his modern re-telling of Genesis. The text of *East of Eden* in that way can be treated as a window into his mind—as he writes the novel in order to offer a glimpse into secrets of which he wanted to unburden himself, but which he was not prepared to fully and openly reveal.

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<sup>11</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 5, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 16-17.

The critical and theoretical approaches of this study can be considered a form of New Historicism, a methodology grounded on the assumption that a literary (or non-literary) text is deeply intertwined with the concurrent social and political culture, that a text cannot be judged or interpreted without consideration of its context, including the life and experiences of the author. Rather than a neutralist inquiry into the past, which is a tenet of traditional Historicism, New Historicism acknowledges the “necessity of making value judgements,” as “texts are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion.”<sup>13</sup> A text and its context are not identical or direct reflections of one another but rather refractions, especially so in the case of an author like Steinbeck who is only obliquely reflecting on his own personal history. In addition to the New Historicist approach, this essay engages the concerns of realism and postmodernism, as Steinbeck fluctuates between them in response to his own inclinations and the influence of others on his thinking and writing. *Grapes of Wrath* is wholly realist and down to earth in its interpretation and illustration of human history and experiences. That novel is also critical, and its objective is to shed light on historical experience, and also bring about change. Conversely, *East of Eden* is a postmodernist fantasy expressing individualist and subjectivist ideologies, and not only that, but instrumentalizing realism in the service of a postmodern distortion of historical reality.

Whereas in *Grapes* Steinbeck strove to represent the “we,” rather than the “I,” the opposite is true in *Eden*. That shift of perspective corresponds to a distortion of history designed to suit the desires of the speaking “I.” The morality of that procedure, however,

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<sup>13</sup> Brewton, “Literary Theory,” n.p.

is highly questionable, as it renders the narrative into a relativistic fable where the real is a matter of personal choices. The *timshel* (“you choose”) which is the motto of this work ultimately amounts to choosing not so much one’s actions in the present, as deciding what one wants to believe about the past. In that choice there is no “we,” only “I,” as others could bear witness to the past in ways different from our own. The loss of the “we,” then, is also the loss of any reality check, the immersion into a fantasy where the multiplicity of characters is merely a series of variations of the same “I,” which is the true subject of the novel. The pretense of history and the pretense of multiple perspectives are revealed in this novel in a series of contradictory statements about identity and the passage of time. The overall effect of the novel is very disconcerting for the reader, as it leaves us wondering what exactly he may be talking about, other than himself, disguised as history, family, and society.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE EARLY LIFE AND WORKS OF JOHN STEINBECK:

#### 1902-1935

In 1902 John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California to his mother, Olive Hamilton, and father, John Ernst Steinbeck. Their only son, he inherited the name of his father and his paternal grandfather, technically making him John Ernst Steinbeck III.<sup>14</sup> Olive was a schoolteacher, and his father held various agricultural jobs as well as serving as Monterey County treasurer.<sup>15</sup> Both of his parents were known for their deep ties to the community, as they were involved in various organizations that worked for unity and collaboration, such as The Order of the Eastern Star, The Wanderers (a women's club which “maintained a worldly outlook and met to discuss the cultures of other countries”), and other interest-based groups.<sup>16</sup> Steinbeck’s grandfather, Johan Ernst Adolph Großsteinbeck (who later shortened his name to John Ernst Steinbeck upon immigrating to the United States), was also known to have led a messianic farming community in Palestine along with his family and several friends, who relocated there from their home country of Germany.<sup>17</sup> The goal of the farm was to establish connection and cooperation between themselves and the Jews who occupied the land so as to “hasten the advent of the Christian Messiah” and to bring about peace on earth. However, not long after their arrival, the commune was attacked, and various members of Johan’s family were killed

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<sup>14</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Shillinglaw, “John Steinbeck,” n.p.

<sup>16</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Perry, “John Steinbeck’s Roots,” 47.

by Arabs who were hostile to both Christians and Jews living in the area.<sup>18</sup> Despite the tragic outcome of his efforts, the missionary activities of Steinbeck's grandfather provide evidence of an interest in Steinbeck's family on collective well-being and unification of people going back several generations.

Relative to the collectivism and service-oriented inclinations of his family, Steinbeck was an outlier. He was known as being rebellious, mischievous, and overall uninterested in the way of "Salinas thinking."<sup>19</sup> He rejected being associated with the ideals of a tight-knit community (as well as those of his own family) which promoted the notion of working towards the common good, whether that involved agricultural work, education, or local government. In *Mad at the World: A Life of John Steinbeck*, William Souder describes a young boy, who "was not lonely, but he was mostly alone."<sup>20</sup> Though he had a few friends, none of them felt like they knew him well. They said he often looked like an "unmade bed," and he sported knee pants until high school although no one else wore them.<sup>21</sup> One childhood acquaintance said that he was "friendly if he liked you."<sup>22</sup> Steinbeck's closest companions at that time were his sisters, the elder Beth and Esther, but especially his younger sister Mary.

By age fourteen, Steinbeck decided that he was going to be a writer and spent much of his time working on poetry and short stories in his room, becoming somewhat of

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<sup>18</sup> Perry, "John Steinbeck's Roots," 47.

<sup>19</sup> Shillinglaw, "John Steinbeck," n.p.

<sup>20</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 7.

a “recluse.”<sup>23</sup> In a chapter titled “The Making and Unmaking of a Novelist” Warren G. French writes that

One cannot understand his subsequent career without appreciating that this was an extraordinary decision for an undistinguished member of a high school class of 24 in a rural community of 2,500 in a generally anti-intellectual society profoundly suspicious of tendencies toward the “metaphysical,” to which Steinbeck confessed to a friend in 1933 he was “always prone” ... The young Steinbeck both benefited and suffered from growing up in a region still living in the afterglow of the frontier experience he dramatized powerfully in “The Leader of the People.” Here the idea of being “fenced in” was abhorred by an undisciplined community rejecting heavily regimented conformity, while individuals like Steinbeck were still enchanted by the untrammelled opportunities of a legendary past.<sup>24</sup>

From this early age, it was apparent that he thought his hometown had nothing to offer him, except for the opportunity to reminisce about what once was, and so he latched onto his writing in hopes of gaining success in the world outside of Salinas. As Souder puts it,

And yet John remained a boy apart in a place unto itself, a small town disconnected from the larger world. From an early age, he bridled at the bland striving in this narrow universe and, later on, at the town’s conventional propriety,

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<sup>23</sup> French, *John Steinbeck’s Works Revisited*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> French, *John Steinbeck’s Works Revisited*, 2.

which he came to see as a veneer concealing the darker human impulses that exist everywhere.<sup>25</sup>

In 1919, Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University and took only those courses which interested him most, such as writing and literature. His peers in the English Club acknowledged him as a writer with no other "interests or talents."<sup>26</sup> A few years later Steinbeck left the university without a degree and began working with migrant populations on local ranches for a brief time. Some authors and critics have attributed to this experience his empathy for disenfranchised workers, as seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*. However, as we will note later, the economic, moral, and spiritual ideas and inspiration of *Grapes* might have had other sources beyond the limited capabilities of its avowed author.

Steinbeck's sympathy for working people appears in fact to be the product, not of actual affiliation with the working classes, but of a desire to see himself, and have others perceive him, as a good and caring person rooting for the underdog and trying to help the underprivileged. Steinbeck, as a matter of fact, was never poor and, even if his family was not wealthy, they were affluent enough to have a summer cottage, where he got to live for free, and were clearly considered prominent people in the Salinas area. As Susan Shillingwood notes, Steinbeck's father "was not a terribly successful man" but "at one time or another he was the manager

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<sup>25</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Shillinglaw, "John Steinbeck," n.p.

of a Sperry flour plant, the owner of a feed and grain store, and the treasurer of Monterey County.” She also notes the family’s high status and influence on their community, “Never wealthy, the family was nonetheless prominent in the small town of 3,000, for both parents engaged in community activities. Mr. Steinbeck was a Mason, Mrs. Steinbeck a member of the Order of the Eastern Star and founder of The Wanderers, a women's club that traveled vicariously through monthly reports.”<sup>27</sup> While Steinbeck was growing up, his father in effect had established himself as an “accountant and manager” in various milling companies around Salinas and California.<sup>28</sup> Both of his parents were hard-working citizens of the Salinas community, providing an adequate safety net for them and their children. Even when Steinbeck’s father had lost his job, they “still had a substantial bank account, and, with the great economic caution that was traditional in his family, he searched for a way to go into business for himself.”<sup>29</sup> With his modest experience buying and selling grain, his father opened up his own store in Salinas, and despite his hope and determination, it failed because he “hadn’t reckoned on the automobile.”<sup>30</sup> Steinbeck had grown up witnessing these various successes and failures, but all the while their family maintained a solid financial footing.

Benson notes that Steinbeck’s father’s job loss and the shop closing “became a nearly devastating experience ... and even though the losses were eventually made up, the [family] never again could quite think of themselves as ‘well off.’”<sup>31</sup> But this loss of

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<sup>27</sup> Shillinglaw, “John Steinbeck,” n.p.

<sup>28</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 13.

“well-off” was not in any dire terms, only the kind of no longer “well-off” that mattered in the perceptions of their social status, so that the biggest struggle from the point of view of Steinbeck during these times was that although his family had money, “neighbors had new gadgets as much as two years before we did.”<sup>32</sup> Once his father was appointed Monterey County Treasurer, he held that position for the rest of his life.

Steinbeck and his sisters grew up comfortably, in a large Victorian-style house on the corner of Central Avenue, in an uptown Salinas neighborhood.<sup>33</sup> The Steinbeck children played in the “unfinished attic, which was big enough to roller-skate in, or out in the yard behind a white picket fence.”<sup>34</sup> They even had a piano which “stood in [their] front parlor—a room that was seldom used. The family and their visitors spent more time in the adjoining living room, which had a fireplace.”<sup>35</sup>

A girl who got invited to join the Steinbecks for dinner from time to time recalled how lovely it was—the food was wonderful and the conversation lively... The Steinbecks were among several Salinas families who owned cottages in Pacific Grove and visited them often throughout the year.<sup>36</sup>

This is important regarding the full context of Steinbeck and Carol’s supposed financial mess, as he called it, at the beginning of his career. He told others how they were just scraping by, barely able to afford enough to eat, even claiming they survived by what he could catch fishing in a little boat. But if we look to any number of biographies

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<sup>32</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 13.

<sup>33</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 12.

there are discussions of the financial support Steinbeck and Carol had received from both of their parents when they were low on funds. They had in fact been getting a “monthly check” from Steinbeck’s father, which, however, was not enough to cover everything, so Carol found various jobs to help until he could make more from his writing.<sup>37</sup> The two eventually moved into his family’s cottage house in Pacific Grove, California, where they lived for free for the next few years. For Steinbeck, there was always a cushion to fall back on—a reason as to why his earlier works remained unconcerned with most of the themes in *Grapes* that directly address real-life suffering, and why most of his writing leaned more towards stories set in some altered version of the past.

His brief stint as a student at Stanford University, the many different jobs he held and which he changed often -- ranch hand, construction worker, newspaper reporter, tour guide, caretaker at Lake Tahoe -- and odd business enterprises, such as manufacturing mannequins, all suggest a restless individual with no particular pressures on him or urgency to do anything of much substance, other than trying to become a writer and make some money on the side while in pursuit of that personal ambition. In a way, the Steinbeck of the 1920s was a fairly characteristic example of a middle- to upper-middle-class, self-absorbed young man of the post-World War I Roaring Twenties, not unlike many others, someone looking for opportunities to become rich and famous, though no doubt also concerned, at least due to his family’s influence, for the less privileged. During the 1920s, it can be said he was looking for his personal pot of gold, and that is what he set out to get, at least in imaginary form.

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<sup>37</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 67.

Steinbeck's first published novel, *Cup of Gold*, appeared in 1929.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the full title of the book is *Cup of Gold: A Life of Sir Henry Morgan, Buccaneer, with Occasional Reference to History*, indicative of the dilettantish attitude and the evasion of history and reality, and of responsibility one might say, that was present in his work from the beginning. While earning money taking care of an estate on Lake Tahoe in the late 1920s, Steinbeck worked on several drafts of this novel which deals with Henry Morgan, a pirate, who raids the city of Panama in search of fame, fortune, and love. Part of the novel takes place at sea, on journeys during which Morgan's fellow sailors share tales of grisly sea monsters and the souls lost at sea. The aesthetic appeal of the descriptions of islands and waters contrasts with the ugliness of the characters' actions and intentions, for what attracts/motivates the pirates is violence and material gain, in complete disregard for human life when it comes to obtaining what they want.

Some critics have claimed that the novel is critical of the brutality and materialism of the pirates' way of life, as this "drive isolates Henry Morgan from those around him and leaves him unfulfilled."<sup>39</sup> However, the novel ends with Morgan knighted by the English King and becoming a designated leader in charge of other pirates, thus elevated to the rank of "privateer" in the service of a national state, rather than just a murderer and thief. *Cup of Gold* is a distinctly self-indulgent and, in that

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<sup>38</sup> Shillinglaw, "John Steinbeck," n.p.

<sup>39</sup> National Steinbeck Center, "Cup of Gold," n.p. <https://www.steinbeck.org/his-work/cup-of-gold/> I first accessed the site where this description was published in January 2022, but the site is no longer available. The text of the quotation can be found at <https://www.nocloo.com/cup-of-gold-john-steinbeck-1929-1st-edition/> (last accessed: May 3, 2022).

sense, postmodern work of fiction, wherein the author is rewriting historical events, and in doing so, romanticizing real tragedies and criminal endeavors, all along living out, on paper, his own fantasies. The novel is designed for the goal of entertaining and pleasing the public, without any real emphasis on the corrupt ideals and aspirations of the main character. Richard Astro concluded that *Cup of Gold* is a “loosely fictionalized history of the English buccaneer” and is a “weak and inconsequential novel.”<sup>40</sup> The novel has been referenced as both a work of historical fiction, and a “fictive biography.”<sup>41</sup> It was during this time that he met the woman who would become his first wife, Carol Henning.



Figure 2. Carol Henning and John Steinbeck, 1930. Photo by The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University.

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<sup>40</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> National Steinbeck Center, “Cup of Gold,” n.p. <https://www.steinbeck.org/his-work/cup-of-gold/> I first accessed the site where this description was published in January 2022, but the site is no longer available. The text of the quotation can be found at <https://www.nocloo.com/cup-of-gold-john-steinbeck-1929-1st-edition/> (last accessed: May 3, 2022).

After meeting Carol at Lake Tahoe, the two “lived as long as they could in Los Angeles until the money ran out, forcing them to move to the Steinbeck family vacation cottage in Pacific Grove. There, Carol worked a series of odd jobs herself, putting her skills as a secretary to good use, while Steinbeck wrote as much as he could.”<sup>42</sup> At Pacific Grove, Steinbeck and Carol lived rent-free and would occasionally receive money from his parents when they did not have enough to spare. In between his parents’ and Carol’s help, Steinbeck was pretty well set up to pursue his writerly interests. Like most writers, though, he struggled publishing his work, experiencing rejection after rejection of his manuscripts.

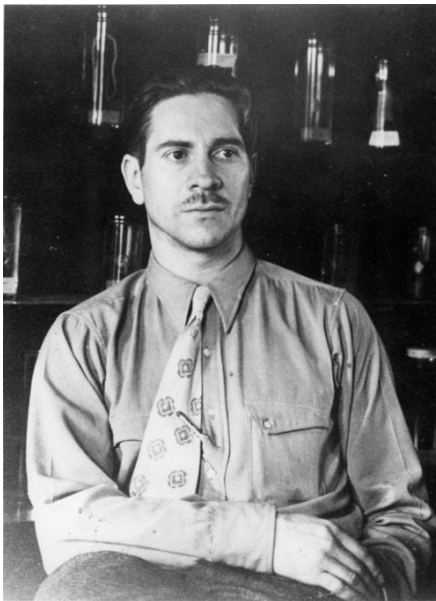


Figure 3. Ed ‘Doc’ Ricketts, taken at Pacific Biological Laboratory, 800 Cannery Row.

Photo by The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University.

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<sup>42</sup> National Steinbeck Center, “John Steinbeck Bio,” n.p.

Steinbeck married Carol in January of 1930 and later that year, in October, was introduced to the marine biologist, Edward (Ed) F. Ricketts, who was to become Steinbeck's closest friend. Ricketts owned and worked at the Pacific Biological Laboratory on the waterfront in Monterey County. According to Steinbeck, the two met in the waiting room of a dentist's office and became friends immediately (each had known/heard of the other).<sup>43</sup> The two had what was described as a "very unique relationship" in which Steinbeck "felt extremely close to Ricketts and needed and desired his companionship, and Ricketts poured out to Steinbeck what, for lack of a better term, must be called love."<sup>44</sup> For a while they spent time with a larger group of friends who bonded over their shared "poverty," often gathering in Ed's lab, and, as Souder calls it, "a members-only club of the talented and the impoverished."<sup>45</sup> Although they did a fair amount of drinking and simply enjoying each other's company, they worked daily trying to establish careers that would bring stability and success. Ricketts was developing books on his scientific inquiries into the marine invertebrates of the west coast of North America, as well as planning trips to various sites to explore marine species for research, while Steinbeck labored long hours at

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<sup>43</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 4-5. According to Souder, "other people who knew him doubted this story, and Carol said flatly that it couldn't have happened that way. She believed it was unlikely that either man would have willingly gone to the dentist; both were like children when faced with even the slightest physical discomfort—especially Steinbeck" (*Mad at the World*, 101).

<sup>44</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 5-6.

<sup>45</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 106.

becoming a better writer.<sup>46</sup> During the summers of the early 1930s, Carol spent quite a bit of time in Ed Rickett's lab, working part-time for him. It was a useful source of income for Carol and her husband, and she and Ed got along well. A brief time later, Ed's wife left him and took most of the money, causing Ed to let Carol go since he could no longer afford to pay her for her assistance in the lab.

Steinbeck's experiences hanging out and drinking with Ricketts and their other friends provided the foundation for the situation described in *Tortilla Flat* (1935). *Tortilla Flat*, like *Cup of Gold* and *East of Eden*, also stands out as a postmodernist work on several accounts. In it, a group of men, the "paisanos" (a Spanish word for peasants), who are mostly drunks and thieves, enlist themselves to participate in the First World War, but never actually engage in combat.<sup>47</sup> Generally, these men spend their time together fumbling around drunk or on quests for money and are meant to be comparable to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, or at least romanticized versions of Arthurian figures, which had a profound influence on the young Steinbeck.<sup>48</sup> In Souder's biography of Steinbeck, he describes how young Steinbeck detested reading and writing as it did not come easy to him, regarding books as "printed demons—the tongs and

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<sup>46</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Souder discusses Steinbeck's teenage years, when him and his friends looked up to soldiers and admired them for their bravery. Steinbeck was excited about possibly participating in World War I, but "it came as a relief and a disappointment when the war ended in the fall of 1918, when John was still a senior at Salinas High. The war was the story of stories, but it would be for others to tell" (*Mad at the World*, 23).

<sup>48</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 17.

thumbscrews of outrageous persecution.”<sup>49</sup> But then, at the age of 9, he was gifted *The Boy’s King Arthur*, the simplified edition of *Le Morte d’Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, and soon after, quickly became fascinated by the story and the complexities of storytelling. But the Knights of the Round Table have an interesting role in history, both literary and literally.

Much of the cultural and historical image of King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table stems from simplified, “glowing” retellings of Sir Thomas Malory’s depictions of the King and his mythical court.<sup>50</sup> However, the true nobility and virtue of these men is rather unclear, even in Malory’s actual work. Even though in the “popular imagination and among scholars, Arthur’s court is distinguished by the chivalry of his knights,” the actions of King Arthur and his men, as told in the medieval narratives, paint an entirely different picture – one of lust, murder, greed, treachery, power struggles, and self-indulgence. *Tortilla Flat* is Steinbeck’s attempt at identifying with the knightly aristocracy and their tyrannical way of life, and, again, effectively romanticizing the knights as heroic and admirable. Enjoying a rent-free house in a southern California beach town and with at least enough money to buy cheap wine for himself and his buddies, the Steinbeck of the early 1930s felt indeed like a King Arthur dispensing good times for his followers at a round table of his own. Like *Cup of Gold*, *Tortilla Flat* is work of fiction that falsifies real historical problems, with the goal of creating a comical story that provided a means of escape for the public during the days of the Great Depression. Interestingly, through his self-indulgent projection of Arthurian fantasies to

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<sup>49</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Bedwell, “Failure of Justice,” 4.

his own life, Steinbeck found commercial success. As Benson notes, *Tortilla Flat* was a novel rescued by his publisher, Pascal Covici, who had requested all of Steinbeck's remaindered novels until they were made commercially feasible, noting that, though this particular one was "written rather quickly and casually and published almost by accident," "[it] raised (Steinbeck) out of obscurity."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 276. *Tortilla Flat* "put Steinbeck on best-seller lists and won the annual award of the Commonwealth Club of California for the best novel by a state resident. Steinbeck's Mexican American paisanos living marginally in a wooded area on the edge of Monterey delighted readers seeking diverting relief from the Great Depression that they found also in James Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times* and George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's play *You Can't Take It with You*": French, *John Steinbeck's Fiction Revisited*, 6.

**CHAPTER 2**  
**THE DUST BOWL TRILOGY AND WORLD WAR II**  
**1936-1945**

Over the course of the 1930s, Ed Ricketts and Carol Henning, as well as the Great Depression, had a very strong influence on Steinbeck, leading him to become more mature and a much better writer with enlightened concerns for others and for nature. These various influences are the reason why Steinbeck was able to write his truly best works, the so-called Dust Bowl trilogy constituted by *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). As scholars have pointed out, during the 1930s Steinbeck was “engaged in troublesome transformation” and was “inspired to one of those remarkable gestures that would incapacitate most people but that several times liberated him from what might become embarrassing detritus from an abandoned past.”<sup>52</sup> The change was so profound that it seemed as if he wanted to destroy every trace of his former self. Joseph Campbell, the man who would later become a prominent writer of studies of mythology, and who was the next-door neighbor of Ed Ricketts, had witnessed Steinbeck “burn a pile of stories a foot and a half high. At least sixty or seventy of them and all waste away.”<sup>53</sup> “On this occasion, as well as on several similar occasions later, he took a perverse pleasure in purifying his oeuvre,” Jackson Benson explains.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> French, *John Steinbeck's Fiction Revisited*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 252.

<sup>54</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 252.

There is a recurring theme of sanitizing his past that plays on throughout his life, which we often see happen after the publication of some of his major novels, and as he moved from one marriage to the next. Jackson Benson succinctly describes how much of Steinbeck's work was predicated on learning from experience and acting accordingly,

If life was a process, then that process for man, as far as Steinbeck was concerned, was largely a matter of learning. It was the major "action" for both his life and work. In his fiction, characters sometimes learn and adapt; sometimes the burden of what they learn is very heavy and they suffer greatly; sometimes they refuse to learn or cannot, and they perish.<sup>55</sup>

In the case of Steinbeck, however, "learning" and acting accordingly often took the form of denial of the unpleasant aspects of the past by erasing and effacing them. His career as a writer could be described as an extended effort, with perhaps a hiatus in the second half of the 1930s, to write and rewrite his own story, in ever more self-flattering terms, which is also fitting of the spirit of postmodernism. For about five years, however, Steinbeck was not a postmodern but rather a true realist, and even a socialist addressing the lives and concerns of others, rather than just his own. The difference between the works of that period and what came before and after is dramatic, almost as if the works of 1936-1939 were not his own. And in a substantial way, they were not.

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), in particular, stands out as having powerful humanist and socialist messages that are not as clearly featured in either his earlier or later works. *Grapes* details the trials and tribulations of migrant farm workers (and the American working classes in general) during the Great Depression. Some of the material

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<sup>55</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 251.

for the novel was derived from his experience working as a journalist for the San Francisco News, investigating and reporting the dire conditions of migrant labor camps in California.<sup>56</sup> Others claim it was his having worked on farms side by side with migrant laborers. But what might have been a more formative influence on *Grapes* was his marriage to Carol and his friendship with Ed Ricketts, whom Steinbeck acknowledged as co-author of *Sea of Cortez* (1941).

Steinbeck wrote and completed *The Grapes of Wrath* in about six months' time, a surprisingly fast-paced endeavor that caused him considerable distress, which he details in *Working Days*, the journal corresponding to the writing of the novel. As Benson describes it, while Steinbeck was working on the final draft of *Grapes*, "he made it a long sprint, rather than a marathon run, and the strain very nearly destroyed him."<sup>57</sup> Part of the stress might have arisen from the fact that his editor, Pascal Covici, and his publishing house were experiencing financial difficulties, and Covici was counting on this book to help the business stay afloat.<sup>58</sup>

Steinbeck had warned Covici that the novel was likely to be unpopular and noted in letters to friends that the quality of his writing had been going poorly, and that a lot of it is "pretty badly done."<sup>59</sup> In terms of getting the manuscript up to publishing standards, Steinbeck relied on Carol's assistance and editorial hand. She had strongly disliked the first draft, so she went to work rewriting the second, "contributing more to the

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<sup>56</sup> Guthrie, "I Call Myself," n.p.

<sup>57</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 375.

<sup>58</sup> French, *John Steinbeck's Fiction Revisited*, 9. Benson, *True Adventures*, 377.

<sup>59</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 375.

completion of her husband's manuscript than she had to previous books."<sup>60</sup> Steinbeck wrote to his friend Elizabeth Otis, confessing:

Carol is typing ms [manuscript] (2<sup>nd</sup> draft) and I'm working on first. I can't tell when I will be done but Carol will have second done almost at the same time I have first. And—This is a secret—the 2<sup>nd</sup> draft is so clear and good that it, carefully and clearly correct, will be what I submit. Carol's time is too valuable to do purely stenographic work. [9/10/38]<sup>61</sup>

Further demonstrating how pivotal Carol's efforts were in transforming and shaping the whole novel,<sup>62</sup> Benson writes, "Carol was in fact writing the revision, that is, correcting errors and editing for contradictions and awkwardness, while John was doing the first draft... the two working together, John writing and then Carol typing and correcting what he had composed that day."<sup>63</sup> She had even thought of the book's powerful and allegorical title. While the manuscript underwent some harsh criticisms from publishers, Elizabeth and Carol had to team up against Steinbeck who was adamant about retaining his artistic integrity.

Indeed, Carol's impact on *Grapes* does not stop at the substantial line-editing work she performed, but her own ethical perspectives informed much of the realist

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<sup>60</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 381.

<sup>61</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 381.

<sup>62</sup> The opening dedication of *Grapes* reads: "To Carol who willed it." According to Benson, "Carol had become very attached to the concept of this new novel, and indeed, she was so firmly behind it and helped so much with it that he thought of it later as 'her' novel": *True Adventures*, 381.

<sup>63</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 381.

depictions and narratives in his work during the 1930s. Carol was known in part for her firm sense of social responsibility:

If things were wrong in the world you must act to right them. Not that John was insensitive to injustice. But it was Carol who brought him to the point of protest. She sympathized so strongly with the poor, the outcasts, the dispossessed. It was her sense of uncompromising morality that he liked, maybe because it echoed that quality in his mother.<sup>64</sup>

By the novel's final revisions before publication, Steinbeck told his editor Covici that Carol had been reading through the galleys (a printer's proof in the form of long single-column strips) very carefully. "It's her book and she wants it right," he said. For him, it was different. He had to force himself to read it. "It's like unburying the dead," he said."<sup>65</sup>

Ed Ricketts' friendship was also fundamental to the philosophical and social underpinnings of the novel. Richard Astro claims that one cannot study the worldview or life philosophies of Steinbeck without also studying "the life, work, and ideas of this remarkable human being who was Steinbeck's closest personal and intellectual companion for nearly two decades."<sup>66</sup>

Ricketts, like Steinbeck, had a partial college education and no degree, and spent much of his time reading and writing, exploring the natural world, and pursuing research in his lab. He was a highly intellectual man with equally high aspirations for himself and the world, all the while promoting an ecological awareness and curiosity that, to this day,

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<sup>64</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 60.

<sup>65</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 218.

<sup>66</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 4.

proves an inspiration for the field of marine biology. Joseph Campbell, who came to envy Steinbeck's resoluteness as well as the appearance that he had his life "sorted out," understood that the relationship between Steinbeck and Ricketts was a remarkable bond, "something that separated them from the others. Steinbeck and Ricketts were very different people ... 'Ed was a scientist. He'd read Jung. I think Steinbeck got a good deal of his thinking from Ed. In fact, I'm very sure of it.'"<sup>67</sup>

Scholars have noted that several of Steinbeck's best and most complex characters have been modeled after Ed, such as Doc Burton of *In Dubious Battle* and Jim Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath*, both having introspective traits and non-teleological philosophies. Astro described Doc as an "incomplete Jim Casey," though "both men are social activists."<sup>68</sup> He concludes that it was unlikely Ricketts helped directly in the actual writing of the work, since during that time Steinbeck and Carol had been living more than 70 miles from Monterey County and Ricketts only occasionally visited them.

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<sup>67</sup> Another interesting detail pertaining to the relationship between Steinbeck and Joseph Campbell was that he was in love with Carol, perhaps another detail explaining Campbell's envy of the writer. At a party at Rickett's place, everyone got madly drunk, and Steinbeck's attention was brought to the fact that Campbell had been flirting with Carol outside in a tree. Joseph later tried to explain to Steinbeck how drunk he was, Steinbeck said he, however, was not at all—that "he was too agitated to be drunk—'there's something nervousness does to man,' he told Joseph, who pretended they were not talking about Carol." Late at night, while everyone was asleep, Joseph found Carol lying alone in a back room and laid with her, kissing her, until the next morning. She admitted to him that, although it was romantic, the deviousness made her feel badly. Later, in his journal, Campbell wrote that he believed "we were all more or less in love with each other": Souder, *Mad at the World*, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 128.

Nevertheless, despite the absence of any overt influence, Ricketts' ideas are present in *The Grapes of Wrath*, if in the process Steinbeck transformed and modified them to fit his developing social gospel. The major portion of Steinbeck's world-view in *The Grapes of Wrath* emerges through the increasing consciousness of Jim Casey, who, like Doc... is patterned on Ricketts. An ex-preacher who abandoned the doctrines of Christianity because of their rigidity and their inability to provide practical solutions to human problems, Casey breaks through to an understanding of the cosmic whole, and through his disciple, Tom Joad, employs the principles of his vision to work to alleviate the plight of the dispossessed migrants.<sup>69</sup>

We can see clearly how Ricketts' ideas, contemplative curiosity, and dedication to understanding the world as it really is, deeply shaped Steinbeck's understanding of what turns a novel from a mere form of entertainment into one that has profound implications for society and its people. As Astro suggests, Ricketts influenced Steinbeck, in the same way that Jim Casey influenced Tom Joad, to use his position to work towards making a concrete difference in the lives of working-class people. Without Ricketts' ideas and Carol Henning's writing, it is likely that *Grapes of Wrath* would not have come into existence. To say the least, the idea that John Steinbeck is the author of *Grapes of Wrath* is not exactly accurate and denies credit for the major contributions of those who inspired and also did much of the writing of the book.

Another noteworthy aspect of Ricketts' and Carol's influence on *Grapes of Wrath* is its reflection on real history and the material conditions of life of the migrant

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<sup>69</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 129.

populations. Looking at Steinbeck's earlier works, it is evident they were only very loosely based in history, and often manipulated the circumstances of history to make the story, and its characters, more entertaining and amusing. Writing about the hardships of migrant labor did not come easy to him, for he knew that it is much harder to represent history truthfully rather than embellish it with whatever details make it fit the narrative. "There's one other difficulty too. I'm trying to write history while it is happening and I don't want to be wrong."<sup>70</sup> Steinbeck had witnessed these hardships firsthand during his short stint as a reporter; however, it was not until Ricketts and Carol came around that Steinbeck began to incorporate into his writing accurate representations of reality imbued with a social consciousness.<sup>71</sup> French writes that:

As we approach the first masterworks of [Steinbeck's] mature years, we must consider what has been so much ignored, to the detriment of both his and his critics' reputations—that Steinbeck was not an intellectual in the sense of being primarily rational rather than emotional. He recognizes that he had a lifelong suspicion of intellectuals, with their a priori systems for the management of human affairs, although he would at times dabble in pseudointellectual theories (like that of the phalanx...), and in the long run his work was confused rather than clarified by his greater attraction to Ed Ricketts's eccentric philosophizing than to the warm, sympathetic concern with still undiagnosed sufferings afflicting human relationships that was Ricketts's most ennobling quality.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 375.

<sup>71</sup> French, *John Steinbeck's Fiction*, 44.

<sup>72</sup> French, *John Steinbeck's Fiction*, 44.

It is not a coincidence that his writing from the 1930s is almost hyper-conscious of the labor movement and the oppressive situation of working-class citizens compared to both prior to and after the Dust Bowl trilogy. Steinbeck's authorial persona outside of these works is defined by anti-realism, self-flattering fantasies, and fantastical (mis)interpretations of history and time—explaining why he had such difficulties with the writing of *Grapes of Wrath* in trying to represent history as it really occurred.

The Great Depression gave Steinbeck the perfect opportunity to draft works such as *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, where he capitalizes on the situation of those who were vulnerable and desperate to understand their own plight. As Meltzer notes, in 1934 Steinbeck met Cicil McKiddy, a young migrant from Oklahoma looking for farm work. McKiddy was appointed secretary-treasurer of a local union, organizing strikes after wages were cut. At least three strikers were killed in the struggle, but it turned out to be one of the most successful labor strikes before WWII, as it resulted in higher wages for farm workers.<sup>73</sup>

After the strike, John pumped McKiddy for every detail about the conflict. He thought perhaps he could help the workers and at the same time gather material for his writing. He was especially interested in the history of Pat Chambers, a Communist and one of the strike leaders. He thought he could write about him in the first person, as though it were the autobiography of a radical labor organizer. Chambers and other strike leaders had been arrested under California's criminal

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<sup>73</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 81.

syndicalism law, which was intended to cripple labor organization by charging union leaders with using force and violence and sending them to prison.<sup>74</sup>

Meltzer points out that Steinbeck used the facts he gathered from this case to shape his narratives. Though the strike had been a success, Steinbeck realized how advantageous the material could be for creating a story that was bound to have a compelling effect on its readers. In the instances of Casy's murder and Tom Joad's retaliatory murder, the dramatization is not far from the abusive and all-around oppressive conditions the migrant laborers faced in real life.

Following the publication of *Grapes* in April of 1939, Steinbeck soon witnessed how potent the novel's inspiration (or, to some, indoctrination) really was and still is. "Looking back on the year, John would have realized that nothing could get the author in trouble faster or open more doors than putting a pen to paper," Brian Kannard observes.<sup>75</sup> That summer, the book had jumped to the top of the New York Times best seller list where "it stayed for the next five months. More dazed than elated, Steinbeck was bewildered by the book's success..."<sup>76</sup> Covici had sent a copy of the book to the White House to gain the attention of President Roosevelt, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, with the hope of showing them how the New Deal had not done enough to address the Great Depression.<sup>77</sup> Supposedly, the First Lady had been so moved by the book that the following year she traveled to California with the intention of visiting the migrant labor

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<sup>74</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 81.

<sup>75</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 104.

<sup>76</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 228.

<sup>77</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 104.

farms alongside Steinbeck. Yet the two did not end up meeting because, by that time, Steinbeck had already “moved on from the stink of *The Grapes of Wrath* to a glorified fishing expedition [the voyage that would become the source for *The Sea of Cortez*]. John had taken to the high seas with marine biologist and longtime friend Ed Ricketts.”<sup>78</sup>

The six-week trip, in 1940, from Monterey to the California Gulf led to Ricketts’s and Steinbeck’s co-authorship of the book, *The Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* (1941). Written during and after the journey, it details the many specimens Ricketts found along the coast, including a log of their daily adventures mixed with tangential philosophical meanderings. While applying for permission from the U.S. and Mexican authorities to visit the Gulf of California, Steinbeck wrote, in a letter to his friend, stating that their own government “kicked us in the pants but the Mexican government [gave] us every courtesy.”<sup>79</sup> Roy Simmonds states that Steinbeck had certainly been aware that,

... as a suspected radical the FBI had been making discreet inquiries about him.

The release in 1984 of FBI files under the Freedom of Information Act has revealed much of the undercover work that was carried out not only in those days but in later years as well, but it is doubtful that Steinbeck fully appreciated just how deep and long-standing the agency’s investigations had been, although he clearly had suspicions from time to time.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Simmonds, *The War Years*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> Simmonds, *The War Years*, 41.

He had been pressured by not only the FBI, but the Associated Farmers of California (AFC) for the novel's antagonism of the agricultural industry's brutal treatment of migrant laborers and asserting the need for active resistance. The AFC was an influential anti-labor organization that operated during the late 1930s, which aimed to prevent labor strikes and unionization efforts.<sup>81</sup> Meltzer notes that Steinbeck had been telling Carlton ("Dook") Sheffield, an old friend from Stanford, that the AFC was "attacking him and *The Grapes of Wrath*, but to no avail, as all of his claims in the book were well documented. He turned over materials to the FBI in case something happened to him... his worry for his own safety wasn't imaginary."<sup>82</sup> The trip itself seemed to provide Steinbeck with a potentially rewarding and adventurous experience alongside a close friend—a much-needed get-away from the escalating paranoia and madness surrounding him in the States, to the point where he "felt at a loss what to do as he saw his world disintegrating around him."<sup>83</sup>

Already before departing on his Sea of Cortez expedition, Steinbeck had to deal with the far-reaching repercussions of authoring a novel that criticized very rich and powerful people, as well as the government. The novel also met with the expected complaints and objections of literary critics, on issues such as the story's abrupt and strange ending, the confusing structure of alternating chapters (the same method he used in *East of Eden*), and its upsetting rather than pleasing effects on readers. The most consequential of these criticisms, for Steinbeck and his career, were those that found *The*

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<sup>81</sup> Pichardo, "Power Elite," 21.

<sup>82</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 224.

<sup>83</sup> Simmonds, *The War Years*, 27.

*Grapes of Wrath* to be a type of anti-capitalist, socialist propaganda. He was both “lauded and vilified by different sectors of the American public for exposing the plight of migrant farm workers,” and found himself being associated with the “subtle sting of the word ‘Communist’” in the months after.<sup>84</sup> Steinbeck had spent a decade writing and working relentlessly to establish himself as a popular and admired author and could not handle the conflict that ensued his most remarkable work. It was in the years after the publication of *Grapes*, that Steinbeck’s life “began to fall apart,” leading to a substantial transformation both in his personal life and his work.

His rather strange behavior after *Grapes* suggests both paranoia and fear of what might happen to him should he do anything that could add to the already heated opinions of the public, the government, and the Associated Farmers of California. Eager to get away from the mounting pressures, Steinbeck traveled to Chicago to discuss filming opportunities with major Hollywood film directors and critics like Pare Lorentz.<sup>85</sup> Traveling East, away from his home and everyone who knew him made it easier for him to “maintain a fiction for a time that he was away.”<sup>86</sup> Steinbeck had been advised to avoid

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<sup>84</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 104.

<sup>85</sup> “Steinbeck became acquainted with an increasing number of Hollywood people during the late thirties and early forties, mostly actors, but [Charlie] Chaplin was one of the very few with whom, for a time, he had any kind of close relationship. This growing acquaintance with film personalities roughly coincided with changes in Steinbeck’s personal life, particularly after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and several of his old friends attributed these changes to Steinbeck’s having ‘gone Hollywood,’ but in fact the changes came from a variety of causes, the least of which was influence by the film capital”: Benson, *True Adventures*, 402.

<sup>86</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 402.

publicity, or lay low, to prevent doing anything that could worsen his increasingly fragile social and professional status.

Stuck in an apartment he had rented while he was in Hollywood (he couldn't stay alone in hotel rooms in the case a rape or assault charge might be set up against him), he met Gwendolyn Conger (Gwyndolyn, shortened to Gwyn), who had delivered food to the author on behalf of a friend, and recalled that she fell in love with the author on the spot.<sup>87</sup> For a time, he had even been using an alias while staying in Hollywood, becoming lonely and depressed from advised isolation that soon turned into alienation. During this time, the spring and summer of 1939, Steinbeck found himself seriously ill, for the first time in decades, and had to undergo treatment for tonsillitis, which resulted in a surgical operation:

... the chronic, indeterminate nature of his illness was both frightening and maddening... In addition to his illness throughout much of 1939, the year also marked the beginning of the end of his marriage. The very foundations of his life seemed to dissolve under the continuing pressures of fame and under the erosion of a growing paranoia. Threats, both real and imagined, by individuals and groups antagonized by the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* preyed on his mind and forced him to alter his manner of living. He became guarded and cautious about whom he saw and where he went. He spent the first part of the year looking for a

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<sup>87</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 403. Lawson, "Gwyn Conger Steinbeck -- Who Was She?" n.p.

way to escape and the second part looking for some direction or project by which he could restore some sanity and order to his life.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 4. Vittorio Borriello. *Portrait of Gwyn Conger Steinbeck* (1919-1975). 1954. Oil on canvas. Photo: Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 392.

<sup>89</sup> Source: San Jose State University, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Digital Collections. [https://digitalcollections.sjsu.edu/islandora/object/islandora%3A76\\_2737](https://digitalcollections.sjsu.edu/islandora/object/islandora%3A76_2737) (last accessed: May 3, 2022).

The fallout from *Grapes* was so personally devastating for Steinbeck that it marked the beginning of that thirteen-year period when the author—attempting to rescue his personal and professional image, or as Benson describes it, “purifying his oeuvre”—emerged as a different person. Although Carol accompanied Steinbeck on the voyage with Ricketts, their marriage was in trouble and she left him after their return. She was tired of dealing with the “deluge of letters, telephone calls, and visitors bearing congratulations, admonitions, threats, and petitions,” and of acting as a buffer between Steinbeck and the consequences of his work. In April of 1941, Carol finally discovered his romantic interest in Gwyn, to whom he wrote a series of twenty-five love poems, while still married to Carol. In 1942, Steinbeck divorced Carol and married Gwyn.<sup>90</sup>

As for his friendship with Ricketts, the marine biologist had allowed Steinbeck the perfect opportunity to travel and produce a collaborative work with practical applications and perhaps some intellectual integrity. There has been debate over the source of the narratives and rightful authorship of *Sea of Cortez*. Richard Astro, in his attempt to “dispel certain myths which have grown up around *Sea of Cortez*” (that Steinbeck wrote the first part – the narrative trip, and that Ricketts wrote the second part – the phyletic catalogue; and that the narrative part came from the personal journals of each), demonstrates how both are untrue. What is true, according to his assessment, is that there were two records kept during the journey, but both had been written by Ricketts, and Steinbeck “composed the narrative almost entirely from Rickett’s journal.”<sup>91</sup> He continues:

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<sup>90</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 402. French, *Steinbeck’s Fiction Revisited*, 10, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 13-14.

Unfortunately, these facts have been overlooked too often, with the result that Steinbeck's novels have been interpreted according to premises stated in *Sea of Cortez* believed to be his, but actually developed by Ricketts. The most obvious example involves the important East Sermon on non-teleological thinking, which was written not by Steinbeck, but by Ricketts... it is imperative to recognize that although both men worked hard to organize the expedition, Ricketts, not Steinbeck, was the driving force behind the project. Steinbeck was already a writer of some reputation and wealth, and by subsidizing the venture, he enabled the marine biologist to carry out the second stage of his research of the North American littoral.<sup>92</sup>

To muddle where the real source of the ideas and notes came from, Steinbeck had either altered or added/excluded certain information: "While Steinbeck drew heavily from Ricketts' journal in shaping the final chronicle, he omitted or minimized many things and exaggerated others... The reason for the many omissions, magnifications, and understatements are, of course, subject to question." When asked why he did not write the narrative truthfully, Steinbeck responded, "for Ed."<sup>93</sup> It is obvious that what came from their shared trip was a work that essentially belongs to Ed Ricketts. However, Steinbeck was adamant about including Ricketts as co-author of the book, and then later told his editor Pascal Covici that, "This book is the product of the work and thinking of

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<sup>92</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 14-15.

<sup>93</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 18.

both of us and the setting down of the words is of no importance.”<sup>94</sup> Neither of the men could enjoy the rewards of their efforts because, the day after the book’s publication, Pearl Harbor was attacked and, in brief time, both men found themselves involved in the war effort.<sup>95</sup>

By the time *Sea of Cortez* had been published in 1941, Steinbeck had decided to “leave the West permanently ... after Carol, after Ed Ricketts, after *The Grapes of Wrath* ...”<sup>96</sup> In addition to the increasing FBI surveillance of the author, up until his move to New York City, Steinbeck had a “genuine fear of retribution by the Associated Farmers for his pro-farm labor writings. He had seen what he believed to be evidence of intimidation by violence, blackmail, and extortion on the part of the Associated Farmers and other grower organizations and believed that they were capable of anything.”<sup>97</sup> His fears of punishment or defamation forced him to re-settle in the East, where he had hopes of finding peace.

In the course of the mid-to-late 1940s, Steinbeck became a “New Yorker,” and spent his time “moving in new circles among people whose company he found increasingly meaningful.”<sup>98</sup> Also during this time period, Steinbeck became very interested and involved in the ongoing WWII. The irony of his doing so certainly puts the

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<sup>94</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 18. Steinbeck later had the narrative part from *Sea of Cortez* re-published in 1951 as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* and listed himself as the sole author.

<sup>95</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 19.

<sup>96</sup> French, *Steinbeck’s Fiction Revisited*, 13.

<sup>97</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 369.

<sup>98</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 178.

author's credibility in question—but he was not after credibility. He was after a purpose (or project) that could help dispel his image as a communist, and that could make him feel patriotic and important.<sup>99</sup> After the U.S. entry into WWII, he “became an ardent support of America’s participation in the global conflict, and when he offered his writing talents to the State Department, they were quickly accepted.”<sup>100</sup> Astro notes that,

there is something deeply troubling about this apparent shift in Steinbeck’s thinking in the light of the sardonic statements about war’s being a regular and observable ‘murder trait of our species’ in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* ... Steinbeck actively supported a war which just months earlier (in the *Log*) he and Ricketts stated a conflict which ‘no one wants to fight, in which no one can see a gain—a zombie war of sleepwalkers which nevertheless goes on out of all control of intelligence.’<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Benson details his interviews with Elaine (Steinbeck’s third wife), noting that: “I pointed out that earlier in his career he was very jealous of his reputation, often burning things that did not meet his standards. There was, for example, the famous letter to Elizabeth Otis and Pat Covici, his editor and publisher, where he announced that he was going to burn the first draft of *The Grapes of Wrath*. For the first two-thirds of his career, he threw away thwarted manuscripts, and over and over in his letters he said things like, ‘I’m simply not going to sell out just for money.’ Yet in the 1950s he began writing what Peter Lisca (with some exaggeration) called third-rate popular journalism”: *Looking for Steinbeck’s Ghost*, 27.

<sup>100</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 141.

<sup>101</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 141. Steinbeck, *Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 88.

This new passion for war would lead him to pursue rather unexpected endeavors, including involvement with spy agencies and the writing of war propaganda. In his article “John Steinbeck and the Vietnam War,” Barden writes:

Despite his undeserved reputation as a communist subversive, Steinbeck’s patriotism ran deep as World War II started. Even after being rejected by the army for his politics, he was determined to get involved and do his part in the war effort. He wrote to and spoke with President Roosevelt several times about the need to counter Nazi propaganda, which he felt was very professionally done and often successful with non-aligned countries. He had seen this firsthand when he was in Mexico working on the scripts to the film *The Forgotten Village*. FDR responded positively to his project proposals and directed him to one William “Wild Bill” Donovan, who in 1942 was opening an office in the War Department called the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the predecessor of the current CIA. Working there without pay, he wrote *The Moon is Down...* The thesis of the work is that “herd” men, any group that gives over its individualism to a collectivist mentality, will always be bested by “free” men...

While he was at the OSS, Steinbeck also gained his first experience as a military field reporter ...

In 1943, realizing he would not be accepted into the military, Steinbeck applied for and received a paid overseas assignment for the *New York Herald*

*Tribune* as a war correspondent. In over eighty dispatches, he wrote about the mundane aspects of the war that many journalists missed...<sup>102</sup>

Through an appeal to his friend Lewis Garnett, Steinbeck had landed a job as a correspondent, writing propaganda pieces for the *New York Herald Tribune*. “Such work would not only give him the opportunity to taste the action that he now craved, but would also free him finally from all the petty jealousies and all the red tape that had been throttling his work for the government.”<sup>103</sup> And because of his celebrity status, along with Hemingway, the two were particularly valuable correspondents, for their ability to meet more people and do things other correspondents were not permitted to do. But Steinbeck, without journalistic experience or military knowledge, for that matter, was considered “under qualified and inexperienced” at reporting what was really going on in the front lines of the war.<sup>104</sup> Regardless of his incompetence in that area, from the 1940s onward, Steinbeck “repeatedly focused his attention and his writing on America’s armed conflicts. From the US entry into WWII until his death in December of 1968, he not only wrote about America’s wars but often did so as an eyewitness from battlefields and combat zones.”<sup>105</sup> “During his time as a correspondent, John would spend nearly two months with Douglas Fairbanks Jr.’s top-secret Beach Jumper (BJ) unit.”<sup>106</sup> Simmonds’ described it as a “special operations unit designated Task Group 80.4” that he was invited

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<sup>102</sup> Barden, “John Steinbeck and the Vietnam War,” 12-13.

<sup>103</sup> Simmonds, *The War Years*, 165.

<sup>104</sup> Preece, “Front Line to Front Pages,” n.p.

<sup>105</sup> Barden, “Steinbeck and the Vietnam War,” 11.

<sup>106</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 43.

to be a part of by his friends, John Kremer and Fairbanks.<sup>107</sup> Particularly questionable decisions Steinbeck made while working beside Fairbanks were to remove his press correspondent armband/badge and handling a weapon. He also posed for a photograph alongside the group holding a Nazi flag. His participation in the events on which he was reporting clearly put into question his professional ethics and the supposed objectivity of his reporting.

One of the last trips he completed as a war correspondent was on behalf of the *New York Herald Tribune*, to report on current events in Russia. Their project mainly involved capturing, via photographs and writing, the daily life of the Russian people.<sup>108</sup> Yet it was more than journalism—through his connection with the OSS/CIA, he had volunteered to gather intelligence during his travels.<sup>109</sup> Kannard argues that, initially, Steinbeck was an asset to the CIA because of his social connections and fame, yet, “it would be fair to say that ... Steinbeck would cross the line from an informant to achieving active covert intelligence goals. While this might be an exercise in semantics, for the fledgling CIA of the 1950s and ‘60s, Steinbeck could be considered a ‘spy.’”<sup>110</sup> After all, since the beginning of the war, Steinbeck worked in various departments (i.e. Office of War Information (OWI), Office of Strategic Services (OSS)), and “other government

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<sup>107</sup> Simmonds, *The War Years*, 189.

<sup>108</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 156.

<sup>109</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 40.

<sup>110</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 40.

agencies as an unpaid consultant.”<sup>111</sup> Kannard notes that Steinbeck’s volunteering for the CIA was likely his method to participate “in the fight against Communism.”<sup>112</sup>



Figure 5. John Steinbeck and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. 1943. Campana, Italy. Steinbeck Center Photo Archive. Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies. San Jose State University.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 43.

<sup>112</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 43.

<sup>113</sup> Source: San Jose State University, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library, Digital Collections.

<http://digitalcollections.sjlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/sphoto/id/1071/rec/12>  
(last accessed: May 5, 2022).

## CHAPTER 3

### AFTER THE WAR: EAST OF EDEN AND BEYOND

#### 1945-1968

The anti-communist activities of Steinbeck during the war were consistent with his various other efforts to rehabilitate his image and standing with the authorities, proving his patriotism and commitment to individualism:

He distrusted ‘givens’ of all sorts—political, social, or personal—yet he had a rather rigid code of personal morality (which did not match conventional morality of the narrowest sort) ... His ‘anti-communism’ came largely out of an awareness that it squashed individuality. He saw it among the young communists in the thirties in California, and he saw it in Russia, and was appalled by the thoroughness and brutality with which all traces of independent thought were tracked down and purged. (Indeed, he was to become a kind of expert on Russia, visiting there three times—two trips lasting for several months each—and seeing more of the country and talking to more of its people than most diplomats and journalists who were stationed there.)<sup>114</sup>

Even his cooperation with the OSS/CIA, however, did not spare Steinbeck the suspicion and surveillance of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI. Ever since the publication of *Grapes of Wrath*, the FBI had kept records detailing Steinbeck’s whereabouts and upcoming

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<sup>114</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 720.

projects that might be of interest to national security. Reports of his activities went back even earlier than *Grapes*:

His [FBI] file notes, “During the Fall of 1936 a group of liberal and communistic writers issued a call for a conference to be held in San Francisco, California, on November 13, 1936, which conference continued throughout the following day. This report indicated that one of the sponsors of this Congress was John Steinbeck.”<sup>115</sup>

Barden comments on the reasons for the FBI’s concern, but states Steinbeck was not a communist:

His novels *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) gained a huge reading audience. But they also gained him a notoriety with many—including some in the federal government and the military—as an extremist, subversive, and even dangerous figure. While he was never formally investigated, the FBI kept a dossier on him from the early 1940s on [*FBI Report #100-106224*] that documented his political activities, his personal connections, and his writings... Although he never joined the Communist Party, his ‘association with elements’ of it, as the FBI dossier put it, and the fact that some of his writings appeared in communist publications, were the bases of army intelligence’s conclusion. But Steinbeck was not a communist, not in the 1930s, nor at any other point in his life. He was very clear about this in an authorial aside in his novel *East of Eden* in 1952: ‘And this I believe: that the

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<sup>115</sup> Mitgang, “Policing America’s Writers.” n.p.

free exploring of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about.' (171-172)<sup>116</sup>

The fact that Barden quotes this passage from Chapter 13 of *East of Eden* as proof that Steinbeck was not a communist shows the role that novel played, thirteen years after the publication of *Grapes*, helping Steinbeck distance himself from his reputation as a leftist and painting him as a patriot and champion of individual liberty. The passage is only one of several others in *Eden* where Steinbeck digresses to fit in an authorial defense of his political beliefs, most of which are entirely contrary to the ideas in *Grapes* and not entirely relevant to the actual plot. Also in Chapter 13 of *Eden*, Steinbeck writes:

Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of man. Nothing was ever created by two men. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The precariousness lies in the lonely mind of a man.<sup>117</sup>

The overdone and irrelevant justification of the freedom of individual mind and ideas in *Eden* is consistent with Steinbeck's fear of the Associated Farmers of California

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<sup>116</sup> Barden, "Steinbeck and the Vietnam War," 11-12.

<sup>117</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 132.

(AFC), FBI surveillance, and the targeting and interrogation, in the days of McCarthyism, of anyone who might be suspected of being a communist. “Many of Steinbeck’s friends, acquaintances, and associates had been either called before the HUAC or had been blacklisted by publications like *Red Channels* as being a Communist.”<sup>118</sup> As noted before, by the beginning of the Red Scare in the mid-to-late 1940s, Steinbeck had become a “New Yorker” and was, as he had done before, actively trying to leave the past behind.<sup>119</sup>

In spite of his *Grapes of Wrath* past, Steinbeck, in fact, was never called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and was not a direct target of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare.<sup>120</sup> This has been speculated by Kannard to have been a result of Steinbeck’s cooperation with the intelligence agencies during and after the war.<sup>121</sup> If such involvements were indeed a reason for sparing him a formal hearing with the HUAC, the question still arises as to whether the exemption was earned through past services or even more current cooperation with the ongoing persecution of suspected communists:

In 1947 the House Un American Activities Committee (HUAC), held a series of very public hearings on directors, writers, and actors who were all suspected of or accused of being communists. ... This was a very difficult time in the entertainment industry. Even people who were not convicted of any crime or

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<sup>118</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 42.

<sup>119</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 178.

<sup>120</sup> Miller Center, “McCarthyism and the Red Scare,” n.p.

<sup>121</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 191-193.

disloyal acts were often “blacklisted.” Few, if any, companies would hire or work with someone who had been blacklisted; careers were destroyed in this way.

Many people were willing to testify against others, even friends, in order to avoid being investigated themselves - often times knowing the person was innocent.<sup>122</sup>

Kannard’s research suggests that, “there was more than enough evidence to question Steinbeck’s political leanings,” especially in the context of his involvement with Hollywood.<sup>123</sup>

In 1947, the focus of HUAC was the Hollywood Ten, a group made up of producers, screenwriters, and directors who refused to betray colleagues or give any information that could lead to the persecution of others. Steinbeck himself,

... had been a writer or held adaptation credits in eight films that were released to the general public. This count does not include the films John worked on for the government during the Second World War. When comparing Steinbeck’s movie writing and adaptation to those of the Hollywood Ten, we see that Steinbeck was involved with more movie projects than six of the Hollywood Ten.<sup>124</sup>

The members of the Hollywood Ten were sentenced to prison for contempt of Congress and subsequently blacklisted by major Hollywood studios. Steinbeck clearly did his best to avoid such a fate, though it is not known whether he actually gave up anyone or named

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<sup>122</sup> “Cold War: The American Front,” n.p.

<sup>123</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 188.

<sup>124</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 188.

names of potential communists. California for him, at that point, seemed safely far-away, as well as his ties to individuals like Ed Ricketts.

It could be argued that Steinbeck's championing of individual freedom throughout *Eden* is a gesture on behalf of those whose political ideas made them targets of persecution. However, a closer look into the later HUAC investigations, in the early 1950s, reveals his more likely leanings. Already during the 40s, Steinbeck had become a close friend of Hollywood director, Elia Kazan.<sup>125</sup> Back in the 1930s, Kazan had briefly been a member of the Communist Party and, for that reason, was interrogated by the HUAC. Although at first Kazan refused to cooperate with the HUAC, he eventually caved in and provided the names of others he knew were involved in leftist organizations:

HUAC recognized the sway Kazan had in Hollywood circles and offered him a chance to appear before the committee a second time to reconsider his position.

HUAC members feared that if Kazan had defied HUAC again, the film director's example would give other actors and filmmakers the strength to do the same.

Kazan appeared before the committee for a second time in April of 1952. This go around, Kazan feared he would be imprisoned for contempt of Congress and read a prepared statement in which he recanted his previous silence and gave the names of eight persons who were in the Communist Party. The move to save his

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<sup>125</sup> Kazan would later acquire the film rights to Steinbeck's *East of Eden*. Benson, *True Adventures*, 626.

own neck at the demise of others prompted a wave of outrage through the Hollywood community.<sup>126</sup>

Kazan's decision had stunned many, whose sentiments were later well-expressed by Orson Welles, when he stated: "Elia Kazan is a traitor. He is a man who sold to McCarthy all his companions at a time when he could continue to work in New York at high salary, and having sold all his people to McCarthy, he then made a film called *On the Waterfront* which was a celebration of the informer."<sup>127</sup> Kazan's decision to save himself and sell out the others was something that Steinbeck apparently found admirable—due to its affirmation of individualism and the freedom to make whatever decisions one wants to, regardless of outside pressures or collective benefit (in other words, prioritizing individual gain over the common good). Prior to the second appearance before the HUAC, Kazan, struggling with his decision, had discussed the matter with Steinbeck, preceding the latter's departure to Europe. "Though Steinbeck had an utter contempt for the committee, for all it stood for and all it had done, he respected his friend's decision and, when almost no one else would, stood by him."<sup>128</sup> Once Steinbeck heard news of his friend's testimony, he wrote a letter to Pascal Covici:

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<sup>126</sup> Kannard, *Citizen Spy*, 190.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted in McBride, *What Ever Happened to Orson Welles*, 108.

<sup>128</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 722.

Have not heard from Kazan. But I understand there is a great fuss and feathers over his statement as opposed to Hellman's.<sup>129</sup> One can never know what one could do until it happens. I wonder what I would do. I'll never know I guess. And I don't even know what I wish I would do. Isn't that strange. I understood both Hellman and Kazan. Each one is right in different ways but I think Kazan's took more courage. It is very easy to be brave and very hard to be right. Lillian [Hellman] can settle snugly back in a kind of martyrdom but Kazan has to live alone with his decision. I hope I could have had the courage to do what he did. [5/28/52]<sup>130</sup>

This letter demonstrates clearly Steinbeck's understanding of individual freedom, not as the right to express sympathy for communism, but as the right to look after one's own interests and stand for a self-serving cause, even if that meant causing harm to others who were exercising their rights of free speech and political association. Steinbeck's response is also interesting for the emphasis on the supposed courage, and "rightness," of Kazan's choices and his then having to deal with his decisions all alone, as a misunderstood hero. Steinbeck's wondering what he would have done in a similar situation — "I wonder what I would do. I'll never know I guess. I don't even know what I wish I would do. Isn't that strange"— is indeed very strange, especially because he puts the matter as a doubt concerning his own wishes. An even more troubling statement follows, when he writes,

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<sup>129</sup> Lillian Hellman was also required to appear before the HUAC and asked to give names of those who were involved in the Hollywood Ten but invoked her 5th amendment right to remain silent: Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism*, 201-202.

<sup>130</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 722.

“I hope I could have had the courage to do what he did.” This is in appearance a denial that he ever had to betray others in similar ways, seemingly confirming the prior “I’ll never know I guess.” By using “could have had” instead of “would have,” however, Steinbeck seems to admit he actually was in that position at some point in the past, and also expresses a desire to have betrayed others on those occasions. What he did, if in effect he was ever in such positions, remains entirely unclear. Strictly speaking, these odd phrases do not deny he ever named names, but only that he wishes he could have felt right and proud about doing it, full of courage and individualistic self-righteousness, rather than feeling ashamed and worthless. If nothing else, these passages reek of insincerity, if not outright guilt.

After his relocation to the East, there was rarely any communication between Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, as they were now separated by thousands of miles. Steinbeck sensed “as early as 1947 that he could never go home again.”<sup>131</sup> He and Gwyn also had two young sons, Thomas and John Jr., born in 1944 and 1946, respectively—for whom he wanted to be a supportive and present father, though he found it difficult to do so. Around this time, his second marriage began to deteriorate, and he worried about his young children’s uncertain future.<sup>132</sup> Meltzer concludes that their marriage was ruined by Steinbeck’s commitment to the war effort and his willingness to travel anywhere, but Europe in particular, in search of an opportunity to be involved.<sup>133</sup> His travels and overseas activities were the cause of many arguments between Steinbeck and his wife,

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<sup>131</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 178.

<sup>132</sup> Astro, *Steinbeck and Ricketts*, 178.

<sup>133</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 140.

resulting in her fleeing to California with their sons and only returning to New York after Steinbeck went to see her and begged for her forgiveness.<sup>134</sup>

Upon his return to New York, after traveling in Russia and Europe, in September of 1947, Steinbeck felt inspired to write his next big novel, a work that he had been imagining for “quite some time. (It would be *East of Eden*.) Perhaps he was reacting to critics who’d been putting him down for limiting himself to small projects all these years, instead of creating another novel as large and significant as *The Grapes of Wrath*.”<sup>135</sup> In January of the next year, he flew out to California to refamiliarize himself with the landscape for his upcoming novel. Steinbeck was able to reconnect with Ed Ricketts, and the two spent time drinking and collecting specimens together, as in the old days. “Reluctantly, he returned to his family in New York,” where he had to take care of the kids, as Gwyn had fallen sick. At the same time, he had been trying to write but was unable to get much done because “he simply didn’t know how to handle the constant racket made by little boys.”<sup>136</sup> Their marriage had remained broken, and at this point the boys had become used to a life without much of a father. By May, Steinbeck received the news of Ed Ricketts’s tragic death—he had been hit by a train while crossing the tracks in his car, becoming severely injured and dying just days later. The exact circumstances of Ed Ricketts’s accident, to this day, remain a mystery.

The death of his closest friend apparently shook up Steinbeck so much that when he went back to Ricketts’s lab in California after the funeral and found it full of people he

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<sup>134</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 156.

<sup>135</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 159.

<sup>136</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 159.

did not recognize, “he was beside himself, demanding to know who had any business being there and at one point threatening to burn the place down.”<sup>137</sup> “Ricketts had designated Steinbeck as the executor of his will,” leaving him “all of his papers—journals, correspondence, and manuscripts.” Ricketts had hoped his dear friend would someday, “edit and publish some of this writing, but he never did. Most of the material, along with Ricketts’s library, would make its way to the Hopkins Marine Station—but not before Steinbeck went through everything, tearing out pages on which Ricketts had made notes about women he was involved with, and burning the letters, many of which were from him.”<sup>138</sup> Steinbeck hired a locksmith to open the large safe that Ricketts had kept in the lab, finding in it “only a bottle of Scotch and a note that read, ‘What the hell did you expect to find in here? Here’s a drink for your trouble.’”<sup>139</sup>

After his brief trip to California, he was greeted upon his return home with divorce papers from Gwyn.<sup>140</sup> Kazan kept Steinbeck company for,

... many a night, all night, with him at the Bedford Hotel, helping him live through what had seemed to be the breakup of his whole world and the loss of the great love of his life. Since then, they had become, in Kazan’s words, ‘like brothers—he was always my friend, no matter what, and I was always his friend, no matter what.’<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 310.

<sup>138</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*. 310.

<sup>139</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 310-311.

<sup>140</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 161

<sup>141</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 721.

Ricketts's death and the divorce from Gwyn would be the end of another chapter in Steinbeck's life. Gwyn and the boys, Thom and John, went to live in California; and as for Steinbeck, he began another series of travels, but this time to Mexico. "John's friend Elia Kazan tried to help by having John join him in Mexico for more research on the *Viva Zapata* film."<sup>142</sup> Over the next few months, Steinbeck dedicated his time to writing screenplays and working with Hollywood directors and producers. Through a series of mutual friends, he would come to meet Elaine Anderson Scott, the woman who would become his third wife.<sup>143</sup>

From the ten years between the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the war, Ricketts's death, and his second divorce, Steinbeck emerged as a significantly changed person. His later works reveal in specific ways the extent to which he had been scarred by the criticism, threats, and the alienation he felt personally and socially. But it is also no secret that he had intended his writing after *Grapes* to be just as, if not even more successful than, that book which he felt was the bane of his existence. Steinbeck still retained his hope of remaking his literary image, carrying on the genius people told him he always had, and, above all, moving on from his troubled past.

Outside of his writing career, Steinbeck tried to distract himself from the turmoil by taking advantage of the fortune which *Grapes*, by far his greatest best-selling novel, had brought him. His substantial earnings from *Grapes* allowed Steinbeck to buy houses,

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<sup>142</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 162.

<sup>143</sup> The friend who had introduced Elaine to Steinbeck was Darryl Zanuck, the Hollywood studio mogul/producer who purchased the film rights to *The Grapes of Wrath* for \$75,000. Meltzer, *Up Close*, 163; Souder, *Mad at the World*, 224.

furnishings, and other amenities. Ironically, the novel that made him into a champion of the working classes also allowed him to become a self-indulgent consumer who very much enjoyed the affluent lifestyle. Steinbeck's friend Sheffield visited him and Carol at the new ranch they had acquired after the publication of *Grapes*. Sheffield commented that,

...it was an impressive place. The house was similar to their first Los Gatos house, but bigger, with a large fireplace and many windows in the living room. They'd also fixed up the old Biddle farmhouse for guests. And there was a delightful, narrow swimming pool... After the success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, they hired a Japanese cook-gardener, and an "Okie-boy" to do odd jobs. Steinbeck said the hired man wasn't really necessary, but he needed the work.<sup>144</sup>

After his divorce from Carol, Steinbeck made plans for new digs to serve as a nest for him and his trophy wife, Gwyn:

Before going overseas, John had written his Stanford friend, Webster Street, that "after the war is done I want about ten acres near the ocean and near Monterey and I want a shabby comfortable house and room for animals, maybe a horse, and some dogs and I want some babies... and I'm pretty sure that's what Gwyn wants too."<sup>145</sup>

Later, as he embarked on his third and last marriage, with Elaine, the same pattern followed. Steinbeck sought to take every advantage of his financial success and began to

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<sup>144</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 222.

<sup>145</sup> Meltzer, *Up Close*, 143.

frequent the circles of the wealthy and the powerful. During his interviews with Elaine, Benson found himself “intimidated by wealth, rather than poverty, as I interviewed Steinbeck’s business associates (producers, directors, publishers), friends, and acquaintances in lavish office suites or apartments high up in tall buildings.”<sup>146</sup> The indulgence in the lifestyle of the rich and the famous perhaps was a distraction from the fact that his life had been turned upside down, and that his mind was struggling to piece it all together, grappling with the choices he had made and the directions he had taken since after *Grapes*. The situation provides context for the development of what he, rather oddly, called, “the only book I have ever written.”<sup>147</sup> Commenting on Steinbeck’s correspondence with Pascal Covici, Souder writes:

The date was January 29, 1951:

“Dear Pat: How did the time pass and how did it grow so late? Have we learned anything from the passage of time? Are we more mature, wiser, more perceptive, kinder? We have known each other now for centuries and I still remember the first time and the last time.

We come now to the book. It has been planned a long time.”

With these words to his editor, Pat Covici, Steinbeck promised that he had come unstuck. The book he still called *Salinas Valley* was about to get underway. He and Elaine were moving into their new house on East Seventy-Second Street, and two more weeks would pass before he tried to begin writing. He didn’t know for

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<sup>146</sup> Benson, *Looking for Steinbeck’s Ghost*, 33.

<sup>147</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 5.

sure what he had left, but he said he was eager to find out. The past few years had cost him dearly—he said he would have had to have been made of stone to come through them unscathed. For the longest time he had thought this book would be another experiment with a new form and a new vocabulary. Now, he said, he knew that it was all wrong. This book would be straight and lean, and at its center would be a philosophy that was both “old and yet new born.” It was going to be about the place he was from and it was going to be about him—the book, as he had said before and would said again in the days to come, that he was meant to write.<sup>148</sup>

His aim was to both (1) re-establish his authorial/artistic integrity (removed from the problematic social realism of *Grapes*), and (2) attempting to portray a coherent, fictional, and universal narrative about good and evil in the context of his own individuality. Perhaps accurately portraying Steinbeck’s actual state of mind and perceptions of himself, *Eden* is a web of historical fabrications and illogical characterizations of time and events that clearly demonstrates the extent to which he may have indeed been damaged, psychologically and emotionally, by the events of the preceding years. The novel in fact can be read as evidence that Steinbeck was losing control of his mind, and of the ability to distinguish fact from fiction. Steinbeck’s postwar fiction, in fact, turned out to be highly evocative of his earliest writings, focusing once again on the individual and sensationalized, rather lurid, versions of events—which is precisely the case in *East of Eden*.

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<sup>148</sup> Souder, *Mad at the World*, 320.

A truly bizarre work in terms of its themes and claims, *East of Eden* can only be properly understood in the context of Steinbeck's life and the hidden struggles of a mind contending with the ghosts of a problematic and traumatic past. The differences between the man who supposedly wrote *Grapes of Wrath* and the one who indeed wrote *East of Eden* are massive and shocking, explainable only by what transpired in the thirteen-year period between them. Whether due to changes in the mind of the author or other causes, *East of Eden* supports the argument that perhaps the author of *Grapes* is not the same as the author of *Eden*. Part of that is due, of course, to the fact that Carol Henning and Ed Ricketts made very large contributions to *Grapes*, both in terms of inspiration/ideas and the language/writing of the novel. Without Henning and Ricketts, the Steinbeck of the late 40s and early 50s struggled immensely trying to maintain the image of the great novelist, which he may not have been after all.

Writing *Eden* was, for Steinbeck, an ordeal, which he could only get through by fear of failure and the pain of knowing that *Grapes of Wrath* was the only reason for his fame and reputation as a great writer. He was well-aware of his own limitations and also knew, secretly, why *Grapes* was such a powerful and universally appealing work. A few years before he had begun working on the manuscript of *Eden*, Steinbeck confessed to his friend Toby Street, "the only thing I can really do is work and I might as well face it. I don't have any other gifts but I can work and if it doesn't amount to a damn thing it was still hard work."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Benson, *Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost*, 607.

These early sentiments, in combination with those expressed in his *Journal of a Novel* (composed alongside his manuscript for *East of Eden*), allow us to see the extent to which the pressure to produce another successful novel was overwhelming for Steinbeck. Benson observes that Steinbeck's letter to Toby,

...perhaps says as much by its tone and what it doesn't say, as by what it does. It does suggest in a quiet way the pressure that was accumulating year by year to "live up to the promise of *The Grapes of Wrath*," as the critics were expressing it, and produce another book of real substance. And he had given too much attention to the critics in his years of success to ignore the general drift of their opinions about him now. He felt more and more that something major must be done in order that he redeem himself, as if he somehow had not fulfilled his obligations. His "bits and pieces" had been a kind of temporizing to fill the need for work, but they had also been most recently a form of procrastination.

As he approached a new long work, he encountered artistic difficulties that provided additional pressures; he had lost contact with the only good setting he could properly use for a long novel; he was not very good at organizing a long work of fiction—his work had always been, in a sense, "bits and pieces"; and perhaps, most important, whether he was conscious of it or not, he had lost some of his confidence. He really did not have enough ego to carry him to true artistic greatness. Too many people had told him for too long that he was not very good. Overly sensitive and too modest, perhaps for his own good, he tended to believe

them, forcing him to withdraw to that position he defined for Toby: “The hell with it. I’m doing the best I can with what I’ve got.”<sup>150</sup>

*Journal of a Novel*, the compilation of the letters to Covici that preceded each *Eden*-writing session, became a sort of ritual for Steinbeck, or, as Robert DeMott refers to it, “a project of confessional ‘life writing...’”<sup>151</sup> Much of the analysis of *Eden* in this essay works in correlation with the text of the *Journal*, relying on the notion that the latter is a “revealing and dramatic (although often piecemeal and covert) inside narrative that historicizes ... different eras in his creative and personal life.”<sup>152</sup> Just before setting to work on his novel for the day, Steinbeck would write a few pages on the progress of his writing, how he was feeling, and would often note other events, distractions, or worries occurring at the time. “Steinbeck, an otherwise deeply conflicted, restless, moody, and often depressed man, was happiest when he was writing, even when he was assailing himself for his lack of ability.”<sup>153</sup> By the time he had begun work on *Eden*, Steinbeck was already very familiar with the practice of writing informal journals alongside his other work: “...at least three times in Steinbeck’s life—in 1938, 1946, and 1951—as he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Wayward Bus*, and *East of Eden*, respectively, Steinbeck’s habitual self-reflection and self-scrutiny manifested itself in

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<sup>150</sup> Benson, *True Adventures*, 607-608.

<sup>151</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 123.

<sup>152</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 126.

<sup>153</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 124.

sustained, full-length composition journals.”<sup>154</sup> Those dates are also roughly in concordance with Steinbeck’s marriage to Carol, Gwyn, and then Elaine, respectively.

However, DeMott, contradicts himself in “Private Narratives / Public Texts.” Initially, he asserts that, in the journals, Steinbeck “indulged personality, whereas his fiction created a public space where he shed personality.”<sup>155</sup> Later in the essay, however, he observes, much more correctly, that “whether he was aware of it or not, Steinbeck’s own personal and emotional and psychological states inevitably found their way into his characters, colored individual scenes and events, and even exerted pressure on the plot sequence...”<sup>156</sup> There should be no doubt that Steinbeck’s life and experiences indeed “inevitably,” shaped his works, although perhaps the author had wanted to prove otherwise.

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<sup>154</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 126.

<sup>155</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 125.

<sup>156</sup> DeMott, “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 125, 132.

## CHAPTER 4

### FRAGMENTS OF TIME AND MIND IN *EAST OF EDEN*

*East of Eden* was designed to be many things all in one. A new beginning, a way out, a box full of hidden secrets, a personal family history, a universal story of good and evil, and, if nothing else, an attempt for Steinbeck to prove himself, once again, as a literary star of the highest order. “And I want the book to be as perfect as possible but it should have some of the imperfections of its subject—namely mankind,” he writes in the journal he kept, accompanying the writing of the novel.<sup>157</sup> *Eden* is teeming with the same contradictions and troubling ironies that we find in Steinbeck’s life, which provides a substantial amount of the context needed to understand precisely what the novel represents. As previously mentioned, one of the greatest concerns is the way in which Steinbeck represents time. His generally inconsistent treatment of time is found most evidently within the short chapters, which are nearly entirely composed of tangential musings on the passing of time and history, yet are unrelated to the narrative itself. “I have concluded a difficult part which is to throw in history and make it sound like a conversation and to mingle with this some kind of understanding of the people involved, at least to pose the problem of these people.”<sup>158</sup>

As this chapter will argue, the fragmentation of time in *Eden* is a direct result of the fragmentation of his own mind during and after the thirteen-year period since the publication of *Grapes*. In *Journal*, Steinbeck laments his poor mental state and inability

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<sup>157</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 27.

<sup>158</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 27.

to focus—often citing his recurring bouts of depression and despondency. “Because of all the confusion of the last several years, I will have difficulty concentrating for a while ... I have been drinking too much, I think, and a few times in the last months I have had depressions.”<sup>159</sup> Throughout the journal, there are also several passages where Steinbeck seems to be in complete denial of the fact that he is no longer the same person that he used to be, or, thought he was. He oscillates between a recognition of the effects on him of the criticism of *Grapes* and a refusal to accept that such a thing could really have changed him. In the very first journal entry we read, “The last few years have been painful. I don’t know whether they have hurt permanently or not. Certainly they have changed me. I would have been stone if they had not.”<sup>160</sup> Then, at the end of the same entry he writes, “It is true that a man may change or be so warped that he becomes another man and has another book but I do not think that is so with me.”<sup>161</sup>

From the onset, the novel attempts to establish its credibility as an objective narrative taking place in specific dimensions of space and time. To that effect, the opening sentences of the first two paragraphs establish what sound like a set of coordinates, connecting the Salinas Valley to Steinbeck’s own personal history: “The Salinas Valley is in Northern California” and “I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers.” The image of the child naming flowers and grasses is disarming in its appeal to innocence and the implied authenticity of childhood recollections, made all the more powerful by the rich odors of “trees and seasons.” The

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<sup>159</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 5.

<sup>160</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 3.

<sup>161</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 5.

ensuing descriptions of specific mountain ranges, the Gabilans and the Santa Lucias, the streams that feed the Salinas River, “live oaks” shading “maidenhair,” “ferns and goldy-backs, ... harebells, tiny lanterns, cream white and almost sinful looking, and these were so rare and magical that a child, finding one, felt singled out and special all day long,” only cement our perception of being well grounded in a beautiful place we can recognize.

To even more solidly anchor the narrative in the deepest dimensions of time and place, and also displaying scientific objectivity, Steinbeck tells us about the geological history and prehistory of the valley:

The floor of the Salinas Valley, between the ranges and below the foothills, is level because this valley used to be the bottom of a hundred-mile inlet from the sea. The river mouth at Moss Landing was centuries ago the entrance to this long inland water. Once, fifty miles down the valley, my father bored a well. The drill came up first with topsoil and then with gravel and then with white sea sand full of shells and even pieces of whalebone. There were twenty feet of sand and then black earth again, and even a piece of redwood, that imperishable wood that does not rot. Before the inland sea the valley must have been a forest. And those things had happened right under our feet. And it seemed to me sometimes at night that I could feel both the sea and the redwood forest before it.<sup>162</sup>

Thus, backed by objective observation of the terrain, its plants and even its geology, its deep history and prehistory, Steinbeck persuades us we are reliably situated in the Salinas Valley, in California, some time during the opening years of the twentieth century.

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<sup>162</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 4.

The authority of the narrative is further reinforced by the fact that the Salinas Valley is presented to us as also having transcendental significance. We are in fact, the author suggests, not only in a clear geographical location at a specific historical time, but also in a very familiar and timeless realm where/when humans came into being in the first place, the time/place where it all began:

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.” (Genesis 2:8-10)

It is in this pristine paradise that God, after creating plants and animals, brought “the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (2:19). Steinbeck in this way accredits his narrative with temporal and historical meaning, scientific authority, and also eternal biblical validation, in the process also giving birth to himself as “Adam,” who is about to rename everything to his pleasure and to establish the fundamental moral meanings by which knowledge and life are to be guided, at least according to this particular Creator.

Naming things or retelling the past, on the other hand, carries a lot of responsibility and perhaps should not be left to a child or a freshly-born Adam. The magic of the “secret flowers,” discovered and baptized by the innocent Steinbeck-turned-child, is, in effect, rather frightening. The angelic flower boy who gently recollects his early years and then turns into the famous writer about to tell us everything we need to

know of human history, and beyond, turns out to have peculiar views of the past, and of himself. Thus, in Section 2 of the same Chapter 1, we are point-blank told:

First there were Indians, an inferior breed without energy, inventiveness, or culture, a people that lived on grubs and grasshoppers and shellfish, too lazy to hunt or fish. They ate what they could pick up and planted nothing. They pounded bitter acorns for flour. Even their warfare was a weary pantomime.<sup>163</sup>

This is followed by a quick sketch of greedy Spaniards looking for gold (perhaps a cup of gold?) and “then the Americans came ... They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. And farmholds spread over the land, first in the valleys and then up the foothill slopes ... Wherever a trickle of water came out of the ground a house sprang up and a family began to grow and multiply. Cuttings of red geraniums and rosebushes were planted in the dooryards ... fields of corn and barley and wheat squared out of the yellow mustard.” In the next paragraph, the Americans quickly name their towns and places and the scene is ready for the arrival of the Hamiltons: “my grandfather brought his wife and settled in the foothills to the east of King City.”<sup>164</sup>

The smoothness of this narrative is so extraordinary as to be downright scandalous. In two quick steps packed into the same chapter, Steinbeck takes his readers from the Salinas Valley of the early 1900s to its prehistory as a sea and a redwood forest, and then to the Garden of Eden, where universal truths reveal the deepest secrets of the human existence. From there, he propels the already dizzy reader through a whirlwind of

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<sup>163</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 6.

<sup>164</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 7.

American history, from pre-Columbian times to the nineteenth century, and then gently back down into (implicitly) a comfortably furnished living room in the twentieth century, where one of the most acclaimed American writers is in the process of telling the reader the God-honest truth about the history of his country, and every other country too, since his story is based on science and on timeless and universal truths. By the end of Chapter 1 then, Steinbeck's project is transparent: he is setting out to remake himself and American, if not universal, history, in an image palatable and even admirable to 1950s and later audiences of red-blooded Americans, fresh from victory in World War II, eager for ever more John Wayne films, and ready to conquer the world and the rest of the universe as well. *East of Eden*, in other words is a narrative designed to convince readers that John Steinbeck is not a communist, but a good-old-boy who knows how worthless the Indians were and how useless the land was in their hands, and who also knows the history of his country and his family like the back of his palm.

Oddly enough, Chapter 2 begins with the admission that author/narrator doesn't really know much about his own family: "I must depend on hearsay, on old photographs, on stories told, and on memories which are hazy and mixed with fable in trying to tell you about the Hamiltons" (2.1). Where knowledge of facts or of history are missing, heroic mythology will have to do. Thus, families like the Hamiltons, straight out of the "fought-over farmlets of Europe," reach California, looking for land, with not even bootstraps to pull themselves up by:

They landed with no money, no equipment, no tools, no credit, and particularly with no knowledge of the new country and no technique for using it. I don't know whether it was a divine stupidity or a great faith that let them do it. Surely such

venture is nearly gone from the world. And the families did survive and grow.

They had a tool or a weapon that is also nearly gone, or perhaps it is only dormant for a while. It is argued that because they believed thoroughly in a just, moral God they could put their faith there and let the smaller securities take care of themselves. But I think that because they trusted themselves and respected themselves as individuals, because they knew beyond doubt that they were valuable and potentially moral units—because of this they could give God their own courage and dignity and then receive it back.<sup>165</sup>

With the fables of individualistic heroics in place, the story can then proceed to tell a tale of surviving and thriving in the form of the twin narratives of the Hamiltons, headed by the inventive and poetic patriarch of the family, Sam Hamilton (Steinbeck's grandfather), and the Trask family of Connecticut, whose patriarch Cyrus got rich telling lies about his military prowess during the Civil War. With the money they inherit from their father, Adam and his brother Charles buy a farm in the Salinas Valley and get to be the neighbors of Sam and the Hamiltons. Already then, after three chapters, the tale has split into alter families initially positioned on opposite sides of the country, West and East. The mechanics of the story bring the East to the West, in the form of Charles and Adam moving to California and meeting and getting to live next to the Hamiltons. This will turn out to be also a temporal move, an attempt to merge broken fragments of past and present by means of the two symbolic families, themselves pieces of the author's divided

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<sup>165</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 12.

consciousness and aspects of his labors to stitch back together irreconcilable perceptions of himself, his past, and his present.

The very dislocation “east” of Eden is a typically postmodern device that flattens time into place and makes geographical and physical space into a substitute for time. It corresponds to the author’s self-imposed exile from his home (California) on the west coast. The physical spaces however are disguises for the present (New York) and a problematic past (California), whose history Steinbeck feels compelled to rewrite. It is also a form of fleeing from painful truths—he goes to New York to reinvent and prop himself up with the fragments of the past, and the fortune he got from the sales of *Grapes*. The descriptions of the geology of the Salinas Valley are themselves one of the first indications of the temporality hidden under the appearance of a geographical space. The contradictory treatment of time itself is of course an even more evident manifestation of the desire to rewrite history. The mention of time, and events in time, create the illusion that a history is being told, while in reality a history is in the process of being hidden by means of shifting places, different characters, different families, and also a duality of protagonists.

Dislocation and gaps are also visible in the structure of a book where, after 11 chapters culminating with Charles sleeping with his brother’s wife, the author feels compelled to end Part I and start all over again with a Part II that begins with a strange recap that takes back exactly to where we started in Part I: “You can see how this book has reached a great boundary that was called 1900.” Curiously, this great boundary is associated, in Steinbeck’s mind, with a desire he imputes to others to forget and remake the past: “Another hundred years were ground up and churned, and what had happened

was all muddled by the way folks wanted it to be ....”<sup>166</sup> At this point in the novel, Steinbeck seems to have felt he might not have sufficiently established his anti-communism at the start of Part I. Thus, he treats his readers, in the appropriately numbered Chapter 13 (where he sets the record straight on anything he might have mistakenly said in *Grapes*), to a full-blown tirade commenting on, among other matters, the virtues of individualism, the evils of collectivism, and the peculiar perception that industrial mass production and cooperation have polluted our minds with communist aberrations alien to the mind of the individual creative genius:

I don't know how it will be in the years to come. There are monstrous changes taking place in the world, forces shaping a future whose face we do not know. Some of these forces seem evil to us, perhaps not in themselves but because their tendency is to eliminate other things we hold good. It is true that two men can lift a bigger stone than one man. A group can build automobiles quicker and better than one man, and bread from a huge factory is cheaper and more uniform. When our food and clothing and housing all are born in the complication of mass production, mass method is bound to get into our thinking and to eliminate all other thinking. In our time mass or collective production has entered our economics, our politics, and even our religion, so that some nations have substituted the idea collective for the idea God. This in my time is the danger. There is great tension in the world, tension toward a breaking point, and men are unhappy and confused.

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<sup>166</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 129.

At such a time it seems natural and good to ask myself these questions.  
What do I believe in? What must I fight against?

Our species is the only creative species, and it has only one creative instrument, the individual mind and spirit of a man. Nothing was ever created by two men. There are no good collaborations, whether in music, in art, in poetry, in mathematics, in philosophy. Once the miracle of creation has taken place, the group can build and extend it, but the group never invents anything. The preciousness lies in the lonely mind of man.

And now the forces marshaled around the concept of the group have declared a war of extermination on the preciousness, the mind of man. By disparagement, by starvation, by repressions, forced direction, and the stunning hammerblows of conditioning, the free, roving mind is being pursued, roped, blunted, and dragged. It is a suicidal course our species seems to have taken.

And this I believe: that the free, explored mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about. I can understand why a system built on a pattern must try to destroy the free mind, for that is one thing which can by inspection destroy such a system. Surely I can understand this, and I hate it and will fight

against it to preserve the one thing that separates us from the uncreative beasts. If the glory can be killed, we are lost.<sup>167</sup>

With this rhapsody to the grandeur of the lone ranger, worthy of the pulp fiction of an Ayn Rand, Steinbeck leaves us absolutely reassured that he never was a communist and that all the evils of the modern world are due to the herd mentality of people who want to work together and the fact that the powers of mechanical reproduction of industrial capitalism are the cause of our misguided communism. Fiat lux!

The profound illogic of these notions could seem sufficient reason to put the book down without going any further, were it not for the fact that there is after all a logic governing the symbolism which is equally mind-boggling but that actually helps clarify the purposes of the author. It can perhaps be agreed that John Steinbeck the narrator is an aspect of the author's personality. This narrator, the Steinbeck descended from the plucky Hamiltons is, however, frozen in eternal childhood, as the son of the characters, Olive and Ernest Steinbeck. The adult John Steinbeck who first lived in California and then moved to New York after the debacle of *Grapes* is, on the other hand, represented by Adam Trask. Adam Trask gets to return to California to "meet" the Hamiltons, i.e. to meet himself in his innocent form as a child, long before the fall from grace and loss of Eden caused by the publication of *Grapes*.

The fragmentations of families and characters, Hamiltons vs. Trasks, Adam vs. Charles, Aron vs. Caleb can be interpreted as a proliferation of personae, multiple personality splits by which Steinbeck avoids facing the past, always diverging into

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<sup>167</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 131-132.

alternative identities that allow him to choose, exercising his creative *timshel*, who he wants to be, at any given point, in the story he would like to tell about himself. As he admits in *Journal of a Novel*, “I sometimes wonder if I must not be all the people I am writing about. And good lord there are so many I must be hundreds.”<sup>168</sup> *East of Eden* in that sense is not so much a novel as a journal of episodes of psychological dissociation symptomatic of the grave trauma that Steinbeck suffered as a consequence of feeling rejected by the public that disapproved of *Grapes of Wrath*. This great divide developed in the thirteen-year period between the publications of the two novels. The Steinbeck before *Grapes* and the Steinbeck after *Grapes* do not even know each other. That is why it is necessary for Adam Trask to move to California and try to befriend the Hamiltons, in the hope of finding and meeting his own lost self. The Steinbeck of *East of Eden*, then, is trying to rejoin the Steinbeck who wrote *Cup of Gold*, the plucky All-American youngster trying to make his mark, get the girl, and make a buck in the process. The Steinbeck who wrote *Grapes of Wrath*, however, died and was buried with the body of Ed Ricketts, back in 1948.

*East of Eden* is a novel of guilt, Cain-guilt, the most likely reason being Steinbeck’s sense that he betrayed and killed his “brother,” Ed Ricketts. Betrayal took the form of taking credit for Ricketts’s ideas and also his writing, both in *Grapes of Wrath* and in relation to the authorially problematic *Sea of Cortez* works. The socially-conscious novels of the 1930s are hard to consider Steinbeck’s works. No doubt involving the mechanical involvement of Steinbeck in literal writing, the novel appears to be mostly the

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<sup>168</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 92.

product of the intellectual influence of Ed Ricketts and the writing prowess of Carol Henning. Ricketts and Henning should perhaps be credited with being the true authors of *Grapes of Wrath*. Did Steinbeck essentially lend his name to their work, taking all the credit and the money, and quickly getting rid of both Carol and Ricketts after the publication of *Grapes*? Perhaps. We don't know for a fact.

As the death threats and hate against the author of the *Grapes of Wrath* were all-too-real, it can also be asked whether, after all, the author of the *Grapes of Wrath* was actually assassinated. Regardless, that author died, literally and/or figuratively, in the 1940s. The timing of the death of Ricketts, in the midst of the anti-communist hysteria of the late 1940s, McCarthyism, and the investigations of the HUAC is, to say the least, a bit troubling. Also troubling is the fact that Steinbeck never had to testify before the HUAC and slipped through the anti-communist noose seemingly easily, very strangely so for someone so publicly known for his leftist ideas, and also his work for the film industry. Such luck can be explained by the fact that Steinbeck had carefully and assiduously cultivated his connections with the military and the intelligence agencies and had also actively participated in the production of propaganda and the spying of the OSS and CIA, which was notoriously aimed at suppressing communism, much more so than suppressing Nazism, both before and during the Cold War.

But John Steinbeck did not kill Ed Ricketts, not literally anyway. Any intelligence disclosure regarding the role of Ricketts in the writing of *Grapes of Wrath*, however, especially considering that Ricketts never moved out of California, as Steinbeck did when he feared for his safety, could have easily resulted, particularly at the height of the Red Scare, in lethal consequences for the unfortunate Ricketts. Was Ricketts privately

ratted out by a bad friend to anti-communist agents eager for prey? Elia Kazan's betrayal of his colleagues to the HUAC is an interesting example of the sort of treachery taking place at the time. The circumstances of Ed Ricketts's death are suspicious, but circumstances are just that, circumstances. As some argue, being run over by a train may not have been all that unusual in the 1940s. We all have at least one not-so-distant relative who was crushed to death by a train, don't we? Or do we?

Regardless of the realities behind the writing of *Grapes*, the *Sea of Cortez* books, and the death of Ricketts, Steinbeck was feeling intense guilt over the death of someone whom he felt was his "brother," which is the likely reason he imposed the Cain-and-Abel narrative, as a unifying thematic umbrella, over the strangely fragmented narrative of *East of Eden* and its pairs of antagonistic brothers. If *East of Eden* is an attempt at coming to terms with guilt, or confessing a past misdeed, it is entirely unsuccessful at doing so. *Timshel*, ultimately, is not the same as doing the right thing, or telling the truth. Choosing one's own story or one's own personality may seem consistent with a postmodern style of self-fashioning, but it is hardly a moral manner of thinking or acting. The complete formula should be: we choose, and then we have to live with the consequences of our choices. We don't get to stand forever at the crossroads of choice, where the paths diverge infinitely and where we can stay forever young, as children playing with secret flowers that never wilt and whose names we can change at will.

Through the allegory of Cain and Abel, Steinbeck is attempting to exorcise his own faults with regards to his behavior. He wanted to be a good writer, to be loved by everyone, and perhaps to truly believe what Ed Ricketts believed, until actually believing those things resulted in adversarial criticism that led him to regret having espoused those

ideas in the *Grapes of Wrath*. After *Grapes*, many loved Steinbeck but many hated him. That was not acceptable for him. So he wrote *Eden*, to make his enemies love him, by flattering their ideologies of individualism and their mythology of luck and pluck. He also wrote the book for himself, to gain control over the narrative of his life and reality. In *Eden*, he makes every effort to acknowledge but also bury his hidden guilt, forgiving himself as God forgives Cain by marking him for protection against being murdered by others (Steinbeck's key preoccupation), and sending him into exile, to the east of Eden. Not a bad outcome for a guy who may have done some pretty bad things.

The corresponding problem in Steinbeck's personal life is that of his relationship with Ricketts, the brother for whose death Steinbeck appears to have felt responsible. Steinbeck left California because he feared for his life. Ricketts stayed and could have been a victim of the same shadowy forces Steinbeck feared. The death of Ed Ricketts (and the strange circumstances surrounding it) may be the underlying source of his profound self-reproach. That the person whose ideas and life inspired much of the novel, which resulted in immense praise and backlash (as well as derailing an author's career for more than a decade), would be run over by a train, *should* seem suspicious, at least in the sense that all accidents require investigation and that other circumstances may not be irrelevant. Various biographies on Steinbeck note that Steinbeck was unable to see Ricketts in the hospital before he died three days later; but none of them, and no records in the papers from that year either, detail the exact circumstances of his death. However, even apart from his friend's death, there is no doubt that Steinbeck had been aware of just how much he had taken from him—all the credit, all the fame, and all the fortune. In a

sense, the dream of the pirate, Henry Morgan, to get himself a cup of gold, may not have remained entirely unrealized.

Although of course no conclusive answers can be given, the questions can certainly be raised: Did John Steinbeck feel responsible for the death of Ed Ricketts? Did he do anything that could have led to that death (which *may* not have been an accident), such as betraying him to the CIA, the FBI, the HUAC, or more sinister agents? Did John Steinbeck take the credit for a novel that in fact was the result of the ideas of Ed Ricketts and the writing of Carol Henning?

In *East of Eden*, the author is trying to rewrite his personal history and cleanse himself of the guilt and shame that haunted him like angry ghosts. This Cain-complex is seen in the strange attempt to make the Cain-Abel story into a universal archetype of all narrative. The novel also favors and looks with sympathy at the Cain-like characters like Charles and Caleb, showing them as stronger and capable of brutal and self-serving actions (in the style of Elia Kazan perhaps), but also the ones destined to survive, unlike weaker types like Adam and Aron. Caleb and Aron might not be Adam's sons but Charles's, and Caleb is going to marry Abra, hence continuing the Cain line, the Abel line of victims going extinct. As Samuel puts it, "Cain lived and had children, and Abel lives only in the story. We are Cain's children." Samuel also states, "God did not condemn Cain at all."<sup>169</sup>

In addition to hinting at the brother-killing, the story may also be a confession of having stolen his brother's rightful inheritance. Evidence of that fact can be gleaned from

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<sup>169</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 269.

the mysterious safe deposit boxes, numbered 27 and 29, left behind by Cathy after her suicide. The numbers may be a rather transparent biblical reference. Genesis 27:27-29 in fact tells of Jacob stealing the blessing and inheritance of his brother Esau by disguising himself as Esau and receiving Isaac's blessing:

So he [Jacob] went to him [Isaac] and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said,

“Ah, the smell of my son

is like the smell of a field

that the Lord has blessed.

May God give you heaven's dew

and earth's richness—

an abundance of grain and new wine.

May nations serve you

and peoples bow down to you.

Be lord over your brothers,

and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.

May those who curse you be cursed

and those who bless you be blessed.” (Genesis 27:27-29)

The biblical narrative does not condemn Jacob (Israel) for cheating his brother Esau of his inheritance. Similarly, Steinbeck does not blame himself for taking the credit for the writing of *Grapes of Wrath*. We do what we have to do to survive, and to get rid of rivals and enrich ourselves as best we can.

The novel's recurring theme of *timshel* ("thou mayest") is Steinbeck's response to the problem of guilt and shame in connection to both responsibility for the death of a brother and for the stealing of a brother's inheritance. As he speaks the profound word, *timshel*, Adam gives his inheritance of wisdom to Cal, just before Adam dies, simultaneously absolving Cal of responsibility in Aron's death and also absolving himself of his own mysterious connection to the problem of killing a brother. With a single word, Adam reminds Cal that the only important thing in life is that every person has the ability to choose. *Timshel* is offered as a value in and of itself, as if it did not actually matter what one chooses and what the consequences of one's choices might be. This is especially comforting to Steinbeck, who defends the individual freedom of choice, repeatedly, as a way of coping with the consequences of choice. Where there is no time, however, there are no consequences and one can imagine oneself forever standing at the crossroads of choice. To prevent unpleasant consequences then, one has to eliminate the categories of time and history.

Like other postmodern works, *East of Eden* is driven by hostility to the very concept of time and a desire to collapse all time into an eternal present constructed out of multiple fragments and layers of time compressed into the solidity of an imaginary space, somewhere east of Eden. The obliteration of time is in fact the driving force of Steinbeck's writing, as he points out in *Journal of a Novel*:

I feel that sometimes when I am writing I am very near to a kind of unconsciousness. Then time does change its manner and minutes disappear into the cloud of time which is one thing, having only one duration. I have thought that if we could put off our duration-preoccupied minds, it might that time has no

duration at all. Then all history and all pre-history might indeed be one durationless flash like an exploding star, eternal and without duration.<sup>170</sup>

Having dropped the atomic bomb on the concept of time, Steinbeck is able to remake the world and himself to his liking. His writing then is a killing of time, in multiple senses of the expression, but primarily as a destruction of what actually happened into a fantasy identical with nothingness, a transformation of historical and personal experience into a self-annihilating textuality. Steinbeck writes because he wants to forget what actually occurred in time and because he wants to make his writing a substitute for painful memories:

Time interval is a strange and contradictory matter in the mind. It would be reasonable to suppose that a routine time or an eventless time would seem interminable. It should be so, but it is not. It is the dull eventless times that have no duration whatever. A time splashed with interest, wounded with tragedy, crevassed with joy—that's the time that seems long in the memory. And this is right when you think about it. Eventlessness has no posts to drape duration on. From nothing to nothing is no time at all.<sup>171</sup>

The antagonism toward time is reminiscent of, or at least equivalent to, a death wish, which he alternatively acknowledges and denies throughout the writing of the novel: "My will toward death was very great when I was growing up ... It is not so now. I look forward to Mondays. The death wish is not so strong as it used to be and maybe some

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<sup>170</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 11.

<sup>171</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 55.

time it will disappear entirely. Or maybe this is too much to hope for”; “I have no will to die but I can remember no time from earliest childhood until this morning when I would not have preferred never to have existed.”

In these respects, the character in the novel most closely associated with the writer is Cathy, the vicious wife of Adam Trask, who takes pleasure in the suffering of others. After burning down her family home, which killed both of her parents, and fleeing her hometown, Cathy is free of everything that was unpleasant to her and leaves the locals to deal with the tragedy. Steinbeck again frames the situation around the passing of time:

In all such local tragedies time works like a damp brush on watercolor. The sharp edges blur, the ache goes out of it, the colors melt together, and from the many separated lines a solid gray emerges. Within a month it was not so necessary to hang someone, and within two months nearly everybody discovered that there wasn't any real evidence against anyone.<sup>172</sup>

Cathy herself destroys others but also seeks to extinguish herself, frequently changing her identity, also her physical appearance, as she flees from one traumatic situation to the next—a tendency analogous to Steinbeck's own desire for a clean slate, allowing him to leave behind unpleasant periods of his life.<sup>173</sup> In this way, Cathy repeatedly changes her name, going from Cathy Ames to Catherine Amesbury to Kate Albey, becoming more

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<sup>172</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 89.

<sup>173</sup> Cathy's character can also be read as an expression of Steinbeck's resentment and anger toward his second wife, Gwyn Conger, the mother of his two boys, Tom and John, just as Cathy is the mother of Adam's sons, Caleb and Aron. He even characterizes Cathy as having a physical appearance almost exactly like that of Gwyn.

monstrous with each new identity. Ever since she was a child, she would daydream about entering the world of *Alice in Wonderland* and becoming so small that she would disappear into somewhere so small she could never be found, and her friend Alice would always keep her company. “I can get to be *so* little you can’t even see me ... Nobody can find me.”<sup>174</sup> In the brothel that she inherits, after murdering the previous owner, Cathy (Kate at that time) has a windowless “gray room,” in which she hides in darkness when she does not want to be bothered. In her last days before committing suicide in her gray room, she thinks to herself, “and always there was Alice to play with, Alice to love her and trust her. Alice was her best friend, always waiting to welcome her to tinyness.”<sup>175</sup> Throughout her life, the only thing she wanted was enough money to get whatever she wanted, and in the end she knew her friend Alice would be waiting for her—which is what mattered most. Whatever the world had to offer her was inferior to “tinyness.” As Cathy dies in her shadowy “gray room,”

... [h]er eyes closed and a dizzy nausea shook her. She opened her eyes and stared about in terror. The gray room darkened and the cone of light flowed and rippled like water. And then her eyes closed again and her fingers curled as though they held small breasts. And her heart beat solemnly and breathing slowed as she grew smaller and smaller and then disappeared—as if she had never been.<sup>176</sup>

Steinbeck himself acknowledges that Cathy is a representation of that aspect of himself that is self-serving, dishonest, unfeeling, cruel, perverse, and wanting only to disappear

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<sup>174</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 82.

<sup>175</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 552.

<sup>176</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 554.

into nothingness: “I am a monster like Cathy. And it is strange that my trade is one which usually is chosen by people who have a will both for life and for immortality. That is a paradox I know”; “Cathy was a liar. ... But a lie is a device for profit or escape. I suppose if that definition is strictly held to, then a writer of stories is a liar—if he is financially fortunate.”<sup>177</sup>

Lies, unreason, selfishness, cruelty and forgetfulness are the essence and the subject matter of *East of Eden*. Like Steinbeck himself, Adam Trask is characterized by his obliviousness of time, which plays out in the many questionable decisions he makes, where his lack of foresight is apparent, as in his ill-advised investment in the business of shipping frozen produce to the East Coast. Adam’s stint in the army and his wanderings around the US and abroad are very evident allusions to Steinbeck’s own involvement in World War II and his world travels during and after the war. Steinbeck felt he had finally come into himself, and was ready to write *East of Eden*, after the war and his foreign travels. In a similar way, as Steinbeck stated during the writing of the novel, “when Adam comes back from the army, he will be a formed man and it will be the thing I have written the whole thing for.”<sup>178</sup>

Adam is only one of the many characters mirroring the author’s own “personal and emotional and psychological states,” as DeMott states.<sup>179</sup> Throughout the 13-year period between 1939 and 1952, Steinbeck was so distressed and unable to endure his cognitive dissonance that his own mind became fragmented into different versions of

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<sup>177</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 84, 89. *East of Eden*, 74.

<sup>178</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 23.

<sup>179</sup> “Private Narratives / Public Texts,” 132.

himself in conflict with each other. Characters like Cyrus Trask, the professional liar, as well as others who come later in the novel, serve as mouthpieces for Steinbeck to justify his resistance to resolving his own inconsistencies. Thus, before going into the army, Adam is provided with wisdom by Cyrus, who has made up his mind that Adam has to enlist, because he loves him more than he loves Charles. Cyrus helps Adam overcome any misgivings about the problem of having to kill people in war, which would appear to be forbidden by the Bible's commandments and also by the Cain story. Cyrus, however, is a master of dissembling and has no problem preparing Adam to do evil and not worry about it:

Cyrus took Adam to walk with him one late afternoon, and the black conclusions of all his study and his thinking came out and flowed with a kind of thick terror over his son. He said, "I'll have you know that a soldier is the most holy of all humans because he is the most tested—most tested of all. I'll try to tell you. Look now—in all of history men have been taught that killing of men is an evil thing not to be countenanced. Any man who kills must be destroyed because this is a great sin, maybe the worst sin we know. And then we take a soldier and put murder in his hands and we say to him, 'Use it well, use it wisely.' We put no checks on him. Go out and kill as many of a certain kind or classification of your brothers as you can. And we will reward you for it because it is a violation of your early training."<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 24.

Though Cyrus is mouthing absurdities, Steinbeck is taking them quite seriously, if for no other reason than the fact that Cyrus is himself a storyteller, and apparently a good one, judging by his success serving the military. Steinbeck's own involvement in the war effort, as a journalist rather than a combatant, is in fact quite similar to the role of Cyrus, who was not engaged in actual combat but who came back with amazing stories about war and military strategies, the lies by which he made his fortune. It is as if Steinbeck is speaking with the same shameless conviction as Cyrus, saying to the reader, "I may not know what I'm talking about, but believe me, it's the truth." Adam, unable to fully comprehend the reasoning, asks Cyrus why soldiers must do these things:

Cyrus was deeply moved and he spoke as he had never spoken before. "I don't know," he said. "I've studied and maybe learned how things are, but I'm not even close to understanding why they are. And you must not expect to find that people understand what they do. So many things are done instinctively..."<sup>181</sup>

Cyrus and Steinbeck fully converge on the point: nobody knows, things are what they are, and they cannot be explained. The response is highly postmodern in its dismissal of objective truth and reason. The only truth for figures like Cyrus and John Steinbeck are the stories they choose to tell, though, if pressed, they both admit they don't know a damn thing. It's all in the attitude, the shamelessness, and the performance. All done on the spot, improvised and rigged up as needed. The only enemy of such perspectives of course is historical evidence, but that is something both Cyrus and Steinbeck bypass in the much more important endeavor of lying to enrich themselves. History doesn't exist.

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<sup>181</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 25.

Time is not real. There is no cause and effect, as there was in *Grapes*, only a place in the present where everything has already happened, for no reason anyone can explain. And whatever I don't know, Cyrus suggests, likely nobody knows. It's all about whatever we choose to believe, all *timshel*, all fabricated story and subjective perspective, all driven by self-interest. Finding out the causes of things would be terribly inconvenient to those who profit from their lies.

Cyrus further reassures Adam that his doubts will soon disappear and that the army will teach him to think and act exactly as everybody does:

“After a while,” Cyrus said, “you’ll think no thought the others do not think. You’ll know no word the others can’t say. And you’ll do things because the others do them. You’ll feel the danger in any difference whatever—a danger to the whole crowd of like-thinking, like-acting men.”

“What if I don’t?” Adam demanded.

“Yes,” said Cyrus, “sometimes that happens. Once in a while there is a man who won’t do what is demanded of him, and do you know what happens? The whole machine devotes itself coldly to the destruction of his difference. They’ll beat your spirit and your nerves, your body and your mind, with iron rods until the dangerous difference goes out of you ... It’s better to fall in with them. They only do it to protect themselves. A thing so triumphantly illogical, so beautifully senseless as an army can’t allow a question to weaken it ... Some men there are who go down the dismal wrack of soldiering, surrender themselves, and become faceless ... But there are others who go down, submerge in the common

slough, and then rise more themselves than they were, because—because they have lost a littleness of vanity and have gained all the gold of the company and the regiment. If you can go down so low, you will be able to rise higher than you can conceive, and you will know a holy joy, a companionship almost like that of a heavenly company of angels. Then you will know the quality of men even if they are inarticulate. But until you have gone way down you can never know this.”<sup>182</sup>

The attentive reader understands that Cyrus’s praise of the military’s (and the government’s) strict repression of soldiers’ individualities stands in complete contradiction with Steinbeck’s own discourse on the virtues of individualism and the dangers of the herd mentality. Although indeed incompatible, such perceptions have to be accepted without question and without logic simply because there is glory in it, as well as “all the gold.”

Steinbeck is reflected in Adam and Cyrus, but also in Charles, Adam’s younger half-brother. Charles is much tougher than Adam and tries to kill him and sleeps with his wife, Cathy. Charles is likely the father of Adam’s sons, Caleb and Aron, as Cathy herself suggests to Adam. Charles then is one of the Cain characters in the novel who do what they do because it is advantageous to them. Although Charles fails to kill Adam, he “kills” him in a figurative way, by fathering his children and robbing him of progeny. For as long as he lives, Charles has unfinished business with Adam, which is hinted at in a letter of Charles that Adam keeps “because it seemed to have a covered meaning he could

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<sup>182</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 25-26.

not get at.”<sup>183</sup> While writing these passages of the novel, Steinbeck wrote to Covici, alerting him to the special significance of the letter:

The letter written by Charles to Adam is a very tricky one and it has in it, concealed but certainly there, a number of keys. I recommend that you read it very carefully—very carefully because if you miss this, you will miss a great deal of this book and maybe will not pick it up until much later. I don’t know why I tell you this though, for I am sure you will read it all with great care, as great care as I use in writing it. Sometimes maybe too much care. But I guess that is impossible. And I suppose the subtleties are sooner or later picked out but never by critics.<sup>184</sup>

In the letter, Charles writes, “I had to take out after you ... Seems like to me there’s something not finished ... Something didn’t get done. I shouldn’t be here ... There is something wrong, like it didn’t get finished, like it happened too soon and left something out. It’s me should be where you are and you here.”<sup>185</sup> As he is living in the farm, while Adam is in the army, Charles is not just Cain but also Jacob, who takes his elder brother’s inheritance. Charles, in those senses, can be seen as yet another alter ego of Steinbeck, as victimizer of Ricketts and both missing and hating him. The movement of the empty rocking chair that Charles reports to Adam suggests the ghostly entity haunting Steinbeck, the lost friend and the hidden guilt of a grave misdeed against a brother. That Adam is also Steinbeck creates an incredibly tangled up web of love and hate that is as

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<sup>183</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 36.

<sup>184</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 28.

<sup>185</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 37.

much self-directed as it is aimed at others. The letter in a way is written by the self to the self, or, rather, by a mute/unconscious aspect of the self to a more conscious/externalized manifestation of that self. Indeed, “Charles, who could not talk, wrote with fullness. He set down his loneliness and his perplexities, and he put on paper many things he did not know about himself.”<sup>186</sup> Charles however also has the potential to be a symbol of Ricketts in terms of the friendship between Ricketts and Steinbeck’s wife, Carol. Although that is not substantiated by the biographical record, a possible affair between Ricketts and Carol could have had something to do with the disintegration of both the marriage and the friendship. Charles and Adam then allow Steinbeck a fluid movement between the opposite poles represented by those two characters, which can at times be Steinbeck and Ricketts or Ricketts and Steinbeck or Steinbeck and Steinbeck. And all three at once, which is consistent with Steinbeck’s writing process and with the apparently quite serious and disturbing fragmentation of his psyche into multiple identities. As he admits to Pascal Covici in *Journal of a Novel*:

Sometime I will tell you about this in detail if you are interested. I split myself into three people. I know what they look like. One speculates and one criticises and the third tries to correlate. It usually turns out to be a fight but out of it comes the whole week’s work. And it is carried on in my mind in dialogue. It’s an odd experience. Under certain circumstances it might be one of those schizophrenic symptoms...<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 36.

<sup>187</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 106; also 37, 104, 139.

The exchangeable identities Adam-Steinbeck, Charles-Steinbeck, Charles-Ricketts, Adam-Ricketts are a travesty that allows Steinbeck to dilute and spread out the responsibilities to the point where we don't know at all who is who and who is responsible for what. Ultimately, the sympathy of the author seems to be with the Cain-like characters (Charles and Caleb) who are portrayed as stronger and more practical, doing what they have to do, in spite of the harm they do to their brothers. The Cain and Abel allegory is carried on through Adam's sons Caleb and Aron—where Cal is indeed responsible for the death of Aron; but he is excused because, as Adam's last word to his son suggests, Aron made his own choices and Caleb does not have to live with the guilt.<sup>188</sup> As Adam plays the role of judge at the end, he absolves Caleb (Steinbeck again, forgiving himself) for the death of his brother Aron (Ricketts). The novel comes across then as a constant puzzle of identity, a shell game played by the author by putting on different masks at every turn and challenging both the reader, and himself, to figure out where the real Steinbeck might be hidden.

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<sup>188</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 602.

## CONCLUSION

*East of Eden* is a ledger of Steinbeck's own psychological disintegration and descent into a denial of reality, in the form of a rejection of history and the passage of time, motivated by the trauma he experienced due to the criticism and controversy that followed the publication of *Grapes of Wrath*. At the broadest level, this is evident in the "strangely unblended" family stories that constitute the backbone of the story, parallel lines that can never converge and that, like the tracks of a train, stretch out west to east and east to west, ultimately getting nowhere. In addition to the fragmentation of families, characters and corresponding personalities themselves are fractured, sometimes into pairs (Charles-Adam, Caleb-Aron, Cain-Abel, Jacob-Esau, Steinbeck-Ricketts), triads (Cathy-Catherine-Kate and Steinbeck-Adam-Charles, Steinbeck-Carol-Ricketts), and even foursomes (Steinbeck-Adam-Charles-Cyrus). As Steinbeck admits, his characters are aspects of his psyche, his own identities are legion, and "good lord there are so many I must be hundreds."

The underlying logic of the personality splits appears to be a narrative strategy that allows for a continuous choice of masks and roles that prevent the experience of pain or remorse over wrongful actions and choices. In the timeless space of *timshel*, there is choice but no actual choice is necessary, only a recognition that the self can be anyone, or no one, and do anything, or nothing at all. Cathy's "gray room" might as well be thought of as the Timshel Chamber, a space of moral twilight where nothing is good or evil because no choice is made, other than closing one's eyes and falling into unconsciousness, especially after having done something awful. The multiple characters

and their choices and actions help the author indirectly confess/express guilt, but also evade and displace responsibility onto myriad imaginary selves.

The novel and the journal offer then compelling evidence of the author's dissociation of personality and loss of grasp of the dimension of time in his perception of reality. Steinbeck was clearly a man who had collapsed, psychologically, morally and spiritually. As he writes in *Journal*, his mind was out of control and decidedly dangerous:

The human mind I believe is nothing but a muscle. Sometimes it has tone and sometimes not. And mine is not in very good tone right now. It is jumbled and slow and like a bad child. It refuses to obey me. I tell it to do something and it won't. In a short time now I will be angry with it and then it had better watch out. I am a hard master of the mind. I don't know. I don't know. Things operate so strangely. The fact of the matter is that I have several things on my mind at once and that poor instrument cannot take the overload.

Sometimes I wonder about things which are close to the unthinkable.<sup>189</sup>

Stylistically, the novel is a typically postmodern fantasy that flattens time into space and renders what are temporal processes into pseudo-geographies obscuring matters of problematic choices and responsibilities, causes and effects. By reverting to the postmodern aesthetic of his literary childhood, Steinbeck universalizes the principles of individualism, self-interest and personal choice as the only moral guide of any significance. That however is not morality but a mechanism of self-exculpation and unflinching self-justification. By crafting a postmodern re-telling of Genesis, Steinbeck is

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<sup>189</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 56.

really adapting the most basic story of original sin, guilt, and murder, into a pseudo-historical novel that can account for the inconsistencies within himself. *Eden* is strewn with efforts to both leave history behind him as well as justify the making of any problematic decisions. But if indeed the story of Cain and Abel is reducible to *timshel*, it is then a story that asserts brothers can continue to kill and rob their brothers because that is a legitimate choice within the *timshel* archetype of conduct set for humanity from the beginning of time. Victimizing their brothers apparently worked well for Cain, Cyrus, Charles, Caleb, and others, why shouldn't it work well for everyone else? Apparently the answer is: You choose.

*East of Eden* is not just a ledger, or scroll, telling of a man's descent into a psychological inferno, but is also a container, a box, or, rather, an ark, to hold that ledger. In the dedication of the novel to his friend and publisher, Pascal Covici, Steinbeck wrote:

Dear Pat,

You came upon me carving some kind of little figure out of wood and you said,  
“Why don't you make something for me?”

I asked you what you wanted, and you said, “A box.”

“What for?”

“To put things in.”

“What things?”

“Whatever you have,” you said.

Well, here's your box. Nearly everything I have is in it, and it is not full. Pain and excitement are in it, and feeling good or bad and evil thoughts and good thoughts—the pleasure of design and some despair and the indescribable joy of creation.

And on top of these are all the gratitude and love I have for you.

And still the box is not full.

JOHN

On July 30, 1951, as he was nearing completion of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck wrote to Covici, "I'm glad for you to see the carving of the box to hold this manuscript."<sup>190</sup> The image of the box is evoked multiple times in the novel in the form of the carved ebony box, with a dragon climbing toward heaven, that Lee gives to Abra;<sup>191</sup> the box for the dead rabbit that Aron gives to Abra so she can give it a funeral;<sup>192</sup> the metaphorical "cold concealed box" where Adam "stored forbidden thoughts";<sup>193</sup> the oak "box with a lock" where Cathy (as Catherine) kept her money while she worked for the whoremaster, Mr. Edwards;<sup>194</sup> the mahogany box where Faye keeps the will giving her brothel to Cathy (as Kate Albey);<sup>195</sup> and the two safe deposit boxes with "keys, numbers 27 and 29" where

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<sup>190</sup> Steinbeck, *Journal of a Novel*, 137.

<sup>191</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 584.

<sup>192</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 346.

<sup>193</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 311.

<sup>194</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 122.

<sup>195</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 233.

Cathy (as Kate) kept her fortune, which was intended for Aron who died in the war before he could inherit.<sup>196</sup>

Aron himself is a box. The word “Aron” (with one “a,” rather than Aaron) means “box” in Hebrew and is used in the Bible in the sense of “ark, coffin, chest, box.” Most of the time, the word *aron* in the Bible means the ark of the covenant, suggesting a connection to the Ten Commandments (ironically the prohibitions against killing and stealing which are violated by Cain and Jacob) or the promise of God not to destroy humanity in spite of its sins, a motif that Steinbeck appears to invoke in his own favor—“it was upon this ark that the highest of Israel’s sacraments, the blood of atonement, was presented and received.”<sup>197</sup> Aron/box can be read as the container where Steinbeck is burying his deepest secrets, perhaps his own violations of the commandments, which is how he describes the contents of *Eden* to Covici.

Ultimately, the novel is, as Steinbeck admits in the journal, a hiding place, a box containing very dark secrets and guilty feelings that Steinbeck is trying to unburden himself of, but which he is not courageous enough to bring into the open. Hence, he must build a box, like the one he actually crafted for Covici and that he describes in the novel’s opening dedication. Aron in that sense is both the coffin and the body inside that coffin, the brother (Abel, Aron) who died as a consequence of the actions of his own brother (Cain, Caleb). Steinbeck cannot deal with the consequences of such misdeeds and can only try to excuse them by claiming *timshel* privilege. He chose, and that is all he wants

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<sup>196</sup> Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 553.

<sup>197</sup> Strong, *Concordance of the Bible*, 27. *Hebrew and Aramaic Dictionary*, Entry #727.

to say. Ultimately, the boxes in all cases have tragic and death-related meanings which make clear the box for the manuscript is also meant to have such associations. The box that Steinbeck carves along with the writing of his novel is a sort of symbolic casket, his own coffin, to hold the secrets of his life, which he entrusts to Covici, and implicitly intended to be buried in the Salinas Valley.

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