

review and comment



JOURNEY TO NOWHERE

**John Steinbeck drives a broken-down vehicle
off the main highway of American life.**

By MILTON BLAU

*Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Johnny's so long at the fair. . . .*

*He promised to bring me a bunch of
blue ribbons
To tie up my bonnie brown hair.
(Nursery Song.)*

EIGHT years is a long time to wait for a bus which not only goes down the wrong road but gets stuck there. And in spite of the arbitrary symbolism which John Steinbeck pastes on the windshield the journey is uncomfortable, for the road to San Juan de la Cruz leads to no city of men but to the sticky bog of William Saroyan's amorphous love and to Henry Miller's marsh of perverse reality.*

On all counts, *The Wayward Bus*, in story, form, style and character development, is a simple mechanism. The novel embraces a handful of people who are delayed enroute to San Juan de la Cruz from Rebel Corners. They are stuck overnight at the roadside establishment of Juan Chicoy which operates as an eatery, bus terminal and repair garage. Before the sun rises on the momentous day which consumes the time area of the story, Chicoy has repaired the bus which had broken down. We are introduced to the characters at breakfast with their various early morning complaints. When the Greyhound bus pulls into Rebel Corners to drop one passenger, Camille Oaks, whose sexiness shines out like a neon sign, *The Wayward Bus* is ready

* THE WAYWARD BUS, by John Steinbeck. Viking. \$2.75.

to roll. The storm has started, the heavens are flashing, the river is rising. The understructures of the bridges are threatening to shove off downstream. This is the moment of supreme crisis: shall Juan Chicoy and his passengers risk crossing the bridge? They decide (by vote) that they would rather risk driving up the abandoned road which once was used by stagecoaches. They do this. The old bus is deliberately maneuvered off the road by Juan, who has plans of starting life all over again by deserting his passengers and his wife Alice, who has remained behind at the eatery preparing to get stinko. Juan plans to return to Mexico. He gets as far as an old barn, where he takes a nap and is awakened by a passionate damsel (Mildred Pritchard, one of his passengers). Chicoy changes his mind for some obscure reason which has been lost in the churned hay. He returns to old *Wayward*, in the vicinity of which several trivial things have happened. With the aid of his passengers and some fence posts he digs Sweetheart, the bus, out of the mud and drives onward to San Juan. That's the book; and taken on this level everything is clear, if not too interesting.

On the level of allegory the reader must deal with a mystery in which the fewest clues have been allowed to show. The important ones in my opinion are those which pertain to the direction of travel taken by the bus. Rebel Corners has a certain romantic symbolism in its name, although it has none in its being in the story: the bus departs from here. It is moving toward San Juan de la Cruz, which in name again has a meaning but is

meaningless to the story and to all characters in the story.

The name painted on the bus is "Sweetheart," but underneath the paint and clearly visible is the bus' former name, "*El Poder de Jesus*" (the Power of Jesus).

Taking all this together we might say that the allegory shows man moving from a dim sort of restless "reality" (Rebel Corners) on a beaten vehicle of love which once was powerful (once "The Power of Jesus," and now just "Sweetheart") through trials (of thought [!], ego, flood and calamity) and along a romantic road of retreat (the stagecoach road) which travels (forward or backward?) to Saint John of the Cross, or religious mysticism, which lies at the end of the journey.

Or at least this would be the sense of the allegory if it had in some manner been integrated with the story and the people who populate it. But Steinbeck's set of characters are shallow and in any large sense unconscious of their world. His dubious hero, Juan Chicoy, a Mexican-Irish bus driver and eat-joint owner, illustrates this argument.

Chicoy is a guy with a flat stomach who is weary, in a dreamy way, of his routine living. He is weary of his wife, Alice, whose only real virtue in Juan's eyes is that she knows how to cook beans in the Mexican style. Aside from this she is his main workhorse in the hash house. Juan charts his action with whispered pledges to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Steinbeck singles Chicoy out as a "man," but there is



nothing he says, does, or thinks which makes him a man of our times. His big "problem" is to run away from life and he fails even this unworthy desire not by cowardice and not by heroism but by the fat inertia which fills his soul. It is difficult, no matter what the measure, to find the man in Chicoy and it is doubtful that some virile Bogart will be able to create an illusion of his manhood.

The other characters — Pimples Carson, whose life and thought are built on gooey pastries and flickering Hollywood ideology; Norma, the adolescent counterpart of Pimples, who "loves" Clark Gable; the unhappy Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard who "suffer" the misery of their upper-class position; their confused daughter Mildred who "thinks" (more or less) and who develops a great feeling for Juan; the travelling salesman of novelties who wears the Congressional Medal of Honor which no one can recognize except Camille Oaks, the gal with the sex supreme; and Van Brunt, the cynical farmer who dies on the bus trip—all are taken on Steinbeck's ride but fail to take on allegorical proportions or any other proportions. In fact, so slightly do any of the characters develop that the reader loses nothing by beginning the book at the middle or even a few chapters from the end.

Yet for all of this the talent of John Steinbeck is not completely obscured by *The Wayward Bus*. The skill of the writing is apparent in the context of this impotent vehicle where none of the power or the greatness of *Grapes of Wrath* is evident. For those who respect the work of John Steinbeck *The Wayward Bus* is an unpleasant book to read. Steinbeck in driving away from reality moves away from his potential greatness as a writer. By now we can be sure that John Steinbeck has reached his private, obscure, mystic San Juan de la Cruz and we must hope that he can see beyond this poor mud village the great roads and great cities which will not be traversed or reached on broken buses.

Brazilian Epic

THE MASTERS AND THE SLAVES, by Gilberto Freyre. Translated and edited by Samuel Putnam. Knopf. \$7.50.

ON THE first appearance of Freyre's great work, in his native Brazil over thirteen years ago, the Catholic hierarchy greeted it as a "pernicious

book, subversively anti-national, anti-Catholic, anarchistic, communistic." Accordingly, with the mildness and generosity appropriate for a spokesman of so august and spiritual a group, it was recommended that book and author be purified "by a nationalistic and Christian *auto-da-fe*." Freyre's book was denounced, too, by the critics of fascist Portugal, one of whom excoriated the author for treating the Negroes as human beings rather than as beasts of burden.

The book merits the honor of this hostility. It is an acute, massive and extremely readable analysis of the development of Brazilian society under the impact of Portuguese colonization, the near-annihilation of the indigenous population, and the introduction and development of Negro slavery.

The viewpoint is that of a materialist who does not fear value judgments. Freyre uses as his point of departure the concept of the ultimate significance, for the social scientist, of the "technique of economic production," which he finds to be more powerful than any other influence "in its ability to make aristocracies or democracies out of societies and to determine tendencies toward polygamy or monogamy, toward stratification or mobility." His anthropological thinking is derived, as might be expected from one eschewing mysticism and idealism, from the immortal Franz Boas, the figure who, the author testified back in 1931, made "the deepest impression" upon him.

When one combines these viewpoints with the most painstaking and prolonged researches into the primary, documentary sources of social history and flings the resulting work into the midst of a literature dominated in large part by clerico-obscurantist scribbling and by chauvinistic viciousness as exemplified by Oliveira Martins, to whom "the Negro is an anthropologically inferior type, frequently very close to the anthropoid, and little deserving to be called a man," it is possible to understand the explosive and tremendously wholesome effect it has had.

But quite apart from relative considerations, the work, in an absolute sense, is of outstanding value. Equipped with a complete mastery of the sources and a scientific viewpoint, Freyre's book represents an invaluable socio-historic survey of the entire rich tapestry of Brazilian civilization. The three elements making up that life — the native, the imported African, and the Portuguese explorer and despoiler, are

