

moment. But I think it'll lead to something. There's plenty of ferment and I think it is very good. Twentieth-century American poetry was really one of the great periods of poetry, possibly one of the great ones of all time. I mean, beginning way back with Edgar Lee Masters and Robert Frost and coming down through Eliot and Ezra Pound and since then to Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore. I think Stevens was the shining star of our time and still not properly appreciated. Edwin Arlington Robinson is another neglected one."

And the American prose writers?

"Faulkner. He's far and away the best we've had in this century, and one of the great men. *The Sound and the Fury* is an extraordinary book. It has wonderful form, and people don't appreciate it as much as they should. Hemingway, I think, will be marked down. I believe he's overestimated slightly. There's not enough mind there, and he has to fall back on rather simple types of humanity for his characters, the beating of the breast, the Tarzan stuff. But I'm not a great fiction reader so I'm not really qualified to go into that. I can't read novels any more, practically. They're so vague. I like things short now, and so I more and more stick to reading poetry—and the comics. I like the serious ones as much as the funny ones. They are really serving a sociological purpose that is invaluable. They are always one step ahead of public opinion, and right now they are beginning to intervene in Vietnam, in a subtle sort of way."

Then is Marshall McLuhan possibly right when he predicts the triumph of the graphic arts over the printed word?

"I'm afraid there is a good deal in that, but I don't think we're going to kill the printed word, not for a minute. The language is growing at a terrific rate, and growing well, and embracing everything as it goes and as it grows. The youngsters are really hungry for good writing. They're a good lot, if you give them a chance."

A standard question, but an inevitable one: What, in his writing life, has given him the greatest satisfaction as an artist?

"I think I would say—forgetting for a moment the poetry, which is such a mass of stuff that it sinks or swims by itself—that probably the autobiography, *Ushant*, is my favorite child. It sums it all up. It illuminates the poetry and is illuminated by the poetry. I am very pleased that there are signs it may be published again."

The interviewer thanked Mr. Aiken for his time and his patience.

"It's been a pleasure," said Mr. Aiken amiably, "but I'm glad it's over."

Personal History

JOURNAL OF A NOVEL: The East of Eden Letters

by John Steinbeck

Viking, 182 pp., \$6.50

"ONE SHOULD BE A REVIEWER," says John Steinbeck in one of the letters in this posthumous collection, "or better still a critic, these curious sucker fish who live with joyous vicariousness on other men's work and discipline with dreary words the thing that feeds them." Elsewhere in his writings he calls criticism "a bunch of crap" and "an ill-tempered parlor game in which nobody gets kissed," remarks that, although relatively infrequent, seemed to become increasingly venomous in the late stages of his career.

The venom was well deserved, for Steinbeck's post-war reception was one of nearly unrelieved and often misdirected hostility. Of the eight fictional works published during this period, only *The Pearl* was even fleetingly praised, and it has inevitably suffered from constant comparison with Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. What distressed Steinbeck most were the "expecters"—those critics who constantly awaited an updated *Grapes of Wrath*, who refused to "go along with the story" in each subsequent work if it did not meet the criteria of his most famous novel. When, for example, Peter Lisca (*The Wide World of John Steinbeck*) wrote a postscript on Steinbeck's "decline as a writer," chiding him for abandoning "his earlier viewpoint," it was clear that balanced opinion had been pre-empted by stylistic

prejudice. Other critics, such as Lionel Trilling, Walter Allen, and Mark Schorer, still influenced by Edmund Wilson's knell-like statements of 1940, found the post-war work wanting for much the same reason. Still others somehow saw evidence in the journalism of the Sixties—*Travels with Charley*, *America and Americans*, and *Letters to Alicia*—that the author had lost his creative spark with his first step outside the Salinas Valley.

Whether these letters, written to Steinbeck's editor, Pascal Covici, during the ten-month composition of *East of Eden* in 1951, will have much effect on future criticism is a difficult thing to predict. Written as a warming-up exercise for the actual novel, though, they contain a great deal more than indictment; they reveal much about Steinbeck the man, about his relationship with those closest to him, about his art in general and *East of Eden* in particular. I believe they will be indispensable to future studies of his work.

The autobiographical details are of course invaluable in the absence of any biography. ("Feel free to make up your own facts about me," he told would-be biographers; "biography by its very nature must be half-fiction.") Steinbeck comes across in these letters as an extremely introspective person, often lonely, given to periods of deep depression as well as exquisite joy (during the creative process), possessed of strong personal beliefs often bordering on the arrogant, as enamored of mechanical inventions as of experimental ideas. His self-descriptions often remind one of many characters in his fiction, as do the brief portraits

Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

MORE FRANGLISH

Each of the missing words is the French for the word at its left, as well as an English equivalent of the word at its right (e.g.—say: DIRE: calamitous). Thanks to Doris Hertz of Mannheim-Feudenheim, W. Germany, and Karin S. Armitage of San Francisco, all the missing links turn up on page 72.

short _____	woo	fate _____	kind
strong _____	bastion	third _____	rows
blade _____	crippled	pull _____	weary
monkey _____	burn	garlic _____	be ill
tooth _____	depression	leap _____	surety
goal _____	however	cat _____	talk
blood _____	warbled	thing _____	selected
corner _____	penny	street _____	regret
slender _____	chop finely	sand _____	precious fur
year _____	one	typewrite _____	candle

of his relatives—mother and father, sons Thom and John, and wife Elaine.

Most illuminating is the obvious understanding and accepting relationship between the author and his editor, a relationship which Charles Madison (*Book Publishing in America*) has called “the happiest in publishing history.” The mutual respect, the sharing of ideas, the attempt to comprehend each other’s role—all are evident here, so that one can appreciate Steinbeck’s tribute to Covici after his death in 1964: “For thirty years Pat was my collaborator and my conscience. He demanded of me more than I had and thereby caused me to be more than I should have been without him.”

Many of the personal details (preference for certain types of pencils, theories about the popular desire for long books) and incidental comments (on Communism, on man’s life-patterns) tend to become boring by mere repetition, as is perhaps to be expected of a publication of this nature. By far the greatest worth of *Journal of a Novel* is to be found in its commentary on the nature of writing and on the technical problems involved in a massive creation like *East of Eden*.

Lately, I have been seeking to maintain that Steinbeck’s direction in his post-war fiction is fabular rather than novelistic (a view that has always been an undercurrent in criticism, and which I was happy to find I shared with that energetic Steinbeck aficionado Warren French). For it has seemed to me there is ample evidence that in these later works Steinbeck was attempting not to depict real-life situations (as in, say, *In Dubious Battle*) but rather to give us fictional examples of the truth of a formulable moral statement—in other words, to construct fables, parables, apologues. Now the proof of the validity of this perspective is at hand; in a letter of October 10 Steinbeck declares: “I have noticed so many of the reviews of my work show a fear and a hatred of ideas and speculations. It seems to be true that people can only take parables fully clothed with flesh. Any attempt to correlate in terms of thought is frightening.”

Furthermore, throughout the letters he speaks of his vital concerns, which are surely those of a fabulist: clothing the thematic skeleton with the “trappings of experience,” creating “symbol people” who will merely translate his ethical ideas for the reader, catching the reader in a “trap” of involvement with these ideas, managing the various levels of meaning a parable may evoke, utilizing some pervasive pattern or motif (“the great covered thing”) to which everything else in the narrative bears a relation. The writing of par-

ables, it appears, requires attention to such fine points of technique; but the catch is this: a reader must be willing, as Kafka puts it, to “go over” into the special world of parable, to read his own life into that world—and this responsibility the “expecters” have always eschewed.

In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck maintains, he is working with the “microcosm,” with a story which is symbolically that of mankind. Thus he sees the moral theme of his Cain-Abel framework as the most vital aspect of his book, something every man must inculcate as he reads. “My wish is that when my reader has finished with this book, he will have a sense of belonging in it,” he declares; and again, “I don’t want a treatise. I want the participation of my reader. I want him to be so involved that it will be his story.” The various ways in which Steinbeck tries to achieve this reader participation are fascinating to watch: manipulation of the book’s pace (“much more like Fielding than like Hemingway”) to give the reader time for contemplation, the fashioning of symbolic characters like Samuel Hamilton (the “wide open man” who recurs in other parables) and Cathy-Kate (the personification of an inherent human malignancy), the refining of the “universal quality” any parable must have into some manageable objective correlative.

Since it does not take much to upset the delicate sense of proportion in parable form, reasons for the ineffectiveness of *East of Eden* are also found here. At least two are easily detectable. One is Steinbeck’s indecision over the nature of Cathy-Kate: at times he seems to believe that the evil she represents is “unearthly,” not human at all, whereas at others (as in the letter of May 31) he comes closer to the doctrine of original sin: “. . . while she is a monster, she is a little piece of the monster in all of us. It won’t be because she is foreign that people will be interested but because she is not. That is not cynicism either.”

There is a hint here of what is glaringly obvious in the books from *Cannery Row* to *The Winter of Our Discontent*: Steinbeck’s compelling vision of good (found in unity with the “Whole”—with nature and one’s fellows) remains unopposed by an equally compelling vision of evil, and the



unresolved tension dissipates the moral thrust.

A second reason for the failure of *East of Eden* to make a serious impact on American literature is that it tackles too much. Repeatedly, Steinbeck insists that the book must be about “everything,” that it must be a “key to living” containing “all in the world I know.” William Golding, it may be remembered, had to cope with much the same tendency toward all-inclusiveness in the writing of *Lord of the Flies*, and he concluded (in his essay “Fable”) that “if one takes the whole of the human condition as background of a fable it becomes hopelessly complex. . . . The fable is most successful *qua* fable if it works within strict limits.” Unfortunately, although Steinbeck mentions this problem at least once (July 24) he was unable to overcome it.

Other correlations of these letters to the published novel (Steinbeck does not think of it as a novel but as a pseudo-history or a romance) must await, as the publisher’s note indicates, “future scholarship.” Read carefully, I think the letters in *Journal of a Novel* might well lead many “expecters” to re-examine Steinbeck’s later work and re-evaluate it on his own terms. For the general reader (and popular following remains strong) the *Journal* provides not the wide-angle view of James’s prefaces nor the microscopic conciseness of Faulkner’s interviews, but a telephoto close-up of a fabulist seriously engaged in the “silly business” of writing. The most eloquent passages in the letters come when Steinbeck discusses this business at length (Jan. 29, Sept. 3):

The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness. In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable. And sometimes if he is very fortunate and if the time is right, a very little of what he is trying to do trickles through—not ever much. . . . Having gone through all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections. Oh! it’s a real horse’s ass business. The mountain labors and groans and strains and the tiniest of rodents comes out. And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not worth even what it might otherwise have been. As it says in *The King and I*—“Is a mystery!”

Lawrence William Jones

Lawrence William Jones, who teaches English at Algonquin College in Ottawa, is currently working on a study of John Steinbeck as a fabulist.