

Peter Shaw

## STEINBECK: The Shape of a Career

"His great theme was the relationship between man and his environment. If he overcomplicated this theme after 1940, he treated it in his books of the 1930s with a depth of feeling for the mysteries of existence that will stand as a permanent achievement."

"I NEVER wrote two books alike," John Steinbeck said, and the diversity of his very large literary output was the key both to his success as a writer and his failure to achieve greatness in the eyes of his contemporaries. "He seems always to be a promising apprentice," wrote Alfred Kazin in 1945, about halfway through Steinbeck's writing career, and the observation still seemed apt when applied to his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which was yet another of his departures in subject and style.

But when one begins to talk about the shape of a career rather than about single books, one is talking about a major writer. Steinbeck used to complain that reviewers said each new book of his showed a falling-off from his previous one, yet they never specified the height from which his apparently steady decline had begun. What he was noticing was the special kind of concern for a grand design that readers feel when they pick up the book of a writer whose career seems in itself to be a comment on the times.

Like most of the major writers in a modern time of unbelief, Steinbeck had a private philosophy and a private symbolism. The philosophy, which Edmund Wilson had found implicit in Steinbeck's books as early as 1940, was being worked out by Steinbeck during that same

year in *Sea of Cortez*, a collaboration with his friend Edward Ricketts. The book, consisting largely of their joint diary of a sailing trip off Southern California to collect marine specimens (Ricketts's profession), took each day's observations of sea life as an occasion for the drawing of biologic parallels with human society. The most striking parallel for Steinbeck was the seeming existence of a group instinct in man similar to that found in schools of fish and colonies of marine fauna. Man, Steinbeck suggested—and he had made a similar observation in 1936 in his novel *In Dubious Battle*—could be regarded as a group phenomenon as well as an individual one. Accordingly, it might be possible to discover more about an individual by studying his behavior as it related to the group than by studying him in isolation. This approach to humankind, stated here in its simplest terms, was an especially useful one for a writer with Steinbeck's strong feeling for the environment, for saga, and for group situations.

YET Steinbeck was attacked for his philosophy where other moderns with far less coherent private systems were not—one thinks of Yeats's mysticism in *A Vision*, Robert Graves's in *The White Goddess*, and the mysterious blood consciousness of D. H. Lawrence. The reason for the attacks on Steinbeck's system and for much of the concern over his career was that so many of his books

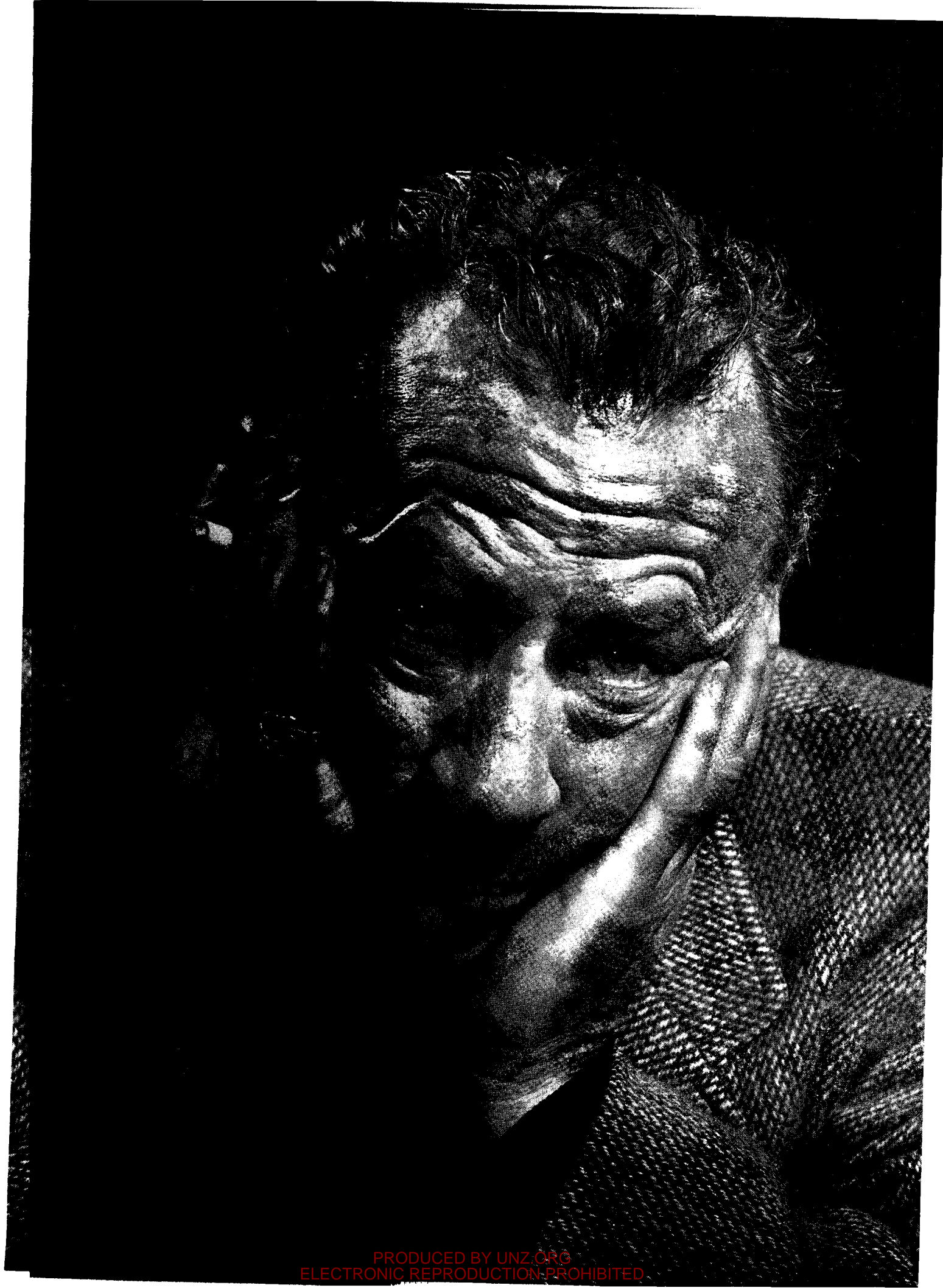
dealt with the contemporary situation, which was one of crisis. Quite simply, in the 1930s Steinbeck wrote about the Depression, and in the 1940s he wrote about the war. In those books that were not about these two great historical crises, everyone sensed that Steinbeck was pointedly refraining from dealing with them, with the result that even his non-social works were felt in much the same way as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Coming at the beginning of the war, therefore, *Sea of Cortez* was deeply resented by many who felt that its coolly scientific examination of the human species—with its suggestion that war was simply an aberration to be taken into consideration only for the purpose of judging the likelihood of the survival of the species—was an abandonment of Steinbeck's commitments of the 1930s. Then, when *The Moon Is Down* appeared in 1942, that parable of resistance to the Nazis became a hotly contested subject. Steinbeck later said that he had been excoriated for making his Nazis human. It seemed to him that since they were eventually defeated just as the book had predicted, he had been proved right in his refusal not to paint them as superhuman monsters just to satisfy the demands of propaganda.

Nevertheless there was something disconcerting about the ideas in this

—Karsh, Ottawa.

John Steinbeck—"He recorded something of the special tone of our century."



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book. Steinbeck's confidence in the people, whom he showed spontaneously thwarting their Nazi occupiers, was a simple belief in the ability of the species to drive out the cankered part of itself that threatened it with destruction. Quite understandably, this faith hardly seemed reassuring at the time the book appeared. For what the fable failed to go into was just exactly what was needed to accomplish the predicted victory: organization. There were no unions, underground organizations, or secret meetings among the populace in *The Moon Is Down*; there was only unorganized yet somehow effective collective action, as though the town were reacting as a single organism. If the human collectivity was to survive the Nazi challenge, however, something more than a biological observer's generalized faith in the species was called for.

**I**N defense of Steinbeck, there is the fact that even though the war came along just at the moment when he had worked out a philosophy of scientific detachment, he plunged back into history with a book that took up the great event of the time with compassion and faith for the downtrodden. If he could not perfectly adapt his philosophy to the violent upheaval of the world, he did address himself morally to the problem. And by the time of *East of Eden* in 1952, he had gone all the way back from the scientific detachment of *Sea of Cortez* to the moral fervor of his social novels of the 1930s. (At the very end, of course, his support of the Vietnam war, in which both his sons were involved, was a complete abandonment of his earlier attitude toward war.)

Steinbeck had begun to observe the human species with scientific detach-

ment in *In Dubious Battle*, his novel about an apple pickers' strike and his first topical work on a theme of social importance. In it, Doc, the character modeled on Edward Ricketts who appeared as a spokesman for Steinbeck in all the books in which he was working out his scientific view, including *The Moon Is Down*, declared: "I want to see the whole picture—as nearly as I can. I don't want to put on the blinders of 'good' and 'bad,' and limit my vision." Steinbeck rigorously carried out this prescription throughout the novel by leaving aside doctrinal questions and limiting himself to the details of organizing and conducting the strike. As he developed it, the principle on which Mac, the Communist organizer, operated was to use every circumstance that came in his way to weave the pattern of a perfect strike. Mac and Jim, the neophyte along to learn the trade, ride a freight into a small valley where the apples have ripened and where migrant laborers who have exhausted their last money traveling to harvest them have been faced with a severe wage cut. With superb skill Mac locates the natural leader of the men, gets him elected strike chairman, instills the group with pride and confidence, finds a place for the strikers to camp, and then keeps the hopeless cause going to a point where, as the book ends, the local authorities are about to charge upon and disperse its remnants.

In *Dubious Battle* was the best strike novel of a decade devoted to the form because it avoided the inherent pitfalls of sentimentality and the typically unconvincing sudden awakening of social consciousness. Jim has a moment in which, after having been a passive observer, he suddenly has a fervent belief

in the strike, but Steinbeck treats it entirely in human terms: What Jim suddenly sees is not the light of social consciousness, but the way men in a group behave. He realizes that they must be made to move immediately, and that they must have a partial victory over the scabs no matter how costly in terms of cracked skulls and arrests. Jim's moment of effectiveness was typical of the fine moments for all of Steinbeck's heroes: They made order in a hostile world by doing the American thing of figuring out how things work. There was, of course, a decided detachment from social issues at such moments—as the critics and Steinbeck came increasingly to see. But this did not at all constitute moral relativism. For Steinbeck's commitment lay in his very choice of subject: As long as he chose to write about bindle stiffs, migrant workers, and the Okies, he was by definition a partisan writer. And his advantage over his contemporaries lay in the rare objectivity with which his distancing technique permitted him to view his subject.

**S**TEINBECK was not able, unfortunately, to accept his biological objectivity simply as a method; instead, he had to think of it as a philosophy. Here it was that he made unnecessary difficulties for himself and dissipated too much of his creative energy. For in elevating his amateur's interest in specimen collecting into a theory, Steinbeck was exhibiting part of an ambivalence toward the life of the mind that has been all too familiar among American writers. And this ambivalence, in which ideas are at one moment violently despised and the next abjectly venerated, hurt him just as it did the others.

Though he labored to disguise it, Steinbeck was at once intelligent, well educated, and well read. His books showed the results of five years spent at Stanford University, for they displayed a considerable reading of the Greek and Roman historians, the medieval and Renaissance fabulists, and, of course, the biological sciences. Despite this, Steinbeck firmly avoided a sophisticated tone in all his writing up to *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* in 1957. Only in that spoof of French politics and culture did he permit his wit to surface and range freely. (It was significant that he let this happen only once in a book with an American setting: his last and least successful novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*.)

Everywhere else in his fiction Steinbeck perpetuated those odd myths about intellectuals that all Americans seem to learn from their popular literature and movies. His intellectuals are all men who exist apart from the vital life of society; they are either sexless, like Doc of *In Dubious Battle*, or vaguely homosexual, like Lee, the Chinese-servant-wise-man



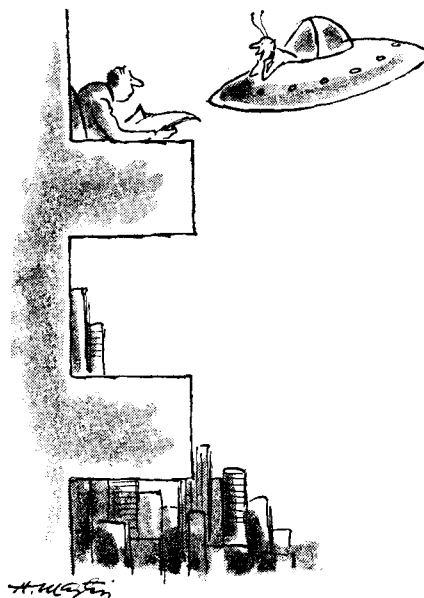
"I am not a dirty old man! I'm a freshman sociology major, and I'm nineteen-and-a-half years old."

of *East of Eden*. As the judicious Slim says of the mentally retarded Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*: "He's a nice fella. . . . Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around. Take a real smart guy and he ain't hardly ever a nice fella." The persistence of these stereotypes in Steinbeck's work is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the characters to which he attached them were based on his friends, whom he certainly did not think of either as fainéants or not-nice fellas because of their intelligence. To complete the myth, the same intellectuals whom Steinbeck made into spiritual cripples were, when they had something to say, invariably very deep and very significant.

As he allowed this unobserved creature, the intellectual, to become increasingly important in his novels, the philosophical inconsistencies of Steinbeck's thought, which had been minor blemishes on his early work, became increasingly obtrusive. And, as his philosophical characters expounded the philosophy at great length to his protagonists, it came increasingly to seem something external to the real life of the books.

THE process culminated in *East of Eden*, a retelling of the Cain and Abel story set in the period between the Civil War and the First World War. In each of the two generations of the Trask family that the novel chronicles, a father spurns the gift of one son and favors that of the other, just as God spurned Cain's gift in favor of Abel's. Furthermore, the characters have names beginning with the same letters as their biblical progenitors: Charles and Adam in the first generation, and Caleb and Aron in the second (in addition, Charles has a mark-of-Cain scar on his forehead, and Aron is killed indirectly by Caleb). Not only are the characters aware of these parallels, but the main thread is a running commentary on the Cain and Abel story among Adam Trask, who has left his brother to settle in California; Samuel Hamilton, a wise but unsuccessful Irish inventor, master-blacksmith, and talker; and Lee, Adam's Chinese houseboy-sage. From the biblical story, which Steinbeck transcribed entirely at one point in the novel, Lee extracts the following philosophy for Adam Trask:

I think this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody's story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul . . . the greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt—and there is the story of mankind.



"Well, don't just sit there.  
Run and get your camera."

Here Steinbeck adopted a psychological explanation for human acts to replace his biological one, and replaced his former attempt to be uninvolved with at least a theoretical compassion for the human condition.

But then, later in the novel, and speaking in his own voice, Steinbeck shifted to an absolutist, unpsychological pattern: "We have only one story," the narrator declares. "All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil." In *In Dubious Battle*, the rejection of good and evil was a way of seeing, was in fact the very technique of the novel; but in *East of Eden*, its acceptance has the effect only of seeming to be one out of several of the author's opinions about the meaning of his story. Because the philosophical views of Lee and the narrator have no essential connection with the way in which the story is told, the reader is free to judge the book in his own way. However, though this resolves some of the contradictions of Steinbeck's philosophical development, it does not make the philosophical disquisitions in *East of Eden* any easier to take.

When, for example, Adam Trask finds himself missing his dead friend Samuel Hamilton, Lee reasons: "Maybe both of us have got a piece of him. Maybe that's what immortality is." Now, Lee's notion is perfectly intelligent and intelligible, but it is not expressed in a natural way, for the apologetic "maybes" are really expressions of Steinbeck's own embarrassment. He can never let one of his characters come up with something brightly and directly, the way people do when they have an idea that they are excited about; instead, he must make them speak in a combination of unnatural portentousness and just-folks apology: "I guess," "It's sort of," "Well, it's kinda. . . ."

This is just what happens to the main, very creative idea of *East of Eden*: Steinbeck's interpretation of God's statement to Cain about evil. The King James Bible has God tell Cain that he will rule over sin; in the American Standard Bible God orders Cain to rule over sin; but in the original Hebrew, which Lee looks up, God says to Cain, "Thou mayest rule over sin," leaving the outcome open and implying that man lives in a non-determined universe. This suggested to Steinbeck a resolution not only of the events in *East of Eden*, but also of his dilemma over how he should view man's acts in general. Yet, when he dramatized Lee's working out of the conundrum, Steinbeck did so by having him spend ten years over the passage, during which time he is supposed to have gone to some ancient Chinese wise men and persuaded them to devote years of their lives to learning Hebrew in order to interpret the sentence for him.

ALL this is, of course, absurd. To find out that the key word, "timshal," in God's sentence means "thou mayest," Lee could have consulted a beginning student of Hebrew, as Steinbeck well realized—he had managed to work out the passage, with the help of commentaries, on his own in considerably less than ten years. But even in real life he persisted in treating the matter with the same disproportionate sententiousness. Thus, in a note correcting his spelling of the word as "timshel" instead of "timshal," he remarked, "I have over a hundred letters pointing out my mistake, and many of them from profound scholars of Hebrew." It is unfortunately clear that the matter could not be meaningful to Steinbeck unless it was "profound." The result of this attitude was to make the ending of a deeply felt book seem ludicrous: When Adam Trask dies on the last page with the word "timshel" on his lips, he is supposed finally to understand his life. But the reader cannot help feeling that if he believed that whopper about the old Chinamen, then he cannot have understood very much of anything.

Steinbeck's great theme was the relationship between man and his environment. If he overcomplicated this theme after 1940, he treated it in his books of the 1930s with a depth of feeling for the mysteries of existence that will stand as a permanent achievement. The typical setting for his best work was the Salinas Valley in California. This is a long, narrow strip of green along the banks of the Salinas River, running from the town of Salinas, where Steinbeck was born, south for about 120 miles between two rugged ranges of mountains. In Steinbeck's best stories, the features of the valley at once determined the physical fates of his characters and made symbolic comment on



them. There was first the rich bottom land near the river that attracted the settlers from the east; in book after book Steinbeck showed them picking up clods of it and running it through their fingers in amazement at the absence of rocks.

**Y**ET, though he loved the valley and worshiped its fruitfulness, Steinbeck did not make it a fanciful Eden. The river brought destructive floods as well as fertility, and the summer wind could blow hot for months without letup. And if the Cabilan Range made a bright backdrop along the east ridge, the Santa Lucias along the west rim of the valley were harsh and dry and wild. Finally, beneath the topsoil there was a level of hard clay that stopped the water in seasons of heavy rain, causing whole fields to be washed away. This sinister bursting out of the very ripeness of nature figured in *The Wayward Bus* as the cause of the detour that brought out the real nature in each member of a previously somnolent and disconnected group of riders. In *In Dubious Battle*, the water washes out the strikers' camp, effectively breaking up the strike; and in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads are at the end flooded out of their boxcar shelter by the rising waters which take their car and worldly possessions, though not their irreducible bravery and hope.

Interestingly enough, only three of Steinbeck's many books actually took place in the Salinas Valley: *The Long Valley*, *The Wayward Bus*, and *East of Eden*, for which the working title had been "Salinas Valley." The rest of his California stories took place in nearby

valleys—some real and some imagined—that were either closed systems of harsh necessity, as in the cases of *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, or fantastic paradises, as in *The Pastures of Heaven* and *To a God Unknown*, where the imaginary valley lies just to the south of the Salinas, protected against its "blasting winds." It is in these valleys of the imagination that one finds the roots of Steinbeck's art.

*To a God Unknown*, which appeared in 1933, was his second published novel, but it was in all other respects Steinbeck's "first novel," for it was the book in which he first explored his major themes. (*Cup of Gold*, published in 1929, an historical romance about Morgan the pirate, was not a characteristic work.) *To a God Unknown* starts off as a loose parallel with the biblical story of Joseph: the hero, Joseph Wayne, is a prophetic dreamer who migrates to California and then sends for his brothers. At first, it seems that the novel is moving on two levels, one of actuality and the other of symbolism in which Joseph's feeling for the land is translated into a comment on the meaning of land to all men who draw their sustenance from it. But as Joseph first turns to primitive ritualistic sacrifice and then actually comes to believe himself directly in control of the processes of nature in the valley, it becomes impossible to make out Steinbeck's own attitude. When the valley is gripped by drought, it is abandoned by men and animals save Joseph. He lies in a grotto near its last drying stream and commits suicide by slitting his wrists to succor the parched earth with his blood. But then the rain, actual

rain, comes pouring down, and there is no way of sorting out the story's symbolic from its actual levels.

Steinbeck quickly grew away from the unassimilated mysticism of *To a God Unknown* as he became involved in the issues of the 1930s, but he never lost his reverence for the processes of nature. And so, when he dealt with the Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath*, his feeling for the waste of natural resources involved in letting good land lie fallow, and his anger at the destruction of crops which could not be sold, elevated what could have been a purely political and social subject into something that captured the imagination of a whole nation. Hunger for the earth, which would seem an abstract thing in the books of most novelists, was the strongest and most convincing motive in Steinbeck's. Not only the Okies, but George and Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* ache to get a piece of land of their own where they can finally harvest the crops that they have sown for other men all their lives.

This kind of feeling, first expressed in the mysticism and animism of *To a God Unknown*, when it was brought under control in the stories of *The Long Valley*, resulted in the one work of Steinbeck's that can be called a complete artistic success. "The Red Pony," the best known story in *The Long Valley*, is a simply told tale of a boy who is given a colt that dies, after which he has to wait a year for another foal. When there is trouble with the birth, the mare is killed and the foal cut out of her belly. There have been numerous interpretations of the symbolism here, and the story is, I believe, widely taught in college English courses. But its power does not come so much from its symbolism of death and life, or from its dependence on the ritual of a young man's coming to maturity by experiencing the mysteries of procreation, birth and death; rather, the force of "The Red Pony" lies in a fidelity to experience so intense on Steinbeck's part that his objects and people begin to shine and express something greater than themselves. The ever-present two contrasting mountain ranges suggest hope and fear, youth and age, knowledge and savage mystery, while running water and a tree under which pigs are slaughtered—one of which attracts as the other repels the boy—further work out the story's dialectic in other natural terms.

Here, as in the other stories of *The Long Valley*, Steinbeck's genius lay in the piling up of casual details to create feelings both of awe and horror at man's being as much a part of the processes of nature as the animals themselves. His most famous image for this was the

(Continued on page 50)



"Mortie always did have charisma."

# State of Affairs

Henry Brandon

## Nixon Starts down the Run

ASPEN, COLO.

SWITZERLAND'S St. Moritz is known as the playground of the "beautiful people," France's Courchevel as the haven of the jet set, but Colorado's Aspen, which has about the best skiing one can find in the United States, is where the brainy people go to relax their intellectual muscles and test their ski legs. When you go down the mountain on skis, there is nothing else you can think about but how to maneuver the next turn.

However, on the ski lifts you may find yourself discussing anything from kidney transplants, with a leading neurologist from the University of California, to whether nuclear superiority is the answer to American foreign policy, with a Pentagon "whiz kid," to international monetary affairs, with a Harvard professor. I was surprised, though, that even in such expert company the flight of *Apollo 8* to the moon was hardly ever mentioned, and I mean when that flight was still in progress. Was it the remoteness of the mountains and the concentration on skiing? When I asked an old Washington hand here why this should be so, he said, "Maybe it is because it is so much easier to fly to the moon than to remove the ghettos in our cities."

The standard of American skiing is amazingly high. I find the average skill of American skiers higher than that of Europeans, even though skiing in the United States has been popular for a relatively short time. It must have something to do with the fact that Americans, when they start something new, want to do it well and therefore work hard at it. Europeans are inclined to take skiing more as relaxation and fun than as a sport. They are content with being just proficient enough to enjoy it.

The expansion of Aspen as a ski resort is only short of phenomenal. There are now some 6,000 beds here, but over the Christmas vacation days this was not enough. Last year an entire ski area, Snowmass, was opened. And this year, the Aspen Ski Corporation has been discussing a five-year plan to extend the ski facilities across another mountain chain and into an adjoining valley. It reminds me of a remark that Guy La Roque, who looks after Courchevel, made to me some ten years ago. He said despairingly, as the chairman of a school board whose classrooms are overcrowded would, "Every year there are 30,000

new skiers on the slopes in France; we cannot build newer and newer resorts fast enough."

One feels pleasantly detached out here from the pains of transition now felt in Washington. President Johnson is stepping back into history, and Mr. Nixon is taking over. Like all Presidents, Mr. Johnson wanted to be a great one. His place in history haunted him. He came to power at the end of the greatest, most turbulent, most demanding, most successful period in American history. Americans by then had grown tired of and impatient with new challenges, more responsibilities, and greater sacrifices. It made Mr. Johnson's task infinitely more difficult. But there are few who are as adept as he is in putting the pressure on. And he did, except that he also created a feeling among the public that he was going too far too fast. He made breathtaking legislative advances, but he also put too great a premium on pressure, and soon additional pressure was generated in the streets and on the campuses that he had not bargained for. The war in Vietnam added powerfully to these pressures until they got out of hand. He overheated the atmosphere and, as a consequence, the country seemed out of control. The war in Vietnam, inflation, the welfare program, violence, crime, opposition to him—all seemed to be galloping. And so, by magnifying the problems, Mr. Johnson also dwarfed his own achievements.

The former President's character, the mixture of pride and defiance, his belief that nothing short of victory would do for him, that "Spirit of the Alamo," also magnified the importance of the war in Vietnam. And even if Mr. Johnson will be proved right and a balance of power will be established in Southeast Asia, it will have been achieved, in my view, at too high and too disproportionate a cost. The war divided the country as it has not been divided since the Civil War. It aggravated racial tensions and student rebellion and it deprived Mr. Johnson of his greatest aim in life—to be remembered as the President who broke the back of poverty. The war also forced his own withdrawal

from the Presidential race and his party's defeat in the elections, for which he cannot escape blame. But above all, it soured the American outlook on the world. It undermined American faith in allies, in American military power, and confidence in American world leadership.

Mr. Nixon has an unusual opportunity to profit from the Johnson legacy. The war in Vietnam is finally defused, and the scene is set for negotiations; he now has the great opportunity of becoming a popular President and of being credited by history with ending the war. He is also the inheritor of many new legislative weapons to deal with most of the ills now troubling this country. If these are properly used, coordinated, and funded, he could succeed in vastly improving the mood of the nation. Mr. Nixon may thus reap some of the fruits denied to Mr. Johnson. Seldom has there been such a bipartisan desire for a new President to succeed, for everybody knows that for Mr. Nixon to fail could be catastrophic.

What the country expects from the new President is to cool it. That will also mean cooling some of his own more extravagant goals proclaimed during the election campaign. One of the most knowledgeable men in this field (and a true skier, too) said to me here over tea *après ski* that the new President will soon find out that nothing startling can be done to establish American nuclear superiority over the Russians. Various projects such as a heavier bomber or a nuclear-engined plane or newer submarines can indeed be built, but when he looks into what additional strategic missions they can cover that are not already provided for, he will find that they are all already taken care of.

Aspen is one of those examples that proves that C. P. Snow's idea of the two cultures is rather artificial. In fact, Aspen manages to combine not only an Institute for Humanistic Studies—where business tycoons relax by debating anything from Plato to T. S. Eliot, while physicists pursue their studies—but also the culture of sports and music. In this way, it is unique in the world. Further, it has more good restaurants per square foot than any American city with the possible exception of San Francisco. It even has a French restaurant where, à la Maxim of Paris, one can eat in cozy little *séparés*, where the waiter knocks before entering, and where wine and fare are as carefully looked after as the intimacy of the guests. At another luxury restaurant, the desserts are kept at the very same price as at its opening on July 4, 1883—none higher than 10 cents. But don't expect the same generosity for the rest of the menu—better bring your checkbook along.

