

ME, STEINBECK, AND ROSE OF SHARON'S BABY

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ABSTRACT

Fiction depends on a dialectic of blindness and insight, but its duplicity is compounded by distortive literary techniques suggestive of Gombrich's theory of artistic illusion. As an exception to prove the rule, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, supposedly realistic in its treatment of the plight of Okies, illustrates a number of deceptive techniques. These include its one-dimensional characterization, its exaggeration of dramatic confrontations, its combination of the archetype wilderness quest with strike novel conventions popular during the thirties, and its use of "instantaneous description" to intensify the effect of thwarted expectations, bringing economic contradiction into style itself. But its most extraordinary misconception is in the radical "truth" Steinbeck wanted to convey that agricultural workers were finally confronted by the choice between destruction and revolutionary activism. Instead, with the advent of World War II and the War Boom, they were soon provided with jobs and then kept employed by the Cold War, restoring their collective faith in the American way of life. So Steinbeck used deceptive narrative technique in order to convey a bigger distortion in his message, though of course history might once again expose us to an economic debacle on the same scale as the Great Depression. For this reason alone, the novel remains a remarkable document of economic crisis, the nightmarish alternative to our current prosperity.

Even English professors somewhat distort the truth. In fact we have to, for it is our professional responsibility essential to the discipline we teach. Our job is to confirm received opinion with fresh insights, but without taking these to an objectionable extreme, a constraint which usually involves at least bending the validity of our argument as much as seems necessary. Too often we are obliged to limit ourselves to tasteful humanistic observations, excluding unpleasant issues such as sex, propaganda and personal bias, which can only bother and offend conventional wisdom. As Northrop Frye has demonstrated, our success depends upon compartmentalizing literature as much as possible with restrictive objectivity comparable to that of historians and political scientists who avoid unprofessional debate upon Vietnam, anthropologists who eschew issues of obvious primitivism, and economists who reject the importance of political economy.¹ For there is much to be ignored in the literary realm as well-- and in fact this is what gives it its universal appeal. We can be grateful for the many tasks we need to perform within the proper bounds of critical inquiry, dedicating ourselves with both

energy and prudence to our Anglo-American tradition's inexhaustible opportunities for research. Whatever tempts us to exceed these bounds is accordingly to be rejected for being irrelevant to our primary responsibility as scholars and critics. It can only distract us from our legitimate concern with the respectability and self-sufficient integrity of our field of inquiry, which is necessarily reflected in the specificity of our methodology, and our no less self-sufficient role as English professors able to gain and share expertise in our chosen fields of investigation.

An undercurrent of human motivation does influence our criticism, I think, but in a curious and negative fashion which is best explained in terms of this evasive strategy. According to hallowed canons of Anglo-American New Criticism, we try to reduce explication to analysis of the text independent of its author's intentions (according to Wimsatt and Beardsley's "intentional fallacy"), independent of our own response (according to their "affective fallacy"), and independent of the real world it supposedly depicts (according to Yvor Winters' "fallacy of imitative form").² Rid of these three impediments, we have separated the text from life and can begin to operate, scalpel please. But this radical surgery often has its embarrassing consequences. Our desire to eliminate the dimensions of literature personally and collectively distasteful to us has in many instances led us to explicate exactly those works that test these dimensions with the greatest provocation. Too often, I would argue, our purpose turns out to be compensatory. We undertake this task, if without realizing it, in order to deny such a connection through the self-sufficient ingenuity of our analysis. There results what seems an explicative repetition compulsion--which might be coined the "exegetical fallacy" (A.C. Bradley's "formalist fallacy" extended to criticism itself)--in our dependence upon the autonomy and coherence of our interpretation to protect us from threatening implications that attract but frighten us.³ In other words, we are too often perversely drawn to exactly those works that challenge our assumptions and sense of propriety. This is because the explicative task lets us deny our feelings by excluding them from the appropriate interpretation of the text, and with the additional benefit that we express ourselves in this act of denial, our latent hostility having been transformed into a subtler manifestation of constraints. What results is a peculiar admixture of affirmation and inhibition: we emphatically declare ourselves in the pronouncements we can make about literature, but with the principal intention of establishing boundaries to deny further possibilities we find obnoxious. Our "job" of criticism (to borrow Blackmur's expression) is the *bricolage* of interpretive strategies we have mastered to maintain this repressive ambivalence with the help of literature.

One of the best examples of explicative denial put to the task of discouraging political involvement is to be found in the conservative effort of the fifties to impose aesthetic standards to justify (and be justified by) Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* despite its original objective to inform the American public of the poverty of California migrant workers described as Okies during the thirties. I think it safe to maintain that *The Grapes of Wrath* had this primary aim as political propaganda whatever else its accomplishment. It was certainly a great epic novel and profuse in its symbolic implications, but these may be granted without denying its principal intention of exposing and condemning the desperate circumstances of migrant farm workers who had fled the dust bowl to seek gainful employment in California. Steinbeck's pamphlet *Their Blood is Strong*, published a year earlier in 1938, afforded the same "message," suggesting that Steinbeck deliberately chose to put his indignation to fiction in order to spread his views to his largest possible audience. However, ten to twenty years later the English professor of the so-

called quiet generation was in flight from radical politics (as was Steinbeck himself by that time), so it became important to justify the impact of the novel in purely aesthetic terms--in fact, if possible, according to an aesthetics antithetical to politics. Whether of direct influence or not, this necessity helps to explain the useful ingenuity of Peter Lisca's formal analysis and the plenitude of allegorical and Christian exegetical interpretations based upon the novel's loose analogy with Moses' exodus from Egypt and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (whose initials just happen to coincide with those of the novel's hero Jim Casy).⁴ It also helps to explain their undue emphasis upon the novel's symbolism, especially in its final earth-mother episode, with flood substituted for drought, similar to T.S. Eliot's ambivalent conclusion to *The Waste Land*, in which Rose of Sharon, the mother of a still-born child, breast-feeds an old farm worker who is the victim of starvation in a tableau suggesting both death and rebirth, perhaps stasis between the two.

Most interpretations along these lines have been valuable but evasive in downplaying or altogether overlooking the thrust of the novel, its remarkable success at putting message to fiction. To mention the breast-feeding incident alone, I think it important to acknowledge the relevance of Steinbeck's implicit Marxist anthropology, derivative of Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society*, in tracing the disintegration of patriarchal lines of authority into primitive matriarchal dependence when the economy can no longer support human needs. Steinbeck's intention was apparently to show tribal regression from a superstructure of work and paternal responsibility to powerless reliance upon a more primitive substratum of unflinching maternal love, a transition that reverses the development of civilization explained by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.⁵ What better final epiphany to illustrate this disintegration than an old man cradled in the lap of a bereaved young mother who is trying to restore him to life with her otherwise useless mother's milk? He embodies the demise of patriarchy under capitalism while her generosity is borne of maternal desperation, her baby dead, and with it the future of the Joad family and perhaps the country as a whole. Their tableau undoubtedly has some allusion to Noah's flood, the nativity scene, Pietà, and the bountiful grace of the virgin Mary, but these are subordinate to this implied anthropology, whatever its validity, and behind that, the radical politics important to Steinbeck at the time. Whatever the validity of the Christian exegetical interpretation, the post-war generation of English professors who expanded its possibilities into almost critical totality, form plus religion, told as much about their own anxieties by minimizing the novel's social context in their analysis. They were obviously seeking patterns of thematic coherence to counterbalance the unsettling disintegrative effect (and "message") of the book rather than commit themselves to the political objectives it was intended to demonstrate were necessary. However, the formal self-sufficiency they emphasized was at the expense of the novel's essential disequilibrium, its imbalance stressing praxis in the urgency of the reader's commitment to a particular cause. For it was almost obligatory to evade this responsibility among patriotic scholars of "liberal" awareness at the peak of the Cold War against godless communism.

It should be emphasized, however, that this pattern of denial is not limited to sex and politics, or the criticism of Steinbeck alone. Its authoritarian evasiveness seems to have become a universal all-purpose defense for English professors, one which actually stimulates our interest in literature. In our youth we had read to fulfill ourselves by identifying with heroes and heroines who could enact our wayward inclinations. Under the burden of professional

responsibility, we are more concerned with bringing under control what might be said for or against us (and others like us) in the texts we explicate. Our daydreams have been transformed into a vigorous defensive rationality: what we assert also denies, and in a compromise formation of blindness and insight that stimulates many of our best ideas and delivers us through our annual ordeal from September to June. Moreover, our ambivalence involves a curious negative dialectic, since our affirmation is usually no less valid than what we reject or somehow evade by means of judicious omissions. In fact the two are likely to be better defined by thwarting any synthesis we might gain in our conscious acceptance of literature's fullest meaning to ourselves. Without this recognition, our compromise formation at least provides fulfillment through circumscribed concessions we hesitate to risk in our publications. It also helps to justify whatever professional standards we can encourage among our students to prepare them for their own compromise with life. This timidity has been scathingly denounced by Yvor Winters in his description of Professor X in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* as "a man who conforms easily" and who "possesses a less intensely active intelligence" than the authors he interprets. More specifically, Winters argues--

His [Professor X's] position is that of the dilettante: the nearest thing he has to a positive philosophy is something to which he would never dare commit himself; that which keeps him in order is a set of social proprieties which he neither understands nor approves. In a world of atomic bombs, power politics, and experts in international knavery, he has little to guide him and he offers extremely precarious guidance to others; yet by profession he is a searcher for truth and a guide to the young.⁶

Winters seems to have had one professor in mind, but his argument was obviously intended to be an indictment of the entire profession. Paul de Man has similarly proposed a dialectic in *Blindness and Insight*, as suggested in his title, that typifies the most impressive contemporary criticism:

In all of them [contemporary critics] a paradoxical discrepancy appears between the general statements they make about the nature of literature (statements on which they base their critical methods) and the actual results of their interpretations. Their findings about the structure of texts contradict the general conception that they use as their model. Not only do they remain unaware of this discrepancy, but they seem to thrive on it and owe their best insights to the assumptions these insights disprove.⁷

My only reservations with de Man's argument would be that he doesn't take it far enough. What causes this discrepancy he describes? The answer, I think, involves a theory of inhibition explained in terms of projection and reaction formation--the neurotic effort to reject traits in texts equivalent to those one finds unacceptable in oneself. The text inevitably tantalizes the critic's curiosity precisely because it evokes his defenses and accommodations as Norman Holland proposes for readers in general in *Poems and Persons: An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature*. Literary critics with the most to deny in literary texts are thus the most likely to submit it to analysis, but too often by emphasizing the defenses totally at the expense of the fantasy content they serve to bring under control. The compromise formation useful to the poet or novelist accordingly degenerates to simple denial based on omission.

Leslie Fiedler insists that the primary responsibility of English professors is to be a model of human conduct, but, potentially at odds with this obligation, he also proclaims the critic's ultimate responsibility is "to be faithful to one's ambiguities," since choice too often involves exclusion, upon which our lie degenerates into genteel authoritarianism.⁸ What we try to cultivate is a judicious smattering of awareness buttressed by dignified professional righteousness wherever our rationalizations might begin to suggest truths too dangerous to acknowledge. Perhaps apropos of our dilemma is Christ's final appeal, "Father forgive them, for they know what they do," which is ingeniously appropriated by Steinbeck in letting his martyred ex-preacher labor organizer Jim Casy say to his killers just before they kill him, "You fellas don't know what you're doin'," a line also with Marxist implications that the lumpenproletariat can be recruited against their own interests. My point is that we English professors "don't know what we're doin'" either, but we do it with grace and perspicacity, so our disingenuousness is useful anyway, more tolerable than that of Casy's assassins, almost as valuable as the research of economists and political scientists.

What both compounds and somewhat justifies the problem for English professors is that authors lie as well--in fact, they are the most audacious liars of all. We the professors are forced into the position that we must lie about the way they lie, but our distortions are limited to a relatively narrow spectrum of aesthetic concepts while theirs cover the enormous range involved in putting the lies of technique to those of felt experience in order to give verisimilitude to characters necessarily swamped with their own delusions. A triple hierarchy is involved, with the explicative fabrications of critics relatively modest, the tip of the iceberg compared to authors' falsifications in their effort to convey whatever truth or beauty seems important to them in this task. Moreover, authors perpetually tempt themselves with their lies, which accounts to their appeal to readers, since we are invited to organize them into more stable categories of omission. Authors test edges so we can affirm their decision not to transgress them. Standing at the edges they themselves have chosen, authors have more to lie about, so dishonesty becomes almost an existential act of commitment, the boldest and most extravagant explorations of one's resources in Sartrean "bad faith." As a result, what seems an inextricable jumble of misrepresentations goes into almost any work of literature, all of which Mallarmé found rooted in "the glorious lie," especially in the novel, which he found even more contrived than opera.⁹ How does one sort through its distortions? Where can one even begin?

Of course criticism began with the discovery that fiction is primarily a lie, as its etymology might indicate. Upon watching his first and only tragedy, performed by Thespis, the tyrant Solon is reported to have been angered at its falsifications despite Thesis' lame excuse that he was merely garnishing the truth. Plato later declared in *The Republic*, Book Ten, that poetry is a double lie two degrees removed from the truth--both its representation in consciousness and, one step further, the representation of its representation in the context of art. If the truth about a chair is its ideal form, he said, then the artisan chair-builder only imitates this ideal form, reducing the poet who writes about it to imitating the artisan's imitation in order to describe the chair he sees. For those dubious of the concept of ideal forms, Plato's theory has another and perhaps more acceptable application combining phenomenology and the semantics of Ogden and Richards: to wit, that our "immediate" experience of a chair, a somewhat organized welter of impressions, can be symbolically depicted by a linear sequence of words, one of which is *chair*, whose relative independence from its referent in its own "sign situation" results from what might be

considered the artisanship of language in the context of literary experience. So the word *chair* produces the idea of a chair but in doing so it separates itself one degree from this idea and actually becomes a falsehood if it oversteps its valid limited function of representing it from part to whole, from sign to sign situation (or from signifier to signifier plus signified), a confusion that often happens in discourse, especially if there is something to be concealed.¹⁰ The French critic Roland Barthes has recently made essentially the same argument by describing myth as a “second order semiological system,” an “empty” signification superimposed upon the linguistic (“utterable”) relation between signifier and signified.¹¹ The only modification I would suggest relevant to both Ogden and Richards’ and Barthes’ respective models would be to emphasize that signification inevitably brings distortion into play, so any second order semiological system inclusive of literary texts has ample opportunity to compound distortion in the words and mythic content of literature.

The second degree of abstraction, then, is in the literary representation of a chair, for example one upon which a Steinbeck or Jane Austen character might be depicted sitting, a conventional aesthetic untruth that readers are usually willing to concede in order to get on with the story. Consequently, the literary chair is twice removed from the real experience of a chair and three times removed from the chair itself, a representation which involves three levels of objectification in symbolizing the actual chair it describes: experience, language, and literary context. Truth is not necessarily sacrificed in this hierarchy, but, as already indicated, complex feedback among these three levels indeed offers the possibility of falsehood if distortion is compounded to embrace both language and fiction, and even triple falsification to the extent that perception is biased by our experience of fiction, as it is for example when finishing a Dickens novel to find oneself in a Dickensian world, a Tolstoy novel to find oneself in a Tolstoyan world, etc. Consequently, the critic’s difficult responsibility is to maintain adequate vigilance to distortive influences among these levels, especially with regard to grammatical modifiers that compound the problem, for example in the combinations “easy chair,” “tattered easy chair,” etc. The critic must recognize that no combination entirely bridges the inductive gap to put itself on equal footing with the concrete chair itself, at least in representing it chair to chair to chair. These distinctions can of course be ignored, but any critic who totally ignores them becomes vulnerable to confused values--perhaps not regarding articles of furniture but certainly regarding such words as *freedom*, *truth*, *justice*, *equality*, *rights* etc., all of which are to be found scattered through Steinbeck’s novels, speeches and interviews of politicians--some of them honest to an extent, many of them not.

Aristotle watered down the issues of falsification with his relatively simple binary distinction between possibility and probability, as did Sir Philip Sidney with his assertion that the poet “nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth,” as if declarative sentences don’t declare anything in the context of literature.¹² My disagreement with Sidney would be that poetry is composed of sentences all of which declare a relationship, even when expressed in the subjunctive mood, on a hypothetical basis, or with figurative intentions, and, in doing so, that they affirm the validity of what they declare at least by implication (“Yes, this is possible at least hypothetically--or metaphorically”). For each sentence an equation is proposed between subject and predicate whose validity is open to question, and each included modifier asserts some truth relative to their combined expression, such that the word *green* in “green field” may be judged as the perceived color of a particular field. Everything said in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Keat’s

Odes is accordingly verifiable as a “truth” acceptable to poetry, as opposed to news reports that are demonstrably false as “lies” unacceptable to journalism, in which metaphor, analogy, and hypothesis are presumably kept to a minimum. A “nucleus” of assertion thus occurs to be examined with close scrutiny in all sentences relevant to their intent, as maintained by Josephine Miles in “What We Compose,” and by Paul Goodman in *Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry*.¹³ What is asserted (or “affirmed”) can accordingly be judged based on its validity, whether it is *or could be* true relevant to one’s experience in life on either a factual or hypothetical basis. I am dubious of the positivist reduction of literature to “pseudo statement,” a modern noetic assumption essentially similar to Sidney’s version of poetic license, for example as proposed by I.A. Richards in *Science and Poetry*.¹⁴ Somehow, the ordinary concept of truth needs to be extended to fiction, perhaps according to the distinction between “presentation” and “assertion” that Max Black has proposed as a modification to the argument proposed by Richards.¹⁵ But if literature expresses or “presents” a vision of life whose truth may be accepted with qualification, then it may also be seen at times to distort this vision, consciously or unconsciously, usually in a manner that asserts one truth in order to deny another--the simplest dialectic of all. In effect poetic convention rooted in aesthetic liberties affords plenty of latitude for outright prevarication. For this reason poetry both affirmeth and often lieth, as Sidney perhaps recognized in his own authorship of sonnets--beautiful ladies not quite so beautiful, love’s tyranny only slightly burdensome, etc.

A useful compromise was offered by Coleridge in his theory of suspended disbelief--exactly opposite ancient skepticism’s important breakthrough concept of “suspended belief,” emphasized by Arcesilaus and Carneades among others. However, the fact remains that a lie is a lie, the substitution of a story or false description for the truth as if the substitute were the truth. Aristotle’s theory of art as mimesis, the imitation of reality, offers a useful paradigm for what happens, one which boils down to the formula that *mythos* (or story) is the *mimesis* (or imitation) of *praxis* (or human behavior). And if story is the imitation of behavior, it occurs, as Plato observed earlier, two degrees removed from the experience it represents, i.e., what we recognize in what we do. Moreover, I would propose, its process of deception occurs in the same manner as the English professor’s exegetical distortions: 1. by simplifying reality through the elimination of presumably extrinsic elements, and 2. by manipulating what is retained according to the intention or bias of the author. These operations, simplification and bias, necessarily interact and feed upon each other at every level in Plato’s hierarchy from ideal form to its literary context. Authors exclude from their account whatever might conflict with the impression they are trying to evoke, and their selectivity inevitable to their creative effort brings their random awareness into better contextual harmony, a process integrating perception, language and aesthetic convention. By lying to their readers, they can lie to themselves; by lying to themselves they can lie to their readers (“It was the husband--i.e. my husband--who ruined the marriage, not my heroine--nor I,” etc.) Authors might strive for greater inclusiveness to evoke the illusion of realism, but in doing so they paradoxically expand the hydra-headed range of exclusions essential to the fiction they declare. Like English professors, they assert to deny, but in their case actually attain synthesis by means of simplifications that produce sequence and resolution, letting their story to advance upon itself as their characters make their own decisions and discoveries important to the experience of literature

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Steinbeck's depiction of Grandpa in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for example, limits his personality to little more than a senile fixation upon bodily functions, especially his perpetual effort to button his fly. His characterization is relatively static and one-dimensional, yet vivid and no more complex than necessary for the brief role he plays in the novel. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that he is much less a mixture of circumstances and inclination than the thousands of real grandpas embarked on their real exodus from Oklahoma to California during the thirties. He is more colorful than they might have been, but radically simplified and thus more capable of overt dramatic gesture, his simplicity to a certain extent explaining his freedom according to both Freud and I.A. Richards' theories of intelligence as the cause of inhibition.¹⁶ The brighter we are, the more capable of effective inhibition despite the aesthetic necessity that fiction overwhelmingly emphasizes *praxis* at the expense of restraint, and with relative accuracy in the depiction of demented individuals such as Grandpa. In other words, Grandpa's lack of complexity actually seems to generate his behavior, the matrix of both his story and characterization. It is his burden to live what others want to believe (or not believe), whether his author, critic, or anybody else in the reading public. Since Grandpa is their joint creation, the embodiment of their shared compact toward a credible illusion, his behavior is limited to a relatively narrow pattern of habits bestowed upon him so he might play out his part appropriate to his role in the novel. Moreover, his awareness is restricted to linear and contextual simplifications inevitable to his depiction. The one-dimensional representation of his thinking can only accommodate simple ideas without the complex adjustments to be discerned in his most intellectually deficient human counterpart, whose motives are almost inevitably a good deal more complex than either his or anybody else's ability to explain them, to say nothing of the novelist and English professor. The skill of Steinbeck, as with other novelists, was in giving verisimilitude to Grandpa's limitations, so the reader can somewhat understand and sympathize with the real Oklahoma migrant in his desperate circumstances through the mid-thirties.

How many aesthetic distortions went into the creation of Grandpa? To trace all these requires a history of the novel that traces the advancement of mimesis from primitive schematic representations, for example in the sixteenth century picaresque romance, through successive innovations in technique to our post-Joycean sophistication today, a sequence not dissimilar to the development of the plastic arts. As E.H. Gombrich demonstrates in *Art and Illusion*, published in 1960, the skill of an artist such as Constable in evoking verisimilitude was the result of centuries of modification in technique, with each artist advancing upon his predecessor to produce more true-to-life effects in color, lighting, perspective, etc. Each new technique was essentially a lie, for example exaggerating the size of one arm even more than perspective requires in order to suggest more effectively posture, movement, balance with another part of the canvas, etc. Such an effect of truth was not strictly speaking the truth itself, as in fact every liar since the beginning of time has striven to promote this effect with means deviating from the truth, though well enough that he himself could believe in his effort, squinting to judge edges with his slightly crooked thumb. Whatever his means, the artist as well as the author has always resorted to an almost instinctive rhetoric of three categories: omission, addition, and inversion--with diminution and exaggeration respectively sub-categories of omission and addition, and usually with additions incorporated to account for gaps created by omissions, the twofold process mentioned above. To evoke the illusion of truth by these means was the overwhelming

preoccupation of artists until the discovery of photography, while in literature it continues to be important in the mixture of language and aesthetic convention to shape and stimulate imagined experience.

The application of Gombrich's model to the development of literary technique gives Grandpa forbears at least as far back as Richardson's *Pamela*, published in 1740. It was Samuel Richardson, for example, who discovered the importance of "instantaneous Descriptions and Reflections" permitted by his narrative's epistolary organization as a sequence of letters, one correspondent explaining to another the events of the story that supposedly transpire from one letter to the next. This aesthetic liberty permitted a concentration upon present hopes and fears as if the future was unknown but would unravel in time, quite aside from the fact that the author himself usually knew quite well how he wanted his story to turn out. Richardson himself explained this literary device, which he himself had discovered quite by accident while compiling a book of sample letters, as a means of giving immediacy to the story he was telling--

All the Letters are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects (the events at the time generally dubious: So that they abound not only with critical Situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* Descriptions and Reflections (proper to be brought home to the breast of the youthful reader); as also with affecting Conversations; many of them written in the dialogue or dramatic way. "*Much more* lively and affecting, says one of the principal characters (Bedford: Aug. 4) must be the Style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress; the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the Events then hidden in the womb of fate); than the dry, narrative, unanimated Style of a person relating difficulties and dangerous surmounted, can be; the relater perfectly at ease; and if himself unmoved by his own story, nor likely greatly to affect the Reader.¹⁷

The so-called "instantaneous" style could reflect the emotions of the characters themselves during the events described rather than the dispassionate viewpoint of an author fully aware of how the story would turn out. Just as the character is caught up in the moment, the author could feign being caught up in the moment while describing what happens, and finally the reader could be similarly swept into the momentum of the story as if it tells itself independent of authorial intrusions. All of this brought into play Coleridge's concept of suspended disbelief, of course many decades before Coleridge formulated it.

Henry Fielding next took the important additional step of limiting instantaneous reflection to his own voice as a narrator, really the dominant personality in his novel, who could be entirely candid of his unwillingness to disclose future events (for example the final outcome) until his story brought him to this point. The same effect was accordingly produced as with Richardson's technique, but with the emphasis upon the story in progress brought forward by the author's strategy as a novelist rather than the epistolary format. In other words, narrative immediacy could be even more effectively achieved without the pretense of writing incessant letters. Then instantaneous prose was brought to its completion by Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott and others of their generation who eliminated even Fielding's narrator so the story could seem as if it were telling itself in its process of unfolding, as if the future was the natural outgrowth of the morals and accomplishments of its characters as well as the circumstances they confronted.

Readers were forced to immerse themselves in the account of these accomplishments in order to share in the outcome. Bourgeois optimism encouraged inverting Aristotle's subordination of character to plot by reducing plot to characters changing their minds. The full emergence of personality in response to social relationships became arguably the most decisive factor in fiction, permitting a greater sense of free will and individualist attainment, traits that had previously been limited to the *hubris* of tragic protagonists. Before fiction's dependence on instantaneous reflection, plays, epics, and romances had appropriately situated literary characters in a hierarchic and deterministic universe, but with England's advance into modern capitalism (call it free enterprise) during the eighteenth century, a new audience arose among the middle classes whose optimistic social aspirations necessitated this shift in emphasis to individual freedom and accomplishment.¹⁸ Fiction best accommodated this need, and to this extent it can be described as having been more honest as a depiction of human experience over the past two hundred-fifty years. However, the technique of instantaneous reflection since Fielding both disguises the role of authors in telling their stories and gives their viewpoint much greater input at every level of experience. Time and again, "truths" get told that aren't exactly true, and with nobody in sight to be held responsible for the problem. The issue of fictive duplicity has been further compounded by Flaubert's so-called free indirect style (*style indirect libre*) that justifies authorial participation in deranged consciousness and "fallible narrators" who convey patent untruths--also by authors when they vigorously disclaim any responsibility for the lessons to be drawn from their stories. But whatever the justification, deception thrives on a whole-cloth basis as a matter of suspended disbelief. The many truths of fiction (and they are there to behold) primarily serve to contextualize more basic untruths--often so basic that the authors themselves remain ignorant of their lies.

Throughout the history of fiction, then, instantaneous reflection has been its crucial ingredient, in essence the gimmick that created and perpetuated the genre of the novel. Yet it functions as a mode of deception, perhaps the most fundamental of all, since authors, like God, are unavoidably omniscient of the future they decide, contrary to the effect they evoke of imminent choice and uncertainty among their characters. The expectations they play upon, confident of their ability to bring them to resolution, involve an emphasis upon free will and the *laissez faire* (getting ahead through one's own efforts), concepts that were typical of the Protestant Reformation that began three centuries of capitalism which apparently ends with the Joad family. In this sense, Steinbeck's "conservative" technique of fiction (in contrast to the associational experimentation of Joyce, Faulkner, and others) involves a remarkable contradiction, at least a two-century anachronistic conflict between style and content. Joyce and Faulkner were more revolutionary than Steinbeck in their experimentation with style, but the "abstract particularity" they developed suggests an acquiescence to the status quo, a decadent social quagmire as perceived by its unhappy, impotent victims. In contrast, Steinbeck's old-fashioned use of "instantaneous reflection" was actually far more radical since it posed contradictions at the level of style that were expressive of the circumstances of his characters. Their desperate will to save themselves manifests a style of freedom that can be traced all the way back to Richardson, while the inevitability of their destruction becomes evident through their helplessness against forces they don't understand and cannot bring under control, their struggle to save themselves (essentially a matter of plot) imposed by the final throes of free-market economic circumstances also traceable to the eighteenth century. The resulting tension between plot and style attains with particular success the standards of realism demanded by

Georg Lukács in *Realism in Our Time*, that it display “the contradictions within society and within the individual in the context of a dialectical unity.”¹⁹ But since the Joads live in a period of crisis, their needs so far exceed their economic capabilities that dialectical unity can only be attained, it seems, through either destruction or revolutionary commitment. Steinbeck’s success in representing this extreme contradiction is what makes his novel such a remarkable tour de force in the fiction of social conflict.

This contradiction can even be detected at a relatively simplistic level in the account of Grandpa, who eagerly anticipates going to California, then tries to get out of it, and finally dies of a stroke because of the shock of having lost his homestead. When friends and relatives recount the deaths of their own grandfathers in real life, they very likely start with the facts of his death itself, which comes last but imposes itself as the most important information; then they can shift to their judgment of the man in his final years, illustrated by a scattering of anecdotes without much connection. If they try to take his story from the beginning, whatever point they choose, and to develop it one step at a time, they are still likely to restrict their account of their grandfather’s behavior exclusive of his changing motives, a rather skeletal elaboration of events devoid of the psychological impact of old age and dying. It takes rank commitment to literary deception to start with Grandpa’s story as if it is his eager decision to leave for California, then suddenly let him become afraid and totally change his mind, from all X to all Y, disclosing his earlier enthusiasm to have been bravado, but without having really documented the inner dynamics of this transition; finally to stretch out a series of vignettes that show his rapid deterioration the farther he gets from his farm, all the while with his decline kept subordinate to the false optimism of his family as whole. This is not to deny the powerful “inner” truth of Steinbeck’s story of Grandpa’s misplaced expectations and disintegration, but it is only brought home to the reader through Steinbeck’s craftsmanship, his selective and exaggerative literary technique that here, there, and everywhere deviates from the truth in order to convey the effect of the truth. Feigning ignorance of the disastrous future he himself plotted for the Joad family, Steinbeck manipulated his account of their motives and behavior in order to transcend the drab complexity of real people, thus affording enough verisimilitude to maintain his readers’ interest in the story of Grandpa and his unfortunate family.

Steinbeck resorted to this kind of literary foreshortening throughout his novel: causes and effects were simplified, motives heightened, personality differences resolved in dramatic confrontations, and chronic destitution given existential sublimation in the unfulfilled quest of the Joad family elevated to almost mythic proportions. Praxis dominated rather than postponement as described by Freud and Richards.²⁰ These aesthetic liberties were necessary, even crucial to Steinbeck’s intentions, for most readers would be bored and uncomfortable in the presence of a real Joad family, offended by their flat, listless conversation, their vulgar mannerisms, raw sores, nuffling noses, and empty stares--also by their inability to follow abstract ideas for more than a few moments and their defeatism and lack of purpose in life. As Nazis found in their treatment of concentration camp prisoners, individuals reduced to penury and destitution soon acquire a listlessness which seemingly justifies their change of fortune. They actually collaborate in their degradation, dehumanized through their masochistic cooperation with their oppressors. Observers become dehumanized too (not just Nazis but all respectable people) through their inability to acknowledge the plight of their victims, dismissing it as a disgrace, joke, or “problem,” the responsibility of others--if nothing else, by distancing

themselves as much as possible so they might remain benevolently unaware of their circumstances. This I have learned from my own experience having grown up with so-called “Okies” in California during the late forties, having taught their children in colleges and junior colleges during the sixties, and having helped to organize a welfare rights union in a region of northern California where the poverty of the thirties can still be found--even having married a small farmer’s daughter who was coincidentally born in 1938 not more than a few miles from where Rose of Sharon is said to have lost her baby. All in all, I have found the Okie to be salt of the earth, but much less colorful and idiosyncratic than Steinbeck did. A truly poverty-stricken family of migrant laborers does not offer itself too readily as the stuff of literature, since chronic destitution is its only claim to tragic magnitude. Moreover, one is uneasy in its presence--the more so the greater its destitution. This is a universal response, as is one’s shame when he recognizes it, as are the “good reasons” he finds to justify himself--typical and not altogether invalid aspersions to shiftlessness and the waste of effort in trying to be of help.

3.

All the typical defenses against the cry of poverty were especially problematic in the late thirties, when upwards of 300,000 unassimilated migrant farmers posed a serious problem to the State of California. Respectable people secure in their jobs found they had to put the burden of responsibility upon the Okies, the federal government, an act of God, anybody but themselves to the limit of their capability as presumably Christian and benevolent fellow citizens. Consequently, the task of Steinbeck the novelist was to exploit the craft of fiction, using every deceptive technique it offered to expose the American public to its indifference to their poverty. In effect Steinbeck was obliged to use narrative falsifications in order to arouse the sympathy of the American public and bring it to a truth it was willing to avoid. He had to resort to lies to expose lies, the paradox at the root of social realism, its unavoidable contradiction between message and technique that somehow has to be resolved in the validity of the completed novel. Instantaneous reflection was the first and most fundamental of these techniques or gimmicks used by Steinbeck, as has already been indicated. Others included telescoping the Joad family into a universal and heroic prototypal identity, a mode of aggrandizement which can be traced forward from Homer to Scott, Tolstoy, and Dreiser before Steinbeck; the use of essay interchapters to produce the effect of panoramic objectivity, with precursors back to Fielding’s wonderful novel *Tom Jones*; and, as with Grandpa, the use of caricature to give figures a quick and easily recognized identity so readers can focus their attention upon their collective plight rather than their individual depth of feelings. This particular gimmick had been crucial to Fielding’s normative ethics as opposed to Richardson’s sentimental emphasis upon personal crisis, and can be traced forward to the caricatures of Dickens and Thackeray, finally to *Tobacco Road* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Even the vivid earthiness of the Joad family’s dialogue involves literary foreshortening. Metaphoric content in the language of sharecroppers and itinerant laborers is actually sparse and highly repetitious. If a real Joad says “taller than a heap of monkeys” once, he says it at least five times weekly, beating dead metaphor into its unrecognizable carcass. Moreover, his use of profanity usually boils down to rather simple transformations of the speech habits of his less demonstrative friends and relatives: he does little more than add his impieties and evacuative and reproductive expletives as attributive participles and exclamatory apostrophes, both for emphasis and to insist upon his belief (often consciously false) in the undeniable validity of what he is saying. The stylistic genius of Steinbeck, then, lay

in his ability to inject variety into this country dialogue, and with enough skill that teachers and librarians across the nation were actually accusing him of language too realistic in its earthiness. This was again a matter of creating the effect of realism by deviating from it, a technique of style to be traced from Smollett, Scott, and Mark Twain to Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck.

Perhaps the most effective of Steinbeck's fabrications was his use of the quest theme to harmonize all the random impulses of uprooted behavior in the story of the Joad family's Odyssey to California. Their counterparts in real life, demoralized and at the brink of destitution, had been reduced to circumstances inferior to the human condition. As a result, it was necessary to give the Joads a heroism transcending this condition, elevated to the status of migrant questors, an essentially strong and skillful people seeking the land of milk and honey fifteen hundred miles away in California. This archetypal appeal is principally why the reader can identify with them, his defenses against poverty having been minimized by literary technique. Like Casy, who mediates his role as spectator he is able to join in with their pursuit of a better life, and when it ends in disaster he can only support Tom's decision to dedicate himself with revolutionary commitment to the fight against capitalistic oppressors. But without realizing it he has been led to recognize that Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis of indefinite frontier expansion preventing class conflict is no longer valid, necessitating a reexamination of the Marxist concept of inevitable class struggle exemplified by the plight of the Joads at what seems their last available frontier.²¹ What was the technique of plot used to deliver the average reader at least to this degree of political awareness? Apparently Steinbeck made his own unique combination of two distinct conventions in American fiction: the archetypal wilderness quest at the root of much of our literature, befitting Turner's thesis, and the formula for the strike novel briefly in vogue during the thirties in which it was typical for a labor strike to be crushed but with its aspirations carried forward by a young worker, the hero of the novel, who escapes to fight another day.²² Steinbeck had inverted the strike formula three years earlier in *In Dubious Battle* by having the young worker killed instead and then cynically held up as a martyr by the strike leader to keep the strike going against the interest of the workers; here Steinbeck restored the formula to its original lines but subordinated it to the more inclusive epic of a single family's destruction, two of whom become the martyred strike leader and his disciple.

When the Joad's westward journey ends in total deprivation, a new twist to manifest destiny, its two strongest men commit themselves to the political action necessary to gain a decent living for migrant workers in general. Jim Casy becomes a strike leader rather unexpectedly, his fundamentalist dedication having been transformed into political commitment, and then Tom, the eldest son, even more abruptly becomes his disciple, initiated into the struggle by spontaneously revenging his murder. But the Joad family itself is doomed to destruction, paradoxically reduced to certain unemployment by an enormous flood, a genuine threat to the subsistence of migrant workers aside from its symbolism suggestive of Noah's ordeal. Their quest has brought them to the brink of starvation and unmitigated despair almost beyond literary technique. The reader can only hope that Tom succeeds in his revolutionary dedication upon his hard-earned recognition that political goals are essential to the task of human survival. The effect is powerful--it is almost impossible to finish the book without an overwhelming sympathy for Tom in his new crusade, delivered by fiction to a politics one would otherwise be likely to reject.

If Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier optimism apparently conflict with the revolutionary commitment of 1930-vintage strike novels, their combination seems to describe with particular realism the situation of the average Okie family who unsuccessfully migrated to California for work. With a stroke of genius, Steinbeck thwarts the wilderness quest, denying Turner's optimism, in order to justify Tom's new commitment according to the strike theme popular during the thirties, with his story's outcome tailored to the Great Depression at the time, when frontier expansion had long since reached its limit in California. However, this apparent realism fitting *mythos* to *mimesis* should be reconsidered with regard to Steinbeck's remarkable skill at foreshortening events. Was his account factually accurate, for example? Not according to Congressman Lyle H. Boren of Oklahoma, who fiercely attacked the novel in a speech before Congress, listing several minor but distinctive geographical errors about his home state to prove the book "a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind."²³ Boren's speech ended--

Mr. Speaker, let it be a matter of record that the English language does not hold vituperative contents sufficient for me to pronounce completely the just condemnation of this man and his book. The lies that he has written he cannot recall; the words he has put into the mouth of these people will whisper eternally in his ear and haunt his wretched soul as the degraded creations of his hallucinations in filth and mire.

Such was a hostile response to the novel in 1940, when congressmen from Oklahoma could share Solon's anger against aesthetic transgressions.

But aside from factual inaccuracy inevitable to any novel and justified long ago by Aristotle's distinction between possibility and probability, to what extent does Steinbeck's use of foreshortening as a technique distort the real experience of driving to California on Route 66? It's a hot, endless road, and for most of those making it nothing much happens on what seems an endless journey. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, in contrast, three unrelated deaths between Oklahoma and California--counting Mrs. Wilson--is an unusually high mortality rate even for the emigration of agricultural workers during the late thirties. Thirteen passengers both in and on top of one car, a Hudson Super 6--this is possible, but certainly the outer limit. But there are other examples of foreshortening throughout the novel. Casy and Tom get into a knockdown fight with a sheriff's deputy the day after they reach their first Hooverville camp--possibly true but a rather quick development--even quicker that this settlement is burned down that night in retaliation by local vigilantes. Moreover, it is also hardly believable that Tom could much later, elsewhere in California, crawl under a fence at dusk to encounter once again Casy, who had disappeared when arrested for his part in the earlier fight, but is now coincidentally found to be leading the strike against which Tom, has been hired as a strike-breaker, and that Tom comes on the scene just in time to watch Casy murdered. Granted, all of this is possible, but it's not especially probable. These coincidences and exaggerations are perfectly acceptable in fiction, but should be recognized to be relatively scarce in real life.

Of more importance to his intention as a propagandist, Steinbeck apparently took similar liberties with regard to the legal and economic circumstances of migrant farm laborers in California. For example, were unemployed farm workers completely without support? Did they have no source of income whatsoever except fruit picking, as Steinbeck implied? Not exactly, according to Frank J. Taylor in his rebuttal, "California's Grapes of Wrath."²⁴ It seems migrant

farm workers could obtain relief payments from the State of California wherever no picking was available, and many did, if not most of them. Moreover, the relief they received was undoubtedly a drain upon the California taxpayer, since their allotment was almost twice as generous as in Oklahoma, a factor which many angry citizens uncharitably claimed was the real explanation for their migration to California. By leaving unexplored these ramifications to the problem of relief payments, Steinbeck exposed himself to Taylor's accusation that he both simplified and distorted the story, loading his account to arouse maximum sympathy for farm workers at the expense of state and local governments. It can also be noted, however, that unemployment compensation for migrant workers also benefited farmers at the expense of taxpayers, since it guaranteed the easy availability of labor when needed for fieldwork. This kind of government largesse seems to have been less bothersome to righteous conservatives than whatever marginal benefits accrued to these workers and these families. Compensation was just fine in their opinion so long as it wasn't "abused" by the presence of too many available workers.

Taylor also ignored the morass of bureaucratic hurdles and barriers that inevitably tied up relief payments, keeping many more indigent workers in poverty than would be conceded by the official version of the story. An excellent illustration of this problem is Steinbeck's reportorial description in *Their Blood is Strong* of the circumstances of actual farm workers he encountered when he visited some of the Hooverilles in California. Here Steinbeck was simply telling what he saw, and there is no reason to doubt his evidence--

The next-door neighbor family, of man, wife, and three children of from three to nine of age, have built a house by driving willow branches into the ground and wattling weeds, tin, old paper, strips of carpet against them. a few branches are placed over the top to keep out the noonday sun. It would not turn water at all. There is no bed. Somewhere the family has found a big piece of old carpet. It is on the ground. To go to bed the members of the family lie on the ground and fold the carpet up over them. The three-year old child has a gunny sack tied about his middle for clothing. He has the swollen belly caused by malnutrition. He sits on the ground in the sun in front of the house, and the little black fruit flies buzz in circles and land on his closed eyes and crawl up his nose until he weakly brushes them away. They try to get at the mucus of the eye-corners. This child seems to have the reactions of a baby much younger. The first year he had a little milk, but he has had none since. He will die in a very short time. The older children may survive. Four nights ago the mother had a baby in the tent, on the dirty carpet. It was born dead, which was just as well because she could not have fed it at the breast; her own diet will not produce milk. After it was born and she had seen that it was dead, the mother rolled over and lay still for two days. . . . The husband was a sharecropper once, but he couldn't make it go. Now he has lost even the desire to talk. He will not look directly at you, for that requires will, and will needs strength. He is a bad field worker for the same reason. It takes him a long time to make up his mind, so he is always late in moving and late in arriving in the fields. His top wage, when he can find work now, which isn't often, is a dollar a day. The children do not go to the willow clump any more [to defecate]. They squat where they are and kick a little dirt. The father is vaguely aware that there is a culture of hookworms in the mud along the riverbank. He knows the children will get it on their bare feet. But he hasn't the will nor

the energy to resist. Too many things have happened to him. This is the lower class of the camp. This is what the man in the tent will be in six months . . . etc.²⁵

Even in this passage Steinbeck heightened and foreshortened his account with reportorial liberties, but it also seems obvious he was trying to describe as well as possible the poverty he found in California Hoovervilles. If so, there was complex dishonesty in Taylor's attack upon Steinbeck, his own judicious admixture of insistence and exclusion. He was correct in denouncing Steinbeck for not taking into account either the availability or relief or the generous efforts of many native Californians to ease the plight of migrant workers. But he himself was evasive in claiming that complicated official procedures were adequate if there was a single Hooverville with a single family as destitute as the one described in the passage quoted above; and if this family was typical of an entire class, as Steinbeck claimed, if but the very lowest among Hoovervilles, then Taylor's establishmentarian apologetics were themselves a vicious lie, one that might "whisper eternally in his ears and haunt his wretched soul," to quote once again the honorable congressman from Oklahoma. In fact, the camp Steinbeck described was far more poverty-ridden than any encountered in *The Grapes of Wrath* and perhaps too stark for fiction. The real family of five depicted by Steinbeck (just down from six, soon probably to four) was too pitiful to be encountered by the Joads at their early campsite locations, certainly too pitiful to launch themselves on a quest of their own, though of course the Joads were to be brought to comparable poverty upon the conclusion of the novel. Nevertheless, it is significant that Steinbeck carefully traced the story of their decline while avoiding any extended treatment of their squalor and misery once they reached this nadir in their difficulties. In at least this one instance, then, the truth exceeded Steinbeck's fiction, very likely from aesthetic necessity to avoid distracting readers from the story of the Joad family itself with all its hopes and aspirations in its own process of disintegration. The prevalent animosity of native Californians against the invasion of migrant farm workers was also probably understated by Steinbeck if the article "California Pastoral" by Carey McWilliams is to be believed, based upon his personal experience in Modesto with mobs, sheriff's deputies and even a private army secretly drilled on its junior college football field, all of which more than confirms Steinbeck's account.²⁶

Finally, the most fundamental example of deceptive foreshortening by Steinbeck was his apocalyptic vision that the general circumstances of the American people, exemplified by the plight of agricultural workers, had been brought to a crisis of such proportions that a major revolution was in the offing, either within the system, or, if necessary, as occasionally implied, by abandoning the system. His effort seems to have been tendentious (i.e., with a "message") in having chronicled the effect of the depression on a single family of displaced migrant workers in order to suggest its only possible cure was through the radical activism of fugitive organizers such as Tom at the very end of the novel. This narrative transition from hope to despair and then revolutionary activism, even adventurism, was propagandistic in insisting upon the choice between reform and revolution based on the assumption that one would be necessary if not the other. The novel's outcome in the radical conversion of Tom, its surviving hero, who emerges as an activist at war with the power structure reflects an intense mixture of creativity and political commitment in Steinbeck himself when he wrote the novel, far more than to have been expected at that stage in his career as an author. One might be tempted, for example, to treat *In Dubious Battle*, published in 1936, as a sequel to *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Tom Joad anticipating the role of Jim Nolan. However, the radical disillusionment of *In Dubious Battle* preceded *The*

Grapes of Wrath, so the actual sequence of the two novels deters any facile judgment that Steinbeck finally attained political “maturity” in either of them. Apparently Steinbeck began his bigger and more mature novel dubious of radical politics but was temporarily radicalized by his exposure to extreme poverty, brought to a level of indignation beyond anything expressed in his earlier novels.

Interestingly, the cause-and-effect relationship between Steinbeck’s politics and the advancement of his story from disillusionment to activism reversed the typical “reactionary” matrix of fiction through withdrawal and disillusionment. In effect, Steinbeck turned inside out the process of reactionary inspiration in the output of such authors as Orwell, Koestler, Wright, Ellison, Trilling, Camus, Céline, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and a multitude of others whose disillusionment might be less obvious, but of comparable magnitude. Poets such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost also fit this description. There is no Tom Joad in Eliot’s “The Wasteland” to lead the people to a better future, except perhaps the dimly perceived Christ toward a millenarian salvation. Still further examples of literary conservatism include the romantic vision of Wordsworth, who renounced his Jacobin enthusiasm during the early seventeen-nineties through an aesthetics of “emotion recollected in tranquility”--emotion having been his youthful experience of nature previous to his Jacobinism, and its recollection in tranquility having been his mature vision of rural simplicity uncontaminated by his half decade’s infatuation with the Jacobin cause. Even Shakespeare can be understood to have been inspired by a reactionary shift in his views, his disillusionment with Elizabethan and Jacobean politics having manifested itself in his advance from collective affirmation in his early comedies and histories to the inner crisis of his tragedies, then having passed into the superficial complexity of his late romances, bringing optimism full circle in *The Tempest*, his purest comedy least in touch with the mounting national crisis of the early seventeenth century.

In contrast, the radical commitment to politics has been relatively uncommon in its equivalent transition from disillusionment to activism, also in its emphasis upon exploitation, social determinism, revolutionary optimism, and individual sacrifice to collective aspirations. Apparently, its only sustained tradition at a relatively high level of sophistication is to be found among American populists from Twain, Howells and Crane to London, Sinclair, Farrell, Dos Passos, and Steinbeck. Lewis and Hemingway can also be added at least during the thirties. Also, this “radical” (or populist) tradition’s principal line of development is better traced among particular novels than the novelists themselves, since, like Wordsworth, many of them emphasized radical issues for only a few years of their active career, and only a couple wrote their best novels at this stage in their development. Steinbeck might well have culminated this tradition, which seems to have ended with World War II, since his sense of class conflict obviously improved his success as a novelist, whether from his his comic aggrandizement of the lower classes or from his more serious treatment of exploitation and the desperate quest for alternatives. For this reason *The Grapes of Wrath*, his best and most remarkable novel, may be seen to have played a pivotal role in the history of American fiction, the culmination of the populist tradition emphasized just a few years earlier by the critics Vernon Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought*, published in 1930, V.F. Calverton in *The Liberation of American Literature*, published in 1932, and Granville Hicks in *The Great Tradition*, published in 1935. The “progressive” literary history these three chronicled (Parrington as a populist, Calverton as a Trotskyist, and Hicks as a CP “fellow traveler”) was important to the critical perspective of the

thirties among the intellectual community, and Steinbeck was apparently willing to exert his creativity in its social context, thereby straddling the enormous divide between best sellers (which it certainly was) and ideologically “correct” fiction relevant to current issues during the Great Depression. However, with the advent of World War II followed by the Cold War, *The Grapes of Wrath* was by default reduced to the questionable status of having provided the final aesthetic culmination of this tradition. Everything changed both in society and literary expectations, and, as in the case of so many others, Steinbeck’s version of social consciousness washed ashore on the shoals of history. Within fifteen years, an entirely new hero emerged in the American novel. The adolescent malcontent Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* grew up to be confronted with the problems of Portnoy, Rojack, Rabbit Angstrom, Benny Profane, and a host of other alienated characters whose personal and social circumstances had no clear relevance to our country’s background of social conflict addressed by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

4.

In retrospect, it is obvious that Steinbeck’s career peaked with *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which he set aside his earlier doubts and inhibitions to declare his politics in the clearest possible terms, though even here with enough softening that his sympathetic critics of the fifties could either blur or altogether overlook his message. But we cannot ignore that he interspersed the names of American and Marxist revolutionary leaders in one significant passage, his eloquent apostrophe to owners in chapter 14:

If you who own the things people must have could understand this, you might preserve yourself. If you could separate causes from results, if you could know that Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin were results, not causes, you might survive. But that you cannot know. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into “I,” and cuts you off forever from “we.”

Paine, Marx, Jefferson, and Lenin are quite a Pantheon, and “we” of course refers to the masses who must struggle against the “I” of the capitalist owners. Steinbeck’s challenge was plain that these owners either had to abandon (or mitigate) their system of accruing profits or be overthrown, and his novel documents how the crisis inevitable to the attainment of this outcome made their victims into revolutionary activists who would eventually do the job.

But of course the expected revolution never came to pass: depression vanished and the California apocalypse of 1939 very abruptly evolved into full employment in the early forties resulting from the so-called War Boom connected with World War II. Steinbeck’s revolutionary expectations accordingly proved just as erroneous as reactionary fantasies of escapism and withdrawal from politics. Typical of radical activists in his premature expectations of both crisis and revolution, Steinbeck can be accused of having sought to foreshorten even history in his novel, unaware of the seemingly limitless resilience of capitalism, which might now and again cause deprivation, for example through the Great Depression, but which also restores, for example with its dispensation of full wartime employment. For the California Okie was saved from utter destitution by the twentieth century’s second Great War, which finally ended the Great Depression by putting everybody to work again. Although Axis leaders beholden to their

own industries wreaked the destruction of as many as sixty million people during World War II, it would be they in the final analysis who could claim credit for having saved migrant farm workers, not Tom or Casy, Steinbeck or Carey McWilliams, Governor Olson or even President Roosevelt. The German economy had quickly recovered from depression through Hitler's national mobilization toward warfare, partly resulting from the cooperation of American banks and corporations that found it profitable to support Hitler's opposition to communism and (almost as offensive) labor unions.²⁷ Then, because Germany's expansionistic energies were not directed exclusively against the Soviet Union, as had been hoped and expected upon Chamberlain's success at Munich, the United States, like Germany, had the good fortune of being forced to mobilize its defense industries, and with dramatic results within a few months of the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*.²⁸ Military production proved a boon for all unemployed Americans, but especially farm workers. Those who were not drafted into the military or employed in California's aircraft plants replaced others who did, and with a multiplier effect that benefited all levels of employment. Granted, many had to settle for jobs as farmhands or cannery workers. Still they were a job, and these who took them could support their families. The rising tide of war preparations lifted all boats.

As with Blacks today (and contrary to their conventional rhetoric), the migrant workers' crisis had occurred when the system was no longer able to exploit them and had to discard them as being unemployable. By 1940, however, everybody was able to benefit once again in our nation's enormous over-production of wealth.²⁹ And when World War II ended, the Cold War suddenly materialized to sustain full employment at previous war levels, this time through hostilities in large part provoked by Truman's administration against the Soviet Union, as has been amply documented in recent years by a healthy number of so-called revisionist historians.³⁰ Germany's threat had provided a relatively temporary benefit to the U.S. economy (of not more than seven years); but combating the Soviet threat could be featured as a more lasting bulwark against the otherwise unstoppable ravages of overproduction. Russia's emergent role as our primary competitor in world politics justified almost limitless neo-Keynsian defense expenditures that incidentally helped to postpone depression and thus Steinbeck's anticipated revolution..

I myself first became acquainted with California Okies during the early years of the Cold War, coming west with my family in 1947 to a defense installation in the Mojave desert at which a variety of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs were available. There we lived, my mother, two brothers, and I, in a trailer park with a remarkable assortment of low-income workers, including Okies, not far from an enormous dump of discarded military equipment. For young and vigorous teenagers our environment was ideal, since we could imagine any battle site we wanted while playing guns among abandoned vehicles and empty barracks--once or twice with a real 22 rifle, though the boy using it (from Oklahoma) was instructed not to shoot too close. What we didn't realize at the time was that the production of the war surplus we were playing upon had probably saved this daring young gunman's life, at least those of his younger brothers and sisters. Capitalism had moved into an entirely new phase, the justification of over-production through sustained national emergency necessitated by the struggle against godless socialism. Increasingly sophisticated equipment had to be produced in surplus and then abandoned, giving jobs to our parents and enabling us, my brothers and me, and all the Joad kids we knew, to feast our adolescence upon the discarded fruits of warfare. History had thwarted revolution in the United

States with what was tantamount to its own lie, national security, which offered itself as another “new frontier,” one totally overlooked by Frederick Jackson Turner fifty years earlier but now the most available solution to economic contradictions. How so incredibly ingenious: war preparations to combat communism abroad on a military basis eliminated dissent at home by keeping workers employed, therefore less vulnerable to the divisive rhetoric of the scattering of misfit Tom Joads still inspired by the thirties. And there was a scientific explanation for it all. The value of deficit spending was first suggested by the British economist John Maynard Keynes on a comprehensive basis in 1936, and it was implemented as a temporary measure during Roosevelt’s administration in the effort to bring to an end the Great Depression. Soon deficit spending was expanded, again on a temporary basis, in order to subsidize World War II, after which could be perpetuated into the indefinite future justified by the Cold War. The high cost of national security guaranteed widespread job security and thus through prophecy fulfillment a more fundamental collective security, protection from internal crisis by preparing for external conflict legitimized by the spectre of communism.

What I am proposing is the disconcerting paradox that Steinbeck exploited all the distortive techniques of fiction he could muster, and with wonderful effectiveness, in order to express what seemed a more fundamental truth in his apocalyptic conviction that the political economy had reached its last extremity in its destructiveness. But that even his vision was wrong, for the system endured, as did migrant farm workers, who made their adjustment to the new role that had been offered them. Many were destroyed by the depression and a few were permanently radicalized by it; however, the Joad family were not depicted to be individuals but the prototype of the Okie, and the collective majority represented by this prototype found employment just a year or two later. With that, whatever sense of class solidarity they might have begun to cultivate was transformed into the easier and more comfortable affirmation of loyalty to their country that had enormously benefited from world politics mostly the agony and responsibility of others. Not just Okies changed, either. Add Richard Nixon, a young California liberal in 1939, whose family had earlier migrated from Iowa under similar circumstances (as mine did later, back and forth on Route 66 with my mother and two brothers in a model A Ford with a hole in its roof). Add Lyndon Johnson, who stayed behind in Texas to become a teacher, then a committed New Deal Politician, finally a Cold War charlatan who destroyed himself by his misbegotten crusade against communism in Asia. Add John Steinbeck himself, who served as a patriotic war correspondent in 1943 and was eventually to cultivate hawkish views on Vietnam before he died in 1968. In his highly publicized debate with Yevtushenko on July 8 and 11, 1966, Steinbeck blamed the Vietnam War upon Chinese expansionism, the supply of Soviet weaponry, and Hanoi’s presumed unwillingness to negotiate. Only the second of these arguments turned out to be defensible. His third argument, at the time the propaganda line of the Johnson administration, was thoroughly exposed by Franz Schurman and others in *The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam*, published in 1966. Steinbeck also boasted of his son’s participation in the war and traveled through Vietnam in 1967 as a war correspondent accompanied by his son. Steinbeck the political activist for an oppressed population in California thirty years earlier had become totally supportive of brutal warfare against an oppressed population abroad. And most Americans shared his attitude well into the late sixties.

In the most inclusive sense history itself has lied by sustaining an economic discrepancy hitherto considered untenable, apparently discrediting radical theories of collective apocalypse,

including Steinbeck's, and inviting the acquisition of new values more in harmony with its successful innovation in political economy. And since so monumental a fabrication must inevitably inspire whatever "truth" gains currency with mankind, *The Grapes of Wrath* has been divested of its message which had depended to too great an extent on its vision of imminent crisis. Its principal virtue, that it confronted the depression with more insight and human compassion than would have been possible in the fiction of Joyce, Faulkner, or Hemingway, became a major liability once depression had been eliminated. The novel continues to enjoy enormous popularity throughout the rest of the world, for example in Germany where I have found as a guest lecturer that university students usually know little about American literature except for Steinbeck and Hemingway. However, this is not the case in the United States. We are looking elsewhere to justify ourselves, bored by the plight of farm workers during the thirties.

This is not to deny that *The Grapes of Wrath* remains a magnificent epic, and with a compelling validity for 1939 which might indeed recur sometime in our future, postponed by just a few decades. If the Great Depression had lasted until 1945, I think the novel might be accepted today as one of America's finest achievements in fiction, and it could yet be discovered in retrospect to have been our long-awaited "great American novel" best summing up negative consequences of our country's pragmatic *laissez faire* policies. For its historic validity is yet to be settled. Abandoned by its public and critics, even by its author in its fullest implications, it quietly reposes on back shelves of municipal libraries, awaiting when history once again catches up with its revolutionary assumptions and we the American people discover that, after all, its truth had been ours as well, that economic imbalance has finally been brought to such an extreme that our affluence can no longer be perpetuated by extravagant military expenditures or the incessant manipulation of interest rates and the money supply. In other words, *The Grapes of Wrath's* final status in the canon of American fiction probably depends to a large extent upon future economic trends. A new and even bigger economic catastrophe seems needed once again to breathe life into its apocalyptic vision. Continued prosperity would of course be preferable, but history itself will be making its final decision.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ "Polemical Introduction," in *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), in which Frye offers perhaps the best and most coherent justification for the American formalist (or "contextualist") perspective among critics and scholars after World War II.

² The “intentional” and “affective” fallacies are proposed in *The Verbal Icon*, by W.K. Wimsatt (Lexington, Ky., 1954), and the “fallacy of imitative form” in *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937), by Yvor Winters, repr. in *In Defense of Reason* (Denver, 1947), pp. 41. 64. Though a considerable variety of heresies and fallacies has been uncovered by proponents of New Criticism, these three seem essential for the elimination of three of the four coordinates of art indicated by M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York, 1953), p. 6: the universe, artist, and audience, leaving the work itself. In Roman Jakobson’s paradigm in “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style and Language*, ed. by Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, 1960), p. 353, four of the six factors are eliminated (addresser, addressee, context, and contact), leaving only message and code (i.e. poem and language). Jakobson himself emphasizes the message and its poetic function, but not to the exclusion of the rest: “Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function . . .” (p. 356).

³ In both *The Function of the Orgasm*, trans. by Carfagno (New York, 1973), and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, trans. by Carfagno (New York, 1970), Wilhelm Reich discusses authoritarianism and its pathological collective manifestation as the outgrowth of sexual repression in early childhood and its diffusion with maturity to involve the entire personality in the negative effort to deny oneself. It is a temptation to extend his analysis to formalist literary criticism, which encourages the projection of one’s repressed inclinations to literature and then the repetition compulsion of incessantly trying to deny them even here, the more so the more clearly they are in evidence. Yvor Winters himself ironically illustrates this syndrome when he declares, “In fact, all feeling, if one gives oneself (that is, one’s form) up to it, is a way of disintegration; poetic form is by definition a means to arrest the disintegration and order the feeling . . .” in *Primitivism and Decadence*, ed. ci., p. 144. My recent article, “Up Against the ‘Mending Wall’: The Psychoanalysis of a Poem by Frost,” *College English*, 34/7 (April, 1973), 934-51, explores the effort to manage such feelings in a particular text and, to a certain extent, in the response it evokes in critics and readers.

⁴ Peter Lisca, *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, 1958), pp. 144-77. A good sampling of allegorical interpretations can also be found in *A Casebook on the Grapes of Wrath*, ed. by Agnes McNeill Donohue (New York, 1968).

⁵ Morgan’s theory of progressive stages of culture has since been discredited, succeeded by Malinowsky’s functionalism and the rigid scientific methodology of Boas, Kroeber, and their followers. Nevertheless, an evolutionary theory of primitive culture seems essential, and probably along lines not too remote from those proposed by Morgan.

⁶ Yvor Winters, “The Significance of *The Bridge*, by Hart Crane: or What Are We to Think of Professor X?” in *In Defense of Reason* (Swallow, 1947), pp. 601-2.

⁷ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford, 1971), p. ix. See also pp. 11, 102-3, and 106-9.

⁸ “Academic Irresponsibility,” *Playboy* (December, 1968), p. 225 ff. Fiedler also declares somewhere in *Being Busted* (New York, 1969) that being faithful to his ambiguities has always

been his most fundamental principle--a rather useful and interesting displacement of one of New Criticism's basic principles to life itself.

⁹⁹ “*ces glorieux mensonges*,” a hyperbole which Mallarmé proposed for the title of one of his collections of poetry in his letter to Henri Cazalis toward the end of April, 1866, in *Correspondance: 186-1871* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 208. In a subsequent letter to Cazalis on May 14, 1868, Mallarmé apparently contradicted himself but entirely in the spirit of his aesthetics: “*Il n’y a que la Beauté - et elle n’a qu’une expression parfaite, la Poésie. Tout le reste est mensonge - excepté pour ceux qui vivent du corps, l’amour, et cet amour de l’esprit, l’amitié*,” *Ibid.*, p. 243. Also I am aware that I somewhat distort Sartre’s theory of “bad faith” proposed in *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1965), esp. pp. 43-60. My excuse is that I do so to take into account Sartre’s substantially more basic commitment to his categories of anguish, abandonment, and despair in the act of authorship as compared to either the experience or criticism of literature.

¹⁰ I suggest the recursive function, “signifier to signifier *plus* signified,” to avoid the limitations of Saussure’s misleading dichotomy between signifier and signified in *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin (New York, 1966), pp. 65-70. Ogden and Richards’ correction in *The Meaning of Meaning* (London, 1956), pp. 4-6, seems as valid as ever, as does their argument, “. . . that when a context has affected us in the past the recurrence of merely a part of the context will cause us to react in the way in which we reacted before. A sign is always a stimulus similar to some part of an original stimulus and sufficient to call up the engram formed by that stimulus” (p. 53). In other words, if a sign can be recognized to function as an extractable component of its sign situation as well as an arbitrary token of what it signifies, then one gains a far more subtle understanding of the context and experience of words.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York, 1972), pp. 114-17.

¹² “An Apologie for Poetrie,” published in 1595.

¹³ Josephine Miles, “What We Compose,” *The Journal of the Conference on College Composition and Communication* (October, 1963), p. 2; and Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry* (New York, 1971), pp. 6-9.

¹⁴ I.A. Richards, *Science and Poetry*, repr. as *Poetries and Sciences* (New York, 1970), pp. 57-66.

¹⁵ Max Black, “Some Questions about Emotive Meaning,” *Philosophical Review*, 57 (1948), p. 114.

¹⁶ In *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1955), pp. 110-11, Richards explains, “The result of the co-ordination of a great number of impulses of different kinds is often that no *overt* action takes place . . . Indeed the difference between the intelligent or refined, and the stupid or crass person is a difference in the extent to which overt action can be replaced by incipient and imaginal action.” Freud is more abstract but says essentially the same thing in “The Ego and the

Id.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey (London, 1961), vol. 19, p. 55: “By virtue of its relation to the perceptual system, it [the ego] arranges the processes of the mind in a temporal mode and tests their correspondence with reality. By interposing the process of thinking it secures a postponement of motor discharges and controls the avenues to motility.”

¹⁷ Explained by Richardson in his “Author’s Preface” to *Clarissa*, published in 1759.

¹⁸ Of the many books and articles that treat the historic connection between economic matters and the rise of fiction, the best and most readable treatment is by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (California, 1957). When I had the opportunity to query Professor Watt about his ideological perspective in his book, he conceded that extensive consultations with Theodor Adorno had much to do with his writing the book.

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time*, trans. by John and Necke Mander (Harper & Row, 1962), p. 31.

²⁰ See fn. 16.

²¹ This argument is both explicit and implicit throughout *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), for example in Turner’s praise of Lofocos: “Like the Western pioneers, they protested against monopolies and special privilege. But they also had a constructive policy, whereby society was to be kept democratic by free gifts of public land, so that surplus labor might not bid against itself, but might find an outlet in the West. Thus to both the labor theorist and the practical pioneer, the existence of what seemed inexhaustible cheap land and the unpossessed resources with the condition of democracy” (p. 303).

²² Steinbeck’s use of the strike novel formula is discussed in more detail by Jules Chametzky in “The Ambivalent Ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 11/1 (Spring, 1965), pp. 35-44.

²³ “The Grapes of Wrath,” *Congressional Record*, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess. pt. 13, LXXXVI, pp. 139-40; included in *A Casebook on The Grapes of Wrath* (see fn. 4).

²⁴ *Forum*, 102 (November, 1939), pp. 232-38--reprinted in *A Casebook on the Grapes of Wrath*.

²⁵ *Their Blood Is Strong* (San Francisco, 1938); reprinted in *A Companion to the Grapes of Wrath*, ed. by Warren French (New York, 1963), pp. 62-63

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²⁶ Carey McWilliams, “California Pastoral,” *Antioch Review*, 2 (March, 1942), pp. 103-21; included in *A Casebook on the Grapes of Wrath* 9 (see n. 4, above). I can add here that I myself taught at the junior college for a semester twenty years later, my residence not more than a hundred yards from the football field. Modesto was prosperous and generous at the time.

²⁷ George Seldes dealt with this connection in *Facts and Fascism* (In Fact, 1943), and it has been mentioned in one context or another ever since. Unfortunately, the definitive study has yet to be published that documents the connection on a comprehensive basis.

²⁸ My explanation of Chamberlain's effort to divert Hitler's expansionism eastward against the Soviet Union essentially derives from D.F. Fleming's *The Cold War and Its Origins: 1917-1960*, 2 vols. (Doubleday, 1961), chpts. 4 and 5. A.J.P. Taylor tried to minimize this aspect of Chamberlain's policy in *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961), pp. 191-92, but he conceded that the eastward encouragement of Hitler's energies was at least considered among "ingenious observers."

²⁹ The importance of the economic downturn in the American economy in 1937 is discussed by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy in *Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1966), pp. 160-61 and 240-44; and the importance of World War II in finally terminating the American Great Depression is acknowledged by John Kenneth Galbraith in *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 69. For further information upon the war's effect upon the employment of migrant farmers, consult, "What Became of the Joads," by Warren French, in *A Companion to The Grapes of Wrath*, op. cit. pp. 93-101. French discloses (pp. 98-99) that employment opportunities during this period were also increased by the incarceration of 100,000 Japanese Americans, and to such an extent that Mexican nationals had to be imported by 1943.

³⁰ These include, among others, William Appleman Williams, D.F. Fleming, Gar Alperovitz, and Gabriel Kolko. Counter-attacks by Robert James Maddox, Ernest May, Robert Tucker, and others have been generally dismissed as being picayunish and irrelevant to the main lines of the revisionist position.