John Ditsky

John Steinbeck
and the Critics

JOHN DITSKY

JOHN STEINBECK
AND THE CRITICS

CAMDEN HOUSE

First published 2000
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
PO Box 41026, Rochester, NY 14604–4126 USA
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK

ISBN: 1–57113–210–4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ditsky, John.
John Steinbeck and the critics / John Ditsky.
p. cm. – (Studies in American literature and culture. Literary criticism in perspective)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1–57113–210–4 (alk. paper)
1. Steinbeck, John, 1902–1968—Criticism and interpretation—History. 2. Criticism—United States—History—20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3537.T3234 Z6278 2000
813'.52—dc21

00–036104

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America

John Steinbeck and the Critics

This work by a prominent Steinbeck scholar begins with a study of the novelist's early celebrity in the 1930s and 1940s. Professor Ditsky shows that by the late 1940s there is some falling off in Steinbeck's critical reputation, and yet that is also the period in which the "first generation" of Steinbeck critics did their first work: seminal commentary by Peter Lisca, Warren French, and Joseph Fontenrose. These critics were unwilling to accept the fact that the proletarian writer of the 1930s was a thing of the past, and that formally he had become much more experimental. In the 1960s, a second generation of critics such as Robert DeMott, Louis Owens, Mimi Gladstein and others, led by the Steinbeck Society's Tetsumaro Hayashi, began to show, if hardly adoringly, what the later Steinbeck was about. As the anniversaries of publication of the classic early works approached in the 1970s, there was a quantitative peaking of book-length criticism, accompanied by a spate of conferences in various worldwide venues. A number of anthologies of journal-published articles were published, including one edited by Professor Ditsky. The last two decades have seen new voices emerge, many going beyond close readings to apply contemporary critical methods to a writer increasingly seen as postmodernist.

John Ditsky teaches creative writing at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He has published more than 1300 poems, and has written four critical works, three of them on Steinbeck.

Studies in American Literature and Culture:
Literary Criticism in Perspective

Editorial Board

Literary Criticism in Perspective

About *Literary Criticism in Perspective*

Books in the series *Literary Criticism in Perspective* trace literary scholarship and criticism on major and neglected writers alike, or on a single major work, a group of writers, a literary school or movement. In so doing the authors — authorities on the topic in question who are also well-versed in the principles and history of literary criticism — address a readership consisting of scholars, students of literature at the graduate and undergraduate level, and the general reader. One of the primary purposes of the series is to illuminate the nature of literary criticism itself, to gauge the influence of social and historic currents on aesthetic judgments once thought objective and normative.

To my late mother, who taught me to read,
and father, who taught me to work, and of course
to my most patient wife Sue, who has put up with
the tantrums that result when the effects
of reading and working intermix in too heady
and unstable an emulsion. And to daughter Kate,
who is always teaching us something.

Acknowledgments

ANYTHING BUT A SHORT LIST would be unfair to the many people who have helped and influenced me through the years, but I would especially mention Tetsumaro Hayashi, whose relentless zeal drove many of us onward for a quarter of a century, Roy S. Simmonds, who has been a faithful and most encouraging correspondent for well over a decade, and Robert DeMott, the most impressive and thorough scholar of Steinbeck in our generation, and an excellent friend. I could not have completed this manuscript without the consistent and caring attention of Lorraine Cantin, who word-processed it — over and over again. Finally, I must thank my University of Windsor and its plucky Department of English for this final sabbatical time and for the unique opportunity for this American to teach John Steinbeck to his heart's delight on soil hardly foreign.

Introduction

LIKE OTHER VOLUMES IN THE SERIES Literary Criticism in Perspective, this one on John Steinbeck (1902–68) attempts to give the reader an idea of the shape and direction of Steinbeck criticism over the past sixty years. That criticism has been fairly voluminous, of late increasingly so; and thus it has been necessary to confine this survey to critical books. However, many of the best critical articles on Steinbeck's work have been gathered in the book-length collections covered herein. It has also been necessary to exclude critical surveys in which John Steinbeck plays only a nominal role.

However, the flexibility which marks this series apart from its lockstep predecessors meant that I was able to include mention of all books written on Steinbeck to date, with proportionate attention awarded according to worth — or its felt lack. There have been bibliographies and bibliographical studies of Steinbeck criticism before this one, but none has been allowed the scope of coverage this full-length survey offers, and of course none is as up-to-date. Rather than mention these earlier efforts here, then, they will be covered in their appropriate niches in the five chapters to come.

I have attempted to provide a sense of the development of Steinbeck criticism in book form in these chapters, and my presentation is therefore almost wholly chronological. The exception is to be found in the third chapter, in which the efforts of Tetsumaro Hayashi and the Steinbeck Society, which cover three decades of serious attention and catalytic enterprise, are shown as reflecting in themselves the major changes in direction of Steinbeck criticism in its most crucial years.

Thus I hope I have been able to satisfy the norms on which this series was founded while taking advantage of the freedom it offered me to present a fuller, more comprehensive coverage.

Excluded for reasons of relative unavailability are books published in countries other than the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This is regrettable but necessary, since Steinbeck has been widely translated throughout the world, and even though the Asian contingent of the International John Steinbeck Society, especially the Japanese membership, has been considerably active in Steinbeck studies — and in organizing the International Steinbeck Congresses, which are held

every five years or so and will likely see a fifth occurrence on the centenary of Steinbeck's birth in 2002. Also excluded are study guides meant only for younger readers, most field guides to Steinbeck country, and the like, that is, books meant for the tourist and the novice. Our intended readership consists of serious university students, both undergraduate and graduate; professional scholars; educated lay readers, bibliophiles, and librarians. But purely bibliographical studies have also had to be excluded, that is, those meant for collectors of particular editions or those interested in collection holdings; those titles of interest to general Steinbeck scholars have been dealt with in turn. In addition, special Steinbeck numbers of various literary journals have also been omitted owing to difficulty of acquisition.

Additionally, there has not been either space or rationale to include the new, larger-format Penguin editions of Steinbeck titles, an ongoing series with (to date) uniformly excellent introductions — but only introductions.

As for obtaining personal, professional, or institutional copies of the titles surveyed herein, the news is quite good. A number of dealers, particularly in California, offer Steinbeck titles as specialty items. Moreover, as work on Steinbeck has increasingly moved from token offerings from major commercial publishing houses to series titles from smaller presses living off sales to libraries, and (as Steinbeck's reputation has been buttressed by further fresh critical activity) to the university presses — which are much more likely to maintain a serious backlist over time — these books are mostly out there for the obtaining, especially with the help of the Internet. Good hunting! I hope I have succeeded at my task.

Contents

1: Pioneers

THOUGH JOHN STEINBECK'S FIRST NOVEL, *Cup of Gold*, was published as early as 1929, it was not until well after *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *In Dubious Battle* (1936), and even *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Long Valley* (1938) that Harry Thornton Moore's *The Novels of John Steinbeck: A First Study* appeared, that is, in the year in which the world received his acknowledged masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

We might well wonder why it took a decade to begin to give Steinbeck serious critical attention at book length. The defensive Steinbeckians of years ago might have been quick to point to the palpable bias of East Coast intellectuals against writers from the West or, for that matter, the South and even the Midwest. The point is by now largely moot. The fact remains that Steinbeck, with *Grapes*, had written a mighty book with a mighty theme, as Melville would have put it, and by encapsulating a major development in American history, the westward migration of victims of the 1930s Dust Bowl conditions, he could no longer be ignored.

For John Steinbeck understood that the thirties had rekindled the pioneer spirit among Americans who had only, as it were, paused in their westward trek almost half a century earlier. Whether they understood this consciously we cannot know, but that John Steinbeck understood their most instinctive perceptions we cannot doubt. It is interesting that this first study should have included what has become a standard feature in critical volumes on Steinbeck: the area map. Maps and charts based on "Steinbeck country" have been a feature of Steinbeck criticism from the beginning, usually indicating the "real" or putative locales where his fictions are based. Implications of such "facts" are not wholly innocent, nor are they a matter of informing ignorant easterners about the territory they are reading about, perhaps for the first time. For the identification of Steinbeck with northern California south of San Francisco had a considerable impact on the first decades of Steinbeck criticism; it is surely part of why his first important critics could not stomach his moves to other locales, such as Europe and the East. Steinbeck's abandoning of his native region surely played a role in

tempting his early major critics to conclude that in the process, he betrayed not only his roots and his philosophy, but also his art.

In fairness to Steinbeck, it is accurate to note that some of his critics could not accommodate his growth as an artist. The fellow whom such critics grew up admiring in their early careers refused to avoid change, and while he changed into something of a postmodernist, they continued to cherish the quondam socialist. But it is not the purpose of this project to evaluate this difference of opinion.

It remains something of a mystery that, given the power of Steinbeck's first publications and their regional concerns and relevancies — the pirate potboiler *Cup of Gold* of course excluded — it took longer until the West was awake to him. And even a casual (but educated) reader of *Cup* should have been alerted to the fact that Steinbeck was mesmerized by Arthurian themes and devices; such a reader should also have been able to pursue that notion through succeeding works wherein main characters, generally male, bond (if only fitfully) in quest of some elusive ideal, usually epitomized as female, some holy "cup," in other words, some grail.

Considering the fact that Moore's *The Novels of John Steinbeck* is the first volume of its kind, the book holds up well even today. Its observations are judicious, such as when Moore observes of *Cup of Gold* that its young author "had not yet reached the stage where he could bring all his people fully to life" (Moore 15), whereas *The Pastures of Heaven* contains "imaginative touches foretelling some of Steinbeck's greatest achievements (18).

At the same time, Moore wrote too soon after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* to have fully come to terms with it. He repeats the mistaken assumption that Steinbeck traveled west with the Okies (88). He places Steinbeck with Thomas Wolfe among novelists who attempt to combine the individual and the universal, noting that the "only American who has successfully created life-in-literature on the scale of the great writers of the earth is Herman Melville," seemingly brushing off a certain Mississippian contemporary of both Wolfe and Steinbeck; and not all readers of *Grapes* would agree that in the end the book lacks "well proportioned and intensified drama," or that "[t]here is no vital conflict in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (68–69). However, Moore senses Steinbeck's ambitious tackling of issues of scale, and it is in those terms that he finds the novel to have fallen short. In the end, it is too bad that we do not have the chance to see what Harry Thornton Moore might have said about the next two decades of Steinbeck's fiction.

In particular, Moore very pertinently raises the issue of *place* in a way that is prescient, that is, prophetic of studies yet to come:

> In every discussion of a Steinbeck story a good deal of space may safely be devoted to examining the author's power of evoking that quality we have no satisfactory word for — it is what the Germans call *"Stimmung,"* and what we try to try to approximate with the word "atmosphere." Steinbeck is perhaps more interested than any writer since D. H. Lawrence in what Lawrence called the Spirit of Place. But this is only the lyric side of novel-writing. Steinbeck . . . has worked within the established borders of novel-writing, so we may fairly use the customary methods of judgment when scrutinizing his characters and their problems. (15)

In other words, Moore seemed — in 1939 — to be open to the notion of thematic portability. Moore, unlike his later colleagues, might have allowed Steinbeck more room to grow.

In the same year as Moore's critical volume, 1939, there also appeared a brochure entitled *John Steinbeck: Personal and Bibliographical Notes,* written by newspaper reviewer Lewis Gannett. This brief work is of little worth to today's reader, and not merely because it (unlike Moore's volume) consists almost wholly of anecdotal information, but on the grounds that it is essentially an attempt to sell titles from the Steinbeck list of Viking Press, which had acquired publication rights to Steinbeck's earliest titles in 1938 and intended to print everything he would write from then on. Consider the differences between Gannett's conclusion and Moore's: Gannett writes of Steinbeck's decision to write the "saga" of the Okies, "It took him a long time, and it made his biggest and richest and ripest, his toughest book and his tenderest, *The Grapes of Wrath*" (Gannett, *Notes* 14). Even readers inclined to agree will recognize puffery when they see it; the work is essentially a long jacket blurb.

Gannett continued to be useful to Viking and Steinbeck when in 1943 he compiled *The Portable Steinbeck*, one of the very first titles in that extremely popular series. The anthology was a sign of Steinbeck's sustained ability to sell books and please his readers, and it contained the full texts of *The Red Pony* and *Of Mice and Men*, along with substantial excerpts from the best of Steinbeck's other novels and stories. Reflecting the times, a fair amount of war-related material was included, and that amount increased when the volume was revised in 1946. (The bibliographical information included continued to be updated well into the 1950s.) Gannett's contribution is again anecdotal, for the most

part, although his introduction, "Steinbeck's Way of Writing," is of genuine critical interest as well as entertaining.

Towards the end of his introduction, Gannett attempts to summarize a career only halfway over:

> So there . . . is the story of a creative writer at work. Certain patterns are recurrent: the restless wandering, when a story is in gestation; the false starts; the utter absorption in creation, when the letters become sparser and the work is everything; finally, fatigue, uncertainty of the product, and a few wisps of anger at critics' misunderstanding. The war interrupts, but merely interrupts, the recurrent pattern; and now the war is over. The rest of the autobiography is for John Steinbeck . . . to write, and it would be presumptuous for a critic to attempt to anticipate it. . . . (Gannett, *Portable* xxvii-xxviii)

This is not only a sound assessment of a pattern but a prescient adumbration of things to come. In sum, this collection in its two editions surely deserved its sales figures, and probably led many a student (and other reader) into the world of John Steinbeck.

Steinbeck had been changing some of his attitudes towards life and literature since as early, it can be argued, as *The Grapes of Wrath.* Those critics who praised his work of the 1930s because they thought him a naturalist, a proletarian, or even a communist seemed baffled, even betrayed, once they began to perceive changes in his fiction, even if they did not understand those changes. Somewhat paradoxically, this led to the first flourishing of book-length Steinbeck criticism during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Steinbeck had largely finished his work as a writer. Whether or not they agreed on what they perceived to be going on in Steinbeck's career, a new generation of Steinbeck critics had emerged, and lively controversies over the man's merits as a writer filled the pages of a clutch of highly significant and influential critical volumes.

But first, a kind of summing up took place. In 1957, two University of New Mexico professors, E. W. Tedlock, Jr., and C. V. Wicker, published the first book collection of criticism by many hands, older work as well as new, on John Steinbeck. Called *Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years,* it accurately mirrors the state of Steinbeck studies from their earliest beginnings to about 1956. Though the critical-anthology approach of Tedlock and Wicker is different from the one chosen for this title, our title pays homage to theirs.

Moreover, there are six short contributions by Steinbeck himself, who had been stung years before by the critical failure of his final "play-novella," *Burning Bright.* Whether the critics did not understand what

Steinbeck was trying to do or understood it all too well is still perhaps a moot point, but it is clear from Steinbeck's essays (and letters) that the writer at first rankled under criticism, then seemed to agree that the work deserved to fail, and finally became defensive again about how critics, as opposed to creative artists, went about their work.

Hence the tone of Steinbeck's reprinted essay, "Critics, Critics, Burning Bright," together with the extra spin that Tedlock and Wicker's title gives the word. It must be noted that the book's editors appear to agree with the writer for their own prudent reasons, reflecting shared attitudes in an era when the close readings of a generation of scholars weaned on the New Criticism ran afoul of other academics who brought philosophy, along with notions of what a writer is allowed to do, to their commentaries. Such a defense of what Steinbeck chose to do on behalf of his art is appropriate to not only the time but the writer himself, whose works appear to invite surface readings because of their approachability.

Thus it is highly ironic that at the end of their thorough introduction to their volume, in which they have dealt in depth with the contents and approaches of the critics included, Tedlock and Wicker compare their experience as critical anthologists to coming home from a cocktail party "late at night not entirely sure what all the talk was about but determined to think about it some other and soberer day" (Tedlock and Wicker x1). The irony lies in the fact that in the process of making their call for fairness in reading Steinbeck, they almost precisely reverse the reasoning of today's new students of Steinbeck (yet to be heard from in this volume), who argue that we need new ways to read the man, and that inevitably means bringing critical theory into play.

Tedlock and Wicker conclude that "many of the reviewers and critics have made serious blunders," and we presume they include in the statement even their own choices, especially "when they deal with his so-called philosophy":

> They start with assumptions of what a correct philosophy is and judge Steinbeck's fiction to be faulty because he does not agree with them. They show themselves unable or unwilling to follow the old, sane, fundamental rule which obligates critics to try to understand the author's intention and to judge his success or failure in realizing it before they shift ground to more universal and . . . controversial considerations. . . . there is a tendency to call him a realist and then to condemn him because he is not the critic's particular brand of realist . . . despite the fact that even in his early work it ought to have been apparent that Steinbeck characteristically worked through sym-

> bol and myth as well as some sort of verisimilitude and that to read him on only one level, that of mere story, was to miss the point. (xl)

Similarly, the editors deal with the charge against Steinbeck of sentimentality, noting that there is "nothing disreputable about combining in a single vision of life an objective attitude and affection" (xli).

The critical common sense expressed by the editors above does not prevent them from suggesting that some of Steinbeck's "attitudes towards critics, and intellectuals in general . . . show an antagonism more suited to the Bohemian rebellions of the Twenties than to the responsibility-demanding Fifties" (xli). One wonders what Steinbeck would have made of the editors' allusion to the "responsibility-demanding Fifties," since a few years later he would be publishing his last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which took a vastly different attitude towards the 1950s and notions of personal duty. Unless Tedlock and Wicker were especially far-sighted, it is likely that Steinbeck did not find that responsibility was really demanded, as it were, until the 1961 Inauguration of President Kennedy, since he regretted deeply his country's double rejection of the candidacy of Adlai E. Stevenson.

With this speculation I mean to place in temporal context Tedlock and Wicker's choices for inclusion, especially the earliest. Some of the writers appear twice, and their contributions are staples of the Steinbeck critical canon. These include Joseph Warren Beach's "John Steinbeck: Journeyman Artist" and "John Steinbeck: Art and Propaganda," Frederic I. Carpenter's "John Steinbeck: American Dreamer" and "The Philosophical Joads" (with its famous tracing of Steinbeck's ideas to American thinkers of the middle and late nineteenth century); Woodburn O. Ross's "John Steinbeck: Earth and Stars" and "John Steinbeck: Naturalism's Priest"; and Martin Staples Shockley's "The Reception of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Oklahoma." Other essays have proved lastingly challenging over the years. The salient point here, where individual essays cannot be given much space, is that the editors made excellent choices that do more than fix Steinbeck criticism in a time venue a decade before the writer's death: They also eerily predict the course of future Steinbeck criticism.

The state of uncertainty Steinbeck had been arousing among his critics for more than a decade is apparent in the anthology's last entry by one of them, Joseph Wood Krutch who, in *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, reviewed *East of Eden* and was chastened into cautiousness by the implications of his task. Krutch does his best not to be precipitously judgmental about what he has noted:

> Moral relativism and some sort of deterministic philosophy have commonly seemed to be implied in the writings of that school of hard-boiled realists with which Mr. Steinbeck has sometimes been loosely associated. It is difficult to imagine how any novel could more explicitly reject both than they are rejected in "East of Eden." The author, who was acclaimed as a social critic in "The Grapes of Wrath" and sometimes abused as a mere writer of sensational melodrama in some subsequent books, plainly announces here that it is as a moralist that he wants to be taken. (305)

And then Krutch simultaneously waffles about his stance on this perceived change in Steinbeck's strategy and puts his finger on the new issue not yet ready to be settled:

> The merits of so ambitious and absorbing a book are sure to be widely and hotly debated. The final verdict will not, I think, depend upon the validity of the thesis which is part of a debate almost as old as human thought or upon any possible doubt concerning the vividness of Mr. Steinbeck's storytelling. On the highest level the question is this: Does the fable really carry the thesis; is the moral implicit in or merely imposed upon the story; has the author recreated a myth or merely moralized a tale? There is no question that Mr. Steinbeck has written an intensely interesting and impressive book. (305)

Not at all a bad response on first acquaintance.

An odd coincidence, if that, partially explains the special virtue of this volume. The editors had decided to include Lewis Gannett's *Portable Steinbeck* introduction, perhaps because Viking had decided another edition was needed and the essay was no longer profitable; in any event, Gannett's essay was accompanied by another specifically designed to be biographical but not to intrude on Gannett's established space. The writer was Peter Lisca, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin; and he not only wrote the new biographical material but revised sections of his doctoral dissertation on Steinbeck, on *The Wayward Bus* and *The Pearl*, specifically for this volume, and in the process managed to set the tone for the arrival of the second generation of Steinbeck critics.

And among these critics he was the first with a serious academic stake in what happened to Steinbeck studies in the next few years. With the arrival of Peter Lisca, the days when John Steinbeck was at the mercy of newspaper and magazine critics had ended. Now he was either the darling or the damned of the academics, since magazines like *Time* never pretended to like, or even to have read, his work. This in a sense made Steinbeck "respectable," since he was no longer at the very un-