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America, Japan, and Beyond

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CROSSING THE OCEANS: THE FUTURE OF STEINBECK STUDIES IN AMERICA, JAPAN, AND BEYOND

STEINBECK REVIEW

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I WOULD LIKE TO BEGIN BY THANKING Dr. Kiyoshi Nakayama and the John Steinbeck Society of Japan for welcoming the New Steinbeck Society of America as a participant in the Sixth International Steinbeck Congress. I believe the professionalism and courtesy of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan should be the model for all scholarly and social activities within the Steinbeck world.

In 1988 John Ditsky gave a keynote address entitled “John Steinbeck—Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” which was subsequently reprinted in the *Steinbeck Quarterly* and later in *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute*. In this address Ditsky examines the criticism of the past, with its tendency to focus on the writer’s “linear development”—Steinbeck’s early period, the Depression and working class Steinbeck, the war writer/correspondent, the man obsessed with morality and the Arthurian myth (177). Although such categories may have been necessary in giving us an initial sense of the man and writer, Ditsky argues that present and future Steinbeck scholars are now coming to see a “continuity” and “oneness” in the writer’s body of work (179). Instead of taking the all too easy path of judging Steinbeck “on the basis of whether or not one agrees with him” or relying on the journals and letters so the author can “explain himself,” Ditsky predicts that future critics will instead apply “critical or philosophy theory” in an “effort to see him whole” (180, 182).

Here I would like to continue John Ditsky’s train of thought by focusing on two ambitious themes: what is amiss within Steinbeck studies today both critically and professionally, and what we can do in the future to address these shortcomings. As

a relative newcomer to the Steinbeck world, I recognize that my perspective is limited. Yet I believe that we are now ready for the third generation of scholars to whom Ditsky refers—those who can see the limitations of the past and problems of the present—to move Steinbeck studies in a different direction for the future. Of course, none of this would even be possible without the painstaking foundation provided by critics of previous generations—Peter Lisca, Tetsumaro Hayashi, Warren French, Yasuo Hashiguchi, and many, many others.

THE WINTER OF SCHOLARLY DISCONTENT

Modern Steinbeck scholarship began with the creation of the Steinbeck Bibliographical Society in 1966 and the *Steinbeck Quarterly* in 1969. Later, under the leadership of Tetsumaro Hayashi, Preston Beyer, Peter Lisca, Sakae Morioka, and Warren French, the Steinbeck Society of America (1968-1988) was formed, which later evolved into the International Steinbeck Society (1988-1998) (Hayashi 173). Although many critics had explored Steinbeck's work before 1969, it was the formation of the *Steinbeck Quarterly* at Ball State University and the birth of literary societies which encouraged a profusion of new studies and scholars within the field. Without a society and journal, such as Japan's own *Steinbeck Studies*, the scholarly community suffers from a lack of conferences, communication, and collegial support. Again, what the John Steinbeck Society of Japan has done—with its outstanding leadership, annual Steinbeck conference, bi-yearly newsletter, and encouragement of Steinbeck scholars both in Japan and abroad—should be commended as *the* model for academic professionalism.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Steinbeck activities and scholarship within Steinbeck's home country. Someone once noted that literary types often assume an importance entirely at odds with the degree of actual notice they receive from the world at large. Yes, our work finds its way into undergraduate research papers, and television and radio networks contact us on anniversaries for an interview or sound bite. But ultimately, as Ditsky noted, "Steinbeck's meaning is in the hands of his readership," who will discover "their own applications of his works to their lives" (185). As Steinbeck himself pronounced in his Nobel Prize speech, literature is "not promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches"—it is written for all humanity, with the high moral

purpose of showing us what we might become (172). *Of Mice and Men* will continue to stir readers long after our own books and essays cease to be read.

However, I believe John Steinbeck would admit that scholars, journals, and literary societies do play a role in bringing exposure to authors—particularly to those aspects of their work which remain under-appreciated—and do influence the estimation of their place among their peers. Critical tides do change, and those scholars who devote their professional lives to Steinbeck—Tetsumaro Hayashi, Barbara Heavilin, Bob DeMott, Kiyoshi Nakayama—do play a role in how the general public views the merit and substance of an author.

Since the discontinuation of the *Steinbeck Quarterly* in 1994, this critical voice has been dimmed to an unacceptable degree in the United States. In the past decade we have had two fine international conferences, one in California (1997) and one in New York (2002); we've had *The Steinbeck Newsletter*, later San José's *Steinbeck Studies*, with two or three critical articles per issue; and we've had several fine essay collections. There is even an organization, "The John Steinbeck Society," which sponsors a session at the annual American Literature Association conference. I know this because I was invited by Susan Shillinglaw, the society's de facto president, to present at the 2002 event with Mimi Gladstein and Katie Rodger on the topic of "Steinbeck at 100." If memory serves me correctly, we had four people come to our session, one of whom was Mimi's husband. Here were four conference attendees to a session on one of America's few recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature; a society without any real influence, communication, or leadership;¹ and a forty-page newsletter instead of a scholarly journal. This, in my view, was simply inexcusable.

So, when Barbara Heavilin contacted me in December 2002 to invite me to join her as co-editor of the *Steinbeck Yearbook*, the time seemed right to move Steinbeck studies in a different direction. Given the expense of the *Yearbook* (\$60 per volume), Barbara and I created a proposal for a new, more affordable academic journal that would continue the long and respected tradition of the *Steinbeck Quarterly*. In this effort we received the full endorsement and encouragement of Tetsumaro Hayashi, and through him the endorsement of Elaine Steinbeck, who was a champion of both Ball State University and the critical work that Dr. Hayashi initiated.² We were also able to assemble the

finest editorial board of Steinbeck scholars in the world, with John Ditsky as Chair, Tetsumaro Hayashi as Honorary Senior Consultant, and several members of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan, including Kiyoshi Nakayama, Hiromasa Takamura, and Miyuki Mawatari as our assistant bibliographer.

However, our efforts to revive a journal and society did not receive the support or endorsement of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San José State University. Initially, we did receive encouragement from the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, with their director offering a collaborative relationship for the future. But this offer was later withdrawn, I believe because of outside pressure. When I shared our proposal for a new journal and sponsoring society with one prominent Steinbeck critic in January 2003, he replied, "Nothing you do will succeed without the support of San José." The implication seemed clear—California was the center of the Steinbeck universe, and despite the current situation in early 2003 of having neither a journal nor a functioning society, it would be best to leave things as they were. This view was later substantiated when some scholars declined an invitation to serve on the Editorial Board of *The Steinbeck Review* out of fear of future consequences to their professional careers.

This atmosphere of territorial control and even condescension toward any efforts to advance the literary reputation of John Steinbeck by those outside of the established group needed to end. In my mind it placed too much power in the hands of too few people while having the indirect effect of discouraging many new scholars from joining the Steinbeck community. With Steinbeckians divided into different camps, there was a lack of a concerted effort to promote the work of the author.³ I believe our numbers would be greater today if some American critics had spent the last ten years promoting Steinbeck alongside their own scholarly reputations. Such has always been the focus of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan. It will now be the focus of the Steinbeck Society of America and *The Steinbeck Review*, as it merges with *Steinbeck Studies*.

When we first proposed *The Steinbeck Review* to the University of Idaho Press, concern was expressed that there just wasn't enough good Steinbeck scholarship to sustain both a newsletter and a full-sized journal. I am new to all of this and admittedly lack the experience of soliciting submissions and cultivating a critical atmosphere over an extended period of time.

But this perspective still strikes me as short-sighted and entirely at odds with Steinbeck's own optimism. I believe that in the near future we will have vibrant Steinbeck societies spanning the globe, that there are hundreds of emerging scholars with a keen interest in John Steinbeck—with new thoughts and directions for Steinbeck criticism—who will join our efforts if we provide a collegial atmosphere and an outlet for their creativity. The leaders of Steinbeck studies today need to believe in such possibilities as well.

While a newsletter and a journal seemed fine to me, it was premature to have two American journals focused entirely on Steinbeck: San José's vastly expanded *Steinbeck Studies* (which increased to 200 pages in the Winter 2004 issue) and Scarecrow Press's *The Steinbeck Review*. Time will tell if there is enough fertile scholarship to sustain two journals in the future. But with the merging of the two journals now, it cannot be denied that the general situation has improved immeasurably—given the past decade's reliance on a newsletter—and that the situation for Steinbeck scholars in particular has clearly improved. We also have a dynamic society which sponsored an international conference in Sun Valley, with tours of Ernest Hemingway sites and a keynote address by National Book Award recipient and African-American scholar Charles Johnson. There is an excitement about Steinbeck studies in America today that has not existed since the centennial celebration. In the best interest of promoting the author and Steinbeck scholarship, I join the Center for Steinbeck Studies in San José and my colleagues in the Steinbeck Society of America, the Cannery Row Foundation, and Ball State University, in inviting the National Steinbeck Center to unite with us in an effort aimed at promoting the literary reputation of John Steinbeck within his own country.

IN SEARCH OF A SCHOLARLY COMPASS

I believe it is clear what must be done to encourage Steinbeck scholars professionally in the future. The question of the future focus for Steinbeck research is more difficult, given the indeterminate nature of the subject. Just as we don't know the period which will eventually supersede the postmodern movement in literature, we also cannot see, as critics, the turn of events that will ultimately shape Steinbeck scholarship. However, it would be wise for the immediate future to follow John Ditsky's insistence on creative new readings that see Steinbeck whole through the application of philosophical and critical theory.

**... I BELIEVE
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AT HAND.**

As I have argued elsewhere, “John Steinbeck stands in elite company in American letters . . . [as] one of a handful of writers . . . who actually represent America in some significant way to the rest of the world. His best work. . . [rests]

confidently alongside that of his artistic contemporaries” (George, “John Steinbeck” 88). For that reason, I believe the end of Steinbeck apologetics is at hand. Brian Railsback confides that in the 1980s an academic career focused on Steinbeck was rather like “a long walk into the sea” (88). Today’s literary climate is much drier, having changed at least to the degree that Steinbeck is again afforded mention alongside Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald as a major figure of American modernism. Our conference on “Steinbeck and His Contemporaries” emphasized to the strongest degree possible what should now be clear to everyone—John Steinbeck was a writer of incredible artistic and intellectual depth who was able to span the divide between ordinary readers and academics in a way reminiscent of Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, and Twain. The time for reactionary defensiveness and conference sessions with four attendees is over. As critics, scholars, and readers of Steinbeck, we too should “roar like a lion” with pride in our favorite author (Steinbeck 172).

In choosing to focus our literary careers on the work of John Steinbeck, we are also fortunate for a number of reasons. First, Steinbeck is arguably the most read author in American classrooms today, and hence his work will always be relevant, whether as the focus of censorship issues, environmental concerns, ethnic relations, or as the subject of a new play or movie production. The same cannot be said of many of his peers; as Ditsky notes, “the fortunes of a writer like Ezra Pound . . . [seem to] depend entirely on the academics” (182). Second, as scholars from John Timmerman to Jay Parini have observed, there are whole fields of study that to date have not been examined, including Steinbeck’s aesthetics, interdisciplinary connections, and teaching possibilities. With mountains of scholarship already in existence, a budding Shakespearian critic faces challenges that the Steinbeck critic does not. I believe there are dozens of new approaches and hundreds of ground-breaking studies yet to be produced on John Steinbeck.

In conclusion, let me offer my own modest suggestions as to what some of these new “critical and philosophical” approaches suggested by John Ditsky might be. If indeed compartmentalization and linear approaches are nearing an end, as are further discussions of Steinbeck’s “phalanx” or “non-teleological” philosophy, then such approaches may be replaced with the following (Ditsky 184).

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

In my estimation one of the finest pieces of scholarship created to date within Steinbeck studies is Susan Shillinglaw’s and Kevin Hearle’s *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*. A carefully edited collection of essays from the 1997 Fourth International Steinbeck Conference, this book stands as a model for interdisciplinary studies to come, with subtopics examining “Steinbeck as World Citizen,” “Steinbeck’s Women,” and “Steinbeck’s Science and Ethics” (v-vi). Each of these areas is itself worthy of numerous and extended critical treatments given the interdisciplinary appeal and richness of the Steinbeck canon. My own recently published work, *The Moral Philosophy of John Steinbeck* (Scarecrow Press, 2005), is evidence that scholars have merely scratched the surface of Steinbeck’s implications for ethics. Critic Joseph Allegretti has suggested that Scarecrow publish an entire series of Steinbeck books with an interdisciplinary focus: Steinbeck and Religion/Christianity, Steinbeck and Myth, Steinbeck and Women/Feminism, Steinbeck and Eastern Philosophy, Steinbeck and Business. Future studies examining the author from such perspectives and others—the social and hard sciences, literary theory and multiculturalism, film studies—all promise an intellectual renaissance to come in interdisciplinary approaches to John Steinbeck’s work.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

John Steinbeck: Centennial Reflections by American Writers and *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute* are two recent works offering perspectives on the author from his own peers within literature. The list of those who either admire Steinbeck or credit him with influencing them as an artist is impressive indeed and includes Tom Wolfe, Edward Albee, E. L. Doctorow, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Barry Lopez, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, Terry Tempest Williams, Budd Schulberg, and the recently deceased Arthur Miller. According to Miller, no other “American

writer, with the possible exception of Mark Twain, . . . so deeply penetrated the political life of the country” as Steinbeck did with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. One of the most promising endeavors for the future, I believe, will be the blossoming of comparative studies on Steinbeck and his peers—Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Willa Cather, and a multitude of international writers—as well as studies of authorial influences on Steinbeck and the author’s continuing influence on writers today. Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Terrance McNally asserts that although “Hemingway influenced the way people wrote more than John Steinbeck did,” Steinbeck had “a much greater influence” on other writers’ humanistic sensibilities (George, *Centennial Tribute* 81). As evidenced by the response to our “Steinbeck and His Contemporaries” conference—with three days of concurrent sessions by scholars from around the world—the time is ripe for reassessing Steinbeck’s place among his literary peers.

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AESTHETICS

As John Ditsky notes, for the past two decades Bob DeMott has been the vanguard figure “in calling for greater awareness of Steinbeck’s inventive artistry” (181). Indeed, DeMott’s *Steinbeck’s Typewriter: Essays on His Art* today stands as the most in-depth treatment of Steinbeck’s aesthetics, particularly in its exploration of the author’s

“interior spaces and . . . creative habits”—elements of Steinbeck’s artistry which “have been not only seriously underestimated but woefully ignored” (xvi). Steinbeck’s creative process, his oft misunderstood use of sentiment and humor, his postmodern narrative technique, his incredible literary range—romantic, realist, naturalist, fabulist, moralist—all have yet to be fully explored. Unexamined as well is the role that ethical criticism—in the tradition of Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum—may play in our appreciating the “shaping power at work in Steinbeck’s novels” (DeMott 276). As Booth argues, when we read attentively and even passionately, we in effect “surrender” ourselves to the

values and thoughts of the implied author (138-39). The intimacy of this reading experience with Steinbeck, including all of its aesthetic and moral implications, remains to be written.⁴

PEDAGOGY

A final area for future Steinbeck criticism is the ongoing exploration of ways to teach Steinbeck more effectively. If John Steinbeck is indeed the most popular author in high school and college classrooms from Maine to California, the fact remains that he is also one of the most censored, with the American Library Association placing *Of Mice and Men* sixth on its list of most challenged books from 1990-2001, behind Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and in front of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. Clearly, much work needs to be done to assist secondary and college teachers in grappling with the demands of an author possessing an artistic-intellectual repertoire from *To a God Unknown* and *Tortilla Flat* to *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*. It can be a dizzying, exhilarating experience reading a writer who constantly calls for the best you can summon as a reader. It is even more of a challenge to teach Steinbeck in ways that will make sense of this variety, ways that can help the student see him "whole." For this reason *The Steinbeck Review* should encourage continuing explorations of innovative teaching techniques and approaches to Steinbeck's works.

CROSSING THE OCEANS

With the discontinuation of the *Steinbeck Quarterly*, Japan's *Steinbeck Studies* became the longest running publication in the Steinbeck world. In its "Special Message" of May 2004, Kiyoshi Nakayama notes with optimism the stepping aside of many first-generation Steinbeck scholars as a rising generation takes their place. Dr. Nakayama also asks, "Now, what new kind of research should we undertake as Steinbeck scholars at the beginning of the 21st century?" (1). I believe this question should guide us in the coming years as we forge new directions and seek renewed alliance among Steinbeck scholars, organizations, and readers everywhere. We must raise the bar of Steinbeck scholarship without becoming trendy or succumbing to academic exclusivity. Future conferences need the support and promotional assistance of all within the Steinbeck world. A new spirit of collegiality and goodwill will infuse our united efforts, evidencing what Steinbeck himself alluded to as "man's proven capacity for greatness of heart

and spirit—for gallantry in defeat, for courage, compassion and love” (“Nobel Steinbeck Prize” 173). We in America have much to learn from our colleagues in Japan concerning these capacities and virtues.

NOTES

¹ The description of “The John Steinbeck Society” can be found through a link on the web site for San José State University’s Center for Steinbeck Studies (www.steinbeck.sjsu.edu/center). The society sponsors the Louis Owens essay contest and the Steinbeck session at the annual ALA conference, the first of which is indeed a worthy endeavor. However, no officers, bylaws, or other services are listed. As such, “The John Steinbeck Society” has been essentially a society in name only.

² The extent of Elaine Steinbeck’s enthusiasm and appreciation for Tetsumaro Hayashi’s efforts to promote the literary legacy of her husband can be seen in their collected letters as preserved in the Archives and Special Collections at Ball State University’s Bracken Library. Their correspondence spans a three-decade period from 1969 to 1998.

³ One example of this lack of a unified effort to promote the author was the Center for Steinbeck Studies apparent unwillingness to publicize the upcoming “Steinbeck and His Contemporaries” conference. Despite repeated requests in 2004 for the Center’s web site and journal to post a call for papers, no response was ever given. However, in August 2005 Paul Douglass, Interim Director of the Center, graciously provided a final mailing announcing the conference to all subscribers of *Steinbeck Studies*.

⁴ An example of Steinbeck’s potential for blending the aesthetic and ethical can be found in Richard Hart’s “Steinbeck, Johnson, and the Master/Slave Relationship” (*Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

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