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**LIVING IN A LAND EAST OF EDEN: NON-TELEOLOGICAL THINKING AND
STEINBECK'S LAST THEORY OF MAN**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR THOMAS KOENIGS
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“Here we are – this oldest story. If it troubles us it must be that we find the trouble in ourselves.”
– John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*

I. Introduction: Steinbeck's *East of Eden*

“The Salinas Valley is in Northern California. It is a long narrow swale between two ranges of mountains, and the Salinas River winds and twists up the center until it falls at last into Monterey Bay.” So begins *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck’s monumental novel that is at once a family saga, modern epic, biblical allegory, personal history, and American ur-narrative, set down by the author in the place of his birth. By the time of its publication in 1952, this manner of opening – with descriptions of the landscape of the valley and its features – seemed like a return to a familiar pattern for Steinbeck, as well as for his readers, who had imaginatively tread his native territory in many of his earlier works. It’s true that the landscape of the long Salinas Valley and adjoining Monterey was a profound and prolific source of inspiration for Steinbeck throughout his career, and he embraced it as the setting for much of his early fiction, including *The Pastures of Heaven*, *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Cannery Row*. But *East of Eden*, which he finally began writing in earnest in 1951 after years of planning, represented Steinbeck’s most ambitious entry yet within the tradition he had created for himself. “In a sense it will be two books – the story of my county and the story of me,” the author wrote in a letter to his editor (*Journal of a Novel* 3). Combining a recent history of his actual maternal family, the Hamiltons, with the multigenerational migratory saga of the Trasks, a settlement history of the Salinas Valley, and a richly-plotted core of familial and romantic drama functioning as an allegorization of the biblical tale of Cain and Abel, *East of Eden* was a behemoth, both in imagination and execution¹. It was unlike everything that had come before, unprecedented both within

¹ In his epistolary journal entries addressed to editor Pascal Covici, eventually published as *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, Steinbeck described the task of bringing the many elements of his story together by using a favored weaving analogy: “I will get to my knitting” punctuates several entries (121).

Steinbeck's oeuvre and outside of it. Even before the writing began, Steinbeck apprehended the work's singularity. "It is the first book," he avowed (qtd. in Wyatt vii). "I think perhaps it is the only book I have ever written" (*Journal* 5). Everything that preceded it, he claimed, had been "experiment" – practice, he imagined, for his most deeply personal and long-anticipated project (*Journal* 3).

In January of 1951, Steinbeck and his third wife, Elaine Anderson Scott, moved into a house on 72nd Street in New York. He began writing the manuscript of his novel (tentatively titled "The Salinas Valley," and then "Cain Sign," before he found the titular phrase while copying down the sixteen verses of Cain and Abel's story from Genesis) on the right-hand pages of a large notebook saved expressly for that purpose. On the left-hand pages, he penned journal entries addressed as letters to his longtime editor and friend, Pascal Covici at Viking Press. In the first entry, dated January 29, Steinbeck mused on beginning the book that he wished to write to his sons², a book for "when they are grown and the pains and joys have tousled them a little" (*Journal* 4). As his words attest, he approached the task with great reverence: "We will have to see whether the practicing through the years has prepared me for the writing of a book. For this is the book I have always wanted and have worked and prayed to be able to write. We shall see whether I am capable. Surely I feel humble in the face of this work. And as our Roman friends would say when casting outside themselves for help, *Ora pro mihi*"³ (*Journal* 6).

² Figure 1, in the Appendix, shows that Steinbeck's first draft of the manuscript began with the words, "Dear Tom and John." (see Appendix). The preserved first lines of the published novel appear further down the page.

³ "Pray for me."

The objective of this essay is to provide a much-needed reevaluation of *East of Eden* in light of the persistent critical misunderstandings and oversights to which the novel has been subjected. I contend that Steinbeck as a novelist and literary artist has been, and largely continues to be, inaccurately branded by a number of spurious and often careless labels, which contributed to frequent critical disparagement during his lifetime as much as it distorts present scholarship. Owing largely to early success with tightly-focused novels like *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was pigeonholed early in his career, and as such his artistic experimentation and intellectual flexibility were often criticized, if not overlooked altogether. Steinbeck's remarkable range of output, in fact, reflects his passionate and abiding commitments to disciplines beyond literature, particularly the natural sciences, especially marine biology, and philosophy. Steinbeck criticism for decades has been undermined by the fact that critics and scholars often fail to take into account the author's wide-ranging occupations and motivations in their approaches to his work, producing persistent misconceptions that this essay attempts to address.

In this essay, I argue that Steinbeck the scientist and philosopher is as present in *East of Eden* as Steinbeck the artist, a presence illuminated in the novel's recurring expressions of "non-teleological thinking," a naturalist philosophy developed by Steinbeck and his closest friend and mentor, Edward Ricketts, and described in the 1951 volume *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. This essay will explore *East of Eden*'s articulations of non-teleological philosophy – using the *Log* as a guide – and consider how Steinbeck's non-teleology in turn gives rise to "timshel," the novel's dominant theme and triumphant message of hope. As we will discover, non-teleological thinking and "timshel" share underlying principles and values, which are embraced by Steinbeck in his

last and most profoundly hopeful theory of man, a theory that champions man's redeemability through the exercise of responsible choice.

II. Breaking With Tradition: The Other Big Book

When *East of Eden*'s first edition was released, thirteen years had elapsed since the publication, in 1939, of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the book that had been Steinbeck's largest, most ambitious, and undoubtedly most successful. The cultural magnitude of that work is hard to overstate: even to speak of *The Grapes of Wrath* as a primarily literary achievement would be to misrepresent some of its enormous significance to the social and political landscape of the Depression era. Although it was banned in several towns and counties throughout the nation⁴, publicly burned on at least two occasions⁵, and decried for its obscenity as much as for its general social themes, the novel was also an instant critical and commercial success: *Grapes* was a National Book Award recipient, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and America's best-selling book of the year in 1939. It earned an entry in First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's nationally syndicated newspaper column, was speedily adapted into an Academy Award-winning film, and sold nearly half a million copies in its first year out. And although Steinbeck the writer had been fairly well-known since *Of Mice and Men* in 1937, *The Grapes of Wrath* catapulted him to new heights of fame, cementing his name among the ranks of American literary giants like Faulkner, Hemingway and O'Neill. To this day, *Grapes* retains its unique eminence in American culture: David Wyatt has observed that, despite the intervening decades, "it is probably our most widely

⁴ See Rick Wartzman's *Obscene in the Extreme* for a history of Kern County's coordinated opposition to *The Grapes of Wrath* led by growers and politicians in 1939 and 1940.

⁵ See "Burning The Grapes of Wrath" at San Jose State University's Steinbeck Center Photo Archive.

read strong novel” (Introduction vii). It is perhaps because of this remarkably singular status enjoyed by *The Grapes of Wrath* that *East of Eden* is often putatively designated “Steinbeck’s *other* big book” (Wyatt, Introduction vii).

It is a peculiar characteristic of the critical discourse on *East of Eden* that it very often begins this way, with discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The truth is that *The Grapes of Wrath* always posed a problem for critics of *East of Eden*, and probably always will, because there is simply no escaping the shadow of the towering cause célèbre that the former novel became at the very apex of the Great Depression. It was, and continues to be, almost universally regarded as the “zenith of John Steinbeck’s career” (Owens 128). It was also, importantly, fundamentally more *understandable* than *East of Eden*. With *Grapes*, there was context to be had in abundance: real social commitments, real stakes; the work reflected issues and events and conditions which existed off the page. In short, *The Grapes of Wrath* was locatable, both within the scope of Steinbeck’s career and in the national moment: there was never any question as to the impetus for, or the referent of, a novel about the migration of dispossessed Okies to California during the Dust Bowl. The same could not be said for *East of Eden*, which (among the various elements that critics took issue with) was repeatedly subjected to accusations that the text lacked a coherent thematic concern.

It is likewise significant that the 1939 novel arrived immediately on the heels of two earlier works which dealt with largely the same subjects: these books, too, featured itinerant and abused laborers and bindlestiffs, alternately enchanted and repelled by the dubious promises of the ascendant west, caught in the perennial struggle between the working man and the landowner. These three works – *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* –

are sometimes referred to as Steinbeck's "labor trilogy," and *Grapes* was immediately understood as its apotheosis (Shillinglaw, "John Steinbeck"). "The author now has a thesis," wrote reviewer Malcolm Cowley of *The New Republic* in 1939 – a seemingly innocuous statement on its face, but one that is actually very illustrative of the way in which Steinbeck's critics habitually oriented themselves towards his work (Cowley, "American Tragedy"). By this I mean: the perpetual impulse to classify – to label – the author and his works was an impulse that served a novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* extremely well, while creating problems for critics and scholars of his later, unconventional works like *East of Eden*. Part of the appeal of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I would contend, was the immediacy and cultural salience of its subject: the novel had a "thesis," it had motivations, it had an obvious referent⁶. It was easy for critics to imaginatively identify and assimilate the novel because they felt (erroneously, in many cases⁷) that they could locate its significance – to the author, the movement, the moment in time. *Grapes* rounded out a trio of works that had long dwelled on a familiar theme; for the critics, it represented the completion of a pattern, and it was a triumph.

For the rest of the author's career, the columnists and commenters of the literary establishment could never help but compare Steinbeck's output, whatever its form – and there was an enormous range – to his "searing social protest novels of the 1930s" (Shillinglaw, "John Steinbeck"). Those early works constituted an imaginative tradition from which the writer, despite his continuing experimentation with different genres, styles, and subjects, never managed

⁶ This is not to say that *The Grapes of Wrath* is artistically or materially simple in any way. On the contrary, I agree with John Ditsky that Steinbeck's novel is closer to being "wholly apolitical" than it is polemic or propaganda (8). Still, the work lent itself to these kinds of facile classifications by critics.

⁷ For instance: "[*The Grapes of Wrath*] belongs very high in the category of the great angry books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that have roused a people to fight against intolerable wrongs" (Cowley, "American Tragedy").

to escape. A very small number of contemporary Steinbeck critics and biographers have correctly identified the author as one of the most experimental American writers, one who was regularly and often harshly criticized for this characteristic. The author himself admitted, on several occasions, a “fear of being pigeonholed, identified with one style of writing and one theme,” and his intention not to “become so complacent and reliant on his...facility of expression that he would be unable to break away from previous modes and patterns” (Schultz and Li 17). It was intensely important to Steinbeck to continue pursuing his own interests and expanding his repertoire, no matter the advice of the executives at his publishing company or the predictable objections of the literary critics. The author’s commitment to diverse forms and subjects is especially evidenced in his least-known works, including the mystifying short novel *To A God Unknown*, the nonfictional *Bombs Away*, his anti-occupation wartime novella *The Moon Is Down*, several stage plays and screenplays, and a translation into modern English of Sir Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. In the later stages of his career, particularly with his wide-ranging work of the 1950s, Steinbeck’s insistence on breaking with the pattern of his 1930s novels continually flummoxed and frustrated the commenters who had made it their business to pin him down. It’s no wonder, then, that the critical response to the sprawling and original *East of Eden* was rather brutal, despite the author’s deep affection for and confidence in the work: “I know it is the best book I have ever done,” Steinbeck confided to Covici (*Journal* 112). Still, he harbored no delusions regarding its probable reception. “It will not be what anyone expects and so the expecters will not like it,” he predicted, with characteristic prescience (*Journal* 98). Invoking an apocryphal anecdote about one of his favorite books, Steinbeck imagined what the market might have in store for his finished volume: “I believe that *Moby Dick*, so much admired now, did not

sell its first small edition in ten years,” he wrote. “And it will be worse than that with this book” (*Journal* 29).

III. “A Strange and Original Work of Art”: Critical Receptions of *East of Eden*

Although Steinbeck’s predictions about the commercial success of his novel were soundly disproven (within about two months of its release, it was the number-one bestselling book nationwide), his anticipations regarding its critical reception were more accurate (Wyatt vii). *East of Eden*, while treated seriously and dutifully reviewed by the columnists and critics, was widely dismissed and disparaged. Critics lambasted the novel for its sprawling contents, double-stranded story structure, and the unrealistic “symbol people” who populated it (qtd. in Timmerman 39). The two most favorable judgments in the immediate aftermath of its release came from reviewers at *The New York Times*: the book critic Orville Prescott denounced the novel as “clumsy in structure and defaced by excessive melodramatics and much cheap sensationalism,” although still “a serious and on the whole successful effort to grapple with a major theme”⁸ (Prescott, “Books of the Times” 21). Mark Schorer amplified his colleague’s tempered approbation, calling the novel “a strange and original work of art” achieved “through the exercise of a really remarkable freedom of [Steinbeck’s] rights as a novelist” (qtd. in Wyatt viii). Schorer was alone – at least among the critics – in arguing that *East of Eden* was “probably the best of John Steinbeck’s novels” (Schorer).

⁸ Prescott would later publish a book outlining his opinions on what he called “the contemporary novel”; the *East of Eden* author clearly made an impression on him, for Steinbeck’s name would appear there in a chapter titled “Squandered Talents: Lewis, Steinbeck, Hemingway, O’Hara.” Apparently, receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature makes one a squandered talent.

Most other commenters were unsparing in their criticism. Samuel Morse of *The Hartford Courant* remarked that “*East of Eden* reveals...that John Steinbeck is a moralist. He is, in a sense, more moralist than novelist” (Morse). Arthur Mizener, writing in *The New Republic*, took a similar view, arguing that “[most] of the characters are not that interesting. They are comic-strip illustrations of Steinbeck’s moral...or they are stock figures who act as mouthpieces for the moralizing” (Mizener). Advancing the increasingly common claim that Steinbeck had strayed too far from his values and lost the energizing outrage of his earlier works, several reviewers saw *East of Eden* as a kind of death knell for the author’s talents of the 1930s. Absent the agitation and “passion” of his labor-focused novels, Steinbeck’s latest work was “too blundering and ill-defined to makes its story point,” many critics decided (qtd. in Wyatt viii). “[Steinbeck] is, or was, at his best when moved by indignation, horror, passionate tenderness, and the other violent motions,” wrote Leo Gurko of *The Nation*. “The vitality, passion, and folk-communion...are painfully absent in *East of Eden*, as they have been in Steinbeck’s fiction since the 1930s came to an end” (Gurko). *The New Yorker* derided the novel as “California Moonshine,” and *Time* labeled it “a huge grab bag in which pointlessness and preposterous melodrama pop up frequently as good storytelling and plausible conduct” (West 121; qtd. in Wyatt viii). Commentary that wasn’t focused on the book’s symbolism or apparent moralizing found another target of criticism in its characters – namely Cathy, who many critics found totally unbelievable in her monstrosity. Called “the most evil woman in American fiction,” the character of Cathy became an oft-cited avatar for what some critics saw as a problem of unsophisticated characterization, and others as a “theory of monsters” that was simply too disturbing to be tolerated (Gladstein 8; Gannett 11). Indeed, many commenters objected to Steinbeck’s depictions of evil, but the objections came

from all sides and expressed opposing views: some felt that “[Steinbeck’s] obsession with naked animality, brute violence, and the dark wickedness of the human mind” was genuinely disturbing, while others scoffed at the whole thing as simplistic and puerile, a farce “in which the villains could always be recognized because they waxed their mustaches and in which the conflict between good and evil operated like a well-run series of professional tennis matches” (qtd. in Wyatt vii; West 121). But what to the critics was unbelievable or unacceptable was, for Steinbeck, an invitation to confront the uncomfortable, often upsetting truths of meeting people – and their flaws – on their own authentic terms: “I have been accused so often of writing about abnormal people,” the author wrote in September 1951, as he was nearing the end of his first draft. “Think the work was good yesterday. But it was painful. And I guess that is because it was true” (*Journal* 156). Still, Steinbeck was aware that his own personal logic for the book’s quirks of construction and character would not serve to justify the novel in the eyes of critics. “So many of the reviews of my work show a fear and a hatred of ideas and speculations,” the author wrote in October, with a hint of the sensitivity that was often perceptible in his private correspondence. “It seems to be true that people can only take parables fully clothed, with flesh. Any attempt to correlate in terms of thought is frightening. And if that is so, *East of Eden* is going to take a bad beating because it is full of such things” (*Journal* 167). While the writer was largely correct with respect to his reviewers, readers among the general public eagerly embraced the novel – an enthusiasm that still persists among readers of today.

East of Eden continues to be revisited and reassessed by present-day critics and scholars, but although the terms of the critiques are expressed far less colorfully, there is still a broad consensus that the novel contains major structural and aesthetic flaws. A common notion among

modern⁹ critics is that *The Grapes of Wrath* represented Steinbeck “at the absolute zenith of his artistic powers” and creative discipline, while the Steinbeck of the late forties and fifties had lapsed into a kind of complacency – ostensibly from his stable, happy marriage, the couple’s financial security, and frequent international diversions – which he indulged by writing what pleased himself most, rather than what agitated him (Ditsky 19). It’s a slightly subtler version of the same reductive sentiment that the author’s contemporaries expressed in lamenting the loss of the “passion” and “folk-communion” that characterized his early fiction (Gurko). Even today, the grudge against *East of Eden* is observable throughout academe: *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are regularly taught to high school and university students across the nation, while *East of Eden* remains snubbed (Timmerman 268).

The scholar Richard Peterson has summarized what are essentially the four major enduring criticisms leveled at *East of Eden* in modern scholarship: these are “[the] structural imbalance between the Trask and the Hamilton sections, the shifting identity of the ‘I’ narrative voice, the heavy and obvious symbolism, and the unrealistic characterizations” of several figures, particularly in the first half of the novel, like Cathy, Cyrus, Adam and Charles (77). These views are common even among those scholars who have dedicated substantial efforts throughout their careers to examining and affirming Steinbeck’s literary merits. Louis Owens, a notable Steinbeck scholar who identifies the author as “a craftsman and artist of the first rank in American literature,” nevertheless denounces the “extraordinarily ambitious and...flawed” *East of Eden* as “a ponderous summing up,” devoid of unity, and disrupted by unnecessary episodes that are “completely out of place” and “reminiscent of the most damaging of Steinbeck’s

⁹ I use “modern” or “recent” loosely, here and in subsequent paragraphs, to describe the criticism and scholarship produced after Steinbeck’s death.

sentimental writing” (xi, 140–145). Ultimately, Owens decides, *East of Eden* remains too “ensnared [by] excessive allegorism” to be great, or even good: he goes so far as to say the novel “unmistakably fails,” although precisely what it fails at, he declines to resolve (141). Owens shares the opinion of some other Steinbeck critics that the writer may simply have been “too close to his material” to judge the novel accurately (Owens 145). Besides the charges of excessive sentimentality and symbolic heavy-handedness, some of the most prominent critiques of *East of Eden* deal with its dual narrative structure. For Steinbeck, the paired and eventually overlapping stories of the Trasks and the Hamiltons was, from the novel’s very first conception, its indispensable design; there was never any question that the book would contain both threads. Although lately, recent scholarship has turned away from condemning this choice to approaching it on its merits, the most influential and oft-cited Steinbeck critics have been vocal in denouncing what they perceive to be the book’s structural incongruity. Specifically, these critics view the Hamilton family stories as extraneous to the essential Trask plot, “[contributing] little or nothing to the central theme of the novel and...[negating] the possibility of unity in the work” (Owens 145). Howard Levant argues that the Hamilton material betrays Steinbeck’s “disregard for a harmonious relationship between structure and materials,” and results in “a strangely unblended novel” (234). Another facet among these structural criticisms is the widespread, often fervent resentment of the novel’s first-person narrator, which is intentionally and recognizably the voice of Steinbeck himself. Although many commenters couch this criticism in terms of the apparent “intrusiveness” of a first-person voice, I would argue that the choice incurred a disproportionate degree of ridicule primarily because it was unfashionable, and ran afoul of the normative literary tastes of the time. But perhaps the most ubiquitous – and often scathing – objection to the novel

targets the characterization of Cathy, whom critics decry for her implausibility, her inhumanity, and even her sheer outsized presence, the gravity of which is so strong that it subsumes and “dissipates Steinbeck’s vision” for the rest of his characters and the work as a whole (French 153). Peter Lisca, who has detailed his views on *East of Eden*’s failures in multiple volumes on Steinbeck, sees this and the other flaws as outgrowths of the author’s “attempt to make [his characters] fit into a myth or illustrate a type” (273). Because of this misguided exercise, Lisca maintains, the novel’s characters are neither “credible [nor] effective,” and even its “prose is not so much casual or careless as affected” (272). Along with Harold Bloom – who famously remarked that the 1940 film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* was superior to the novel, and took the occasion of the Steinbeck centennial to propose that Steinbeck’s name had no place in the American canon – Lisca, Warren French, and Louis Owens share the opinion that *East of Eden* represents ambition in excess of skill, and reflected an author’s talents in decline.

IV. John Steinbeck: Artist, Scientist, Philosopher

Despite the cultural weight and longevity of some of the criticisms just summarized, there exists a subset of Steinbeck scholars, biographers, and critics who have seen past the entrenched perspectives and committed themselves to readings of *East of Eden* free from the tyranny of preconceived notions. As I argue in this essay, it is precisely this problem of preconception – and the related problems of comparison, classification, and a generalized lack of understanding of John Steinbeck the writer and thinker – that has plagued and misled Steinbeck criticism from the very beginning. Any reading of Steinbeck’s fiction, particularly a work with the scope and volume of *East of Eden*, demands an understanding of the author’s whole person – not in the

biographical sense, but with respect to his commitments and occupations *beyond* writing. As

John Timmerman has rightly observed,

“Few American authors have left so rich and diverse a legacy. And that diversity, in part, has led to misunderstanding and critical slighting. [...] Throughout his career Steinbeck’s reviewers and critics were too quick to put a face on him that they had designed. Unable to see through the face they had fabricated, they ignored the real artist.” (268)

This intransigent habit of approaching Steinbeck’s prodigious and varied output with a preassembled framework or contrived label meant that the author’s works were never approached on their own merits, and subsequently, that he was never credited for his truly remarkable range of experimentation across an array of genres and mediums (Have you ever heard of *The Forgotten Village*? *Bombs Away*? *The Wayward Bus*? *The Russian Journal*?).

Another writer might have been deemed experimental or innovative for producing such a range, but Steinbeck was pigeonholed early: everything after the tightly-focused novels of the 1930s would be subjected to comparison schema which were only getting less and less relevant as time went on, and as his self-directed interests grew. The critics “approached him too often with preconceptions. When his work failed to fit their personal hermeneutical theories, they judged him a failure” (Timmerman 269). It’s no coincidence that the scholars who have recognized and acknowledged this pattern in Steinbeck criticism – among them Jackson Benson, John Timmerman, Richard Astro, and Susan Shillinglaw – are also those who have devoted attention to Steinbeck’s interest and involvements in natural science and philosophy, and who have consequently offered some of the most receptive and positive responses to *East of Eden* as a work of art. For “the real artist,” as Timmerman put it, is more than a novelist: reading *East of Eden* requires considering Steinbeck the writer alongside Steinbeck the scientist, ecologist, and

philosopher. *East of Eden* is at its best and most glorious when understood in light of Steinbeck's deep and abiding interest in the natural sciences, his treasured friendship with the Monterey marine biologist Edward F. Ricketts, and his conviction in and commitment to what he called "non-teleological thinking."

Although the subject of non-teleological thinking has been acknowledged by a number of Steinbeck critics, those studies have applied themselves only to individual figures from his fiction – namely, Doc from *Cannery Row* – or to individual works: the 1945 novel *Cannery Row* and the 1951 book *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, a kind of travel journal documenting Steinbeck and Ricketts' scientific expedition to the Gulf of California in 1940. Stuffed with philosophical musings alongside scientific observations and accounts of their sailing and specimen-collecting, the *Log* is an offbeat and indispensable account of the author's philosophy of science and of life, as well as a record of the intellectual exchange and friendship between Steinbeck and Ricketts. *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* also contains the clearest articulation of the concept of non-teleological thinking, a philosophy whose deep and enduring influence on Steinbeck's later fiction, including *East of Eden*, has gone widely unrecognized. Richard Astro, author of *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*, is the scholar who has dedicated the most attention to examining Steinbeck's debt to science, to natural philosophy, and to Ricketts; I will draw on his scholarship as well as that of Jackson Benson to argue that *East of Eden* can only be understood in the fullness of its meaning when we read into its expressions of non-teleology, and consider Steinbeck the artist-scientist-philosopher as its proponent. I concur with Astro's view that:

“It must be said that many of the flawed conclusions by the critics resulted from their being forced to operate without many indispensable facts about the writer and his work. More often, though, the problem lies in the writers’ limited horizons, because most critics carry out their investigations within the constricted framework of literary patterns and traditions. In some cases, this approach may be sufficient, but with Steinbeck it is disastrous. The serious reader of Steinbeck’s work must be prepared to examine the vast horizons of science in general and marine biology in particular [...] And until Steinbeck’s view of man and the world is stated clearly and honestly, there is no way of assessing properly the full measure of his contribution to American letters.” (4)

Steinbeck and Ricketts’ spirited and generous philosophy of non-teleology fully illuminates the novel in a way that no preexisting critical framework ever did or could. In this essay, I will draw on the author’s carefully cultivated scientific and philosophical theories – articulated best in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* – to discover *East of Eden*’s expressions of non-teleology and to chart the progression from non-teleological thinking to *timshel*, the shining, compact pearl at the heart of Steinbeck’s epic. I contend that *timshel* – the novel’s dominant theme and message of hope for mankind – is fundamentally an expression of non-teleological thinking; put another way, non-teleology can be understood as Steinbeck’s philosophical antecedent to *timshel*. Appreciating the logic of non-teleology that pervades *East of Eden*, we the reader – and some of Steinbeck’s characters – find “the glory, and the choice” that awaits us as fully accountable, fully alive beings (Steinbeck, “Nobel Speech”). Freed from the existential trap of fatedness, of the imaginative constraints of cause-and-effect, the non-teleological thinker may embrace that most hopeful message, “thou mayest.” Steinbeck’s non-teleological philosophy, I argue, constitutes an early articulation of, and underlying logic for, his last and most profoundly hopeful theory of man.

Before offering my own readings and arguments on the text, I include a brief explanatory section on non-teleological thinking, so that the reader may gain a sufficient understanding of the concept. Section V, below, is devoted to that topic.

V. “Thinking From”: Introduction to Non-Teleological Thinking

Then we passed Point Sur and the waves flattened out into a groundswell and increased in speed. Tony the master said, “Of course, it’s always that way. The point draws the waves.” Another might say, “The waves come greatly to the point,” and in both statements there would be a good primitive exposition of the relation between giver and receiver. This relation would be through waves; wave to wave to wave, each of which is connected by torsion to its inshore fellow and touches it enough, although it has gone before, to be affected by its torsion. And so on and on to the shore, and to the point where the last wave, if you think from the sea, and the first if you think from the shore, touches and breaks. And it is important where you are thinking from. (Steinbeck, *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* 35)

“It is important where you are thinking from.” This is the essence, in few words, of the idea that Steinbeck and Ricketts called “non-teleological thinking.” Drawing inspiration from the precepts of biological science and Ricketts’ scientific method, non-teleological thinking is an approach to living and to seeing the world that resists the compulsion to think in terms of teleological relationships, of cause and effect. The teleological perspective relies on reasoning backwards from a presumed or resolved end, implying the “purposiveness of events” and thus projecting an impression, however erroneous, of order or causality (Steinbeck, *Log* 144). Non-teleological thinking, on the other hand, “concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually ‘is’ – attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*” (*Log* 135). Steinbeck wrote that non-teleological ideas “derive through ‘is’ thinking,” and this is still one of the simplest and most apt ways to describe it: rather than seeking answers in the form of identifying results or effects, the non-teleologist is satisfied to ask *what* something is instead of *why* something is so (135). Non-teleological approaches “consider events as outgrowths and expressions rather than as results; conscious acceptance as a desideratum, and certainly as an all-important prerequisite” (135). The human observer is deeply accustomed to the imputation of patterns and to the resolution of

questions by comparison, analogy, and especially by the projection of one's own self-image onto the question. Non-teleological thinking apprehends the perils of this impulse, and insists on the necessity of curious, open-minded observation, free from causal reasoning.

In practice, this requires a kind of discipline very similar to that which the scientist must exercise in his work and in the field. The marine biologist, intently observing the intertidal zone, at first finds "the picture is wide and colored and beautiful. But after an hour and a half the attention wearies, the colors fade, and the field is likely to narrow... Here one may observe his own world narrowed down until interest and, with it, observation, go out," Steinbeck wrote. "A man looking at reality brings his own limitations to the world" (84). Steinbeck suspected that most people were so habituated to their worlds and their ideas that the interest and curious observation which were crucial elements of non-teleological thinking had all but faded from the general population, and even from the ranks of esteemed "men of science" (84). Ricketts' approach to marine biology – now recognized as an early iteration of holistic ecology – appealed to and inspired Steinbeck as an observer of human nature and as an artist. "The non-teleological picture... goes beyond blame or cause. [But] as a matter of fact, whoever employs this type of thinking... will be referred to as detached, hard-hearted, or even cruel. Quite the opposite seems to be true. Non-teleological methods more than any other seem to me capable of great tenderness, of an all-embracingness which is rare otherwise" (146). Steinbeck viewed non-teleological thinking as both a generous and prudent humanistic philosophy, one that encouraged living openly out in the world: he described it as the difference between observing a living fish in its environment, "his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air," and observing the pickled specimen, "a stiff colorless fish from formalin solution," in the laboratory (2). "The true biologist

deals with life, with teeming boisterous life, and learns something from it, learns that the first rule of life is living,” Steinbeck wrote (29). For the author, non-teleological thinking was not only the practical approach to understanding, it was also an antidote to the malaise he sensed in the modern intellectual professions, and the best answer to the question of how to live: “The truest reason for anything’s being so is that it *is*. This is actually and truly a reason, more valid and clearer than all the other separate reasons...Anything less than the whole forms part of the picture only, and the infinite whole is unknowable except by *being* it, by living into it” (148). This statement is consistent with the fact that Steinbeck’s interest in and engagements with philosophy were “never...divorced from actual, lived experience” (Hart 16). His appreciation of certain theories and his personal writings on philosophical ideas were never hypothetical or purely scholarly in nature; rather, they were motivated by real concerns for living people and informed by a lifetime of observing human nature. As such, the theories he embraced and dedicated effort to writing about – like non-teleological thinking – were those that he genuinely felt held some hope for humanity in them, some advice on how to live¹⁰. As many scholars have noted, Steinbeck was inclined to both work out and promote these theories in his fiction¹¹. Non-teleological thinking has received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, but almost exclusively in relation to *Cannery Row*, in which the character of Doc (a fictionalization of Ed Ricketts) exemplifies the ideal of the non-teleological thinker. Certainly, that is the work of fiction in which the concept finds its most obvious expressions, but I contend that the theory of

¹⁰ It is worth emphasizing how rigorously *practical* and *non-hypothetical* Steinbeck’s ideological commitments were. His ideas were “informed by documentary zeal,” as the Steinbeck expert Susan Shillinglaw has noted, and they were also in service of what he determined to be the most urgent priorities facing not just Americans, but the global population, in the chaotic twentieth century (Shillinglaw).

¹¹ The most obvious and oft-cited example of this is Steinbeck’s “phalanx theory,” powerfully expressed in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

non-teleology endures thematically throughout many of the author's works, including the oft-neglected *East of Eden*. The following section will examine the novel's varied manifestations of non-teleological thinking, drawing on selections from *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* where necessary to help illuminate dialectical parallels. Ultimately, as this examination will reveal, the essence of *timshel*, "thou mayest," is also the logic at the heart of non-teleology – and it is in this promised actualization of the long-held theory that Steinbeck finds faith in "the perfectibility of man" (Steinbeck, "Nobel Speech").

VI. Reading Non-Teleology in *East of Eden*

Some of the novel's most conspicuous manifestations of non-teleological ideas are embodied in the characterization of Samuel Hamilton. The Hamilton patriarch – the first character to be introduced in the novel's six hundred pages, and the author's real maternal grandfather – comes to California from Ireland, and settles in the eastern foothills of the Salinas Valley. All the rich, fertile land lies in the valley bottom, claimed by wealthier newcomers; whereas on Samuel's ranch, "the acres were harsh and dry. There were no springs, and the crust of topsoil was so thin that the flinty bones stuck through. Even the sagebrush struggled to exist, and the oaks were dwarfed from lack of moisture...From their barren hills the Hamiltons could look down to the west and see the richness of the bottom land" (9). One of the very first things the reader learns is that Samuel's land is arid and unproductive, and at the same time, that his ranch has such proximity to the fertile land to the west that the stark contrast between their circumstances is made even more dismal. Yet, despite this disadvantage, Samuel and his clan positively thrive. While the Hamiltons are never wealthy financially, Steinbeck makes clear that

– because Samuel invests a great deal in his homestead and in the developing Salinas Valley – he reaps real rewards, in the form of a large, healthy family, a successful blacksmithing shop, consistent employment on the surrounding farms, and the trust and respect of his neighbors. Steinbeck spends the entirety of the book’s second chapter, in fact, detailing Samuel’s skills, inventions, accomplishments, and the steady growing of his family and property: “His clever hands built a well-boring rig, and he bored wells on the lands of luckier men. He invented and built a threshing machine and moved through the bottom farms in harvest time, threshing the grain his own farm would not raise” (10). The dominant motif in these descriptions is one of adaptation and innovation. Samuel cannot change the natural conditions of his own land, but he embraces every opportunity to provide for his family’s welfare, and even that of his neighbors, by his ingenuity and industriousness. The narrator reminds us that, faced with similar hardship, other early settlers “would sell out for nearly nothing and move away,” but Samuel is never defeated by the challenges of homesteading in the barren hill country (5). Instead, he confronts those circumstances, accepting them as they are, and is able to flourish in place despite the fact that his position puts him at a particular disadvantage.

Over the course of these several pages, Steinbeck leads us to understand that Samuel embraces what *is*. In his characterization, we hear echoes of what the *Log* calls “conscious acceptance as a desideratum” in explaining the principles of non-teleological logic (135). Critically, “acceptance” in this context does not equate to complacency or passivity – in other words, the fact that the Hamilton patriarch actively sought to provide for his family is not at odds with the principle of “conscious acceptance.” In fact, as we see in consulting the *Log*, non-teleological thinking never precludes the “bettering of conditions,” and indeed is much more

conducive to it than the alternative: “In their sometimes intolerant refusal to face facts as they are, teleological notions may substitute a fierce but ineffectual attempt to change conditions which are assumed to be undesirable, in place of the *understanding-acceptance* which would pave the way for a more sensible attempt at any change which might still be indicated” (*Log* 135, emphasis added). This sentence fittingly encapsulates what we know of Samuel Hamilton with respect to his place in the valley, and moreover, it explains the reason he prevails, while many others are defeated and abandon the endeavor altogether. The Hamiltons take root and thrive where so many others fail because Samuel’s practical “understanding-acceptance” of his circumstances permits him to pursue sensible and effective solutions. In other words, his non-teleological thinking endows him with insight that supports productive responses to the problems at hand. His soil won’t raise wheat, so he procures work threshing it on other farms; there’s no water to be had on his land, so he bores wells for his neighbors; doctors couldn’t make it to the outlying ranches for childbirths, so he delivers his own children. Everything the reader learns of Samuel in the opening chapters demonstrates this idea of non-teleological “‘is’ thinking,” and further, it underscores the rewards of actualizing that type of thinking by *living* accordingly. Steinbeck’s *Log from the Sea of Cortez* reminds us that “strictly, the term non-teleological thinking ought not to be applied to what we have in mind. Because it involves more than thinking, that term is inadequate...The method extends beyond thinking even to living itself; in fact, by inferred definition it transcends the realm of thinking possibilities; it postulates ‘living into’” (147). *East of Eden*’s opening pages offer a portrait of precisely what that looks like in the character of Samuel Hamilton. His example illustrates the possibilities and promise to be found,

even in his inauspicious and humble “dust heap,” when one is guided by the lucid principles of non-teleology and sustained by personal responsibility and courage (297).

Samuel’s inclinations to non-teleological thinking come into particular focus when he is depicted alongside Lee, who might be described as the novel’s other major non-teleological thinker. Both Lee and Samuel are clear-sighted, wise observers and reliable judges of character. The novel spends significantly less time following Lee’s affairs, and almost no time narrating his thoughts or motivations (which we get frequently with Adam Trask and Samuel), but Lee’s qualities are intentionally conveyed in his long exchanges with both of these men, and they leave a very strong impression of his perceptive acuity and probing intellect. The first time that Samuel meets Lee, who is employed by Adam as a domestic servant, Samuel senses that Lee’s manner of speaking in pidgin is contrived, saying “I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t believe it, Lee” (163). Lee apprehends instantly that Samuel, like himself, is a shrewd observer of other people, and has already penetrated the illusion that in Lee’s experience has long gone unquestioned. “You are one of the rare people who can separate your observation from your preconception,” Lee tells Samuel. “You see what is, where most people see what they expect” (163). In this exchange, we see again that Samuel’s ability to ascertain what *is*, rather than what *should* be or what is expected, gives him a tremendous level of clarity and insight. This also confers benefits for Samuel in other ways; namely, it allows Samuel to become acquainted with and have deep conversations with Lee, from whom he will ultimately learn a great deal. The exchange is also equally illustrative of the fact that Lee himself is a sharp observer and savvy judge of character: explaining the affected speech, he tells Samuel, “Pidgin they expect, and pidgin they’ll listen to. But English from me they don’t listen to, and so they don’t understand it... You look at a man’s

eyes, you see that he expects pidgin and a shuffle, so you speak pidgin and shuffle” (163-4).

Lee’s powers of perception lead him to adopt the affectation as a protective, and productive, measure in service of being understood by those who plainly lack his same acuity. People’s failures to see Lee – who was born in Grass Valley and educated at the University of California – for what he actually is betray a deep aversion of the kind that Steinbeck took note of in the pages of the *Log*: “we do not objectively observe our own species as a species,” Steinbeck wrote (17). When Lee explains that men “[expect] pidgin and a shuffle,” and in doing so, impair their own ability to understand him, Lee is articulating one of the great perils that Steinbeck saw in teleological reasoning: in their preoccupation with what they assume *should* be the case, these men have undermined their ability to see clearly – to see reality as it is – and they end up deeply misled, unknowingly wed to falsehood. When Steinbeck wrote in the *Log* that teleological thinking focuses on “what ‘should be,’ in the terms of an end pattern (which is often a subjective...projection),” he may as well have been describing Lee’s situation (134). It was precisely the “subjective projections” of all the non-Samuels of the valley that prompted Lee to assume his affectation, and it is Samuel’s ability to resist that compulsion that allows him to see through it.

Steinbeck’s theory of non-teleology in *East of Eden* may find its most overt expressions in the characters of Samuel and Lee, but possibly its most powerful and affecting representation comes in a form so innocuous that it is liable to be missed by even the most careful reader: the one-paragraph story of Mrs. Trask, whose presence in the novel is so diminutive that she doesn’t even merit a first name. Mrs. Trask is the first wife of Cyrus Trask, and the mother of Adam. The narrator tells us that she “used religion as a therapy for the ills of the world and of herself, and

she changed the religion to fit the ill” (15). When Cyrus returns home from his service in the army with a case of gonorrhea – a condition which he passes to his wife – Mrs. Trask does exactly that, “[casting] about for some new unhappiness” in order to justify her present suffering. In her view, her miserable condition can only be accounted for by discovering a suitable sin with which to charge herself. Her story is so bizarre, and so brief, that I’ve decided to include a substantial part of it here, since its full significance could not be ascertained otherwise:

“And as soon as she was aware that a condition existed, she devised a new theology. Her god of communication became a god of vengeance – to her the most satisfactory deity she had devised so far – and, as it turned out, the last. It was quite easy for her to attribute her condition to certain dreams she had experienced while her husband was away. But the disease was not punishment enough for her nocturnal philandering. Her new god was an expert in punishment. He demanded of her a sacrifice. She searched her mind for some proper egotistical humility and almost happily arrived at the sacrifice – herself. It took her two weeks to write her last letter with revisions and corrected spelling. In it she confessed to crimes she could not possibly have committed and admitted faults far beyond her capacity. And then, dressed in a secretly made shroud, she went out on a moonlight night and drowned herself in a pond so shallow that she had to get down on her knees in the mud and hold her head under water. This required great will power.” (15)

Equipped with our understanding of teleological versus non-teleological reasoning, we are able to understand Mrs. Trask’s story not as a symbol of the ills of religion – indeed, nothing about her beliefs has genuine parallels in religion – but as a fable of the perils of a teleological personal philosophy. Mrs. Trask’s worldview is clearly and rigidly teleological: her habit of changing her “theology” to suit the present ill requires her to invent causes and reasons to which she can ascribe a resulting state of being. This kind of retroactive reasoning is entirely consistent with the teleological method’s impulse to seek cause-and-effect patterns to explain present circumstances or account for unusual observations. Mrs. Trask twists and manipulates what actually *is* in order to suit a perceived “just” end, a wished-for logical order. Her condition is only justifiable, in this framework, if she can identify its cause (whether the cause is completely fabricated is clearly not

a concern). And for conditions that are especially perverse or unseemly, she must devise not only the reason, but also a punishment – in her mind, an appropriate “egotistical humility.” Mrs. Trask’s carefully designed and implemented death is the last act of her life; and the events of her life, she has decided, must suit the imagined penalty awaiting her. To further bear out this chosen “theology,” she pens a letter wherein she confesses to crimes she didn’t commit: in other words, she contrives the evidence that will bear out her deservedly-dismal end. Mrs. Trask drowns herself in shallow water so that the observable calamity of her last act might fittingly testify to the believed perversity of her condition (i.e., imagined adulteress in a dream-conjured act of infidelity). Her god of vengeance must be appeased, but alas, it is a god of her own designing. It is senseless, obviously, a complete farce, but that was evidently Steinbeck’s intention. Mrs. Trask’s story takes up no more than the space of a paragraph, but it is a powerful and, some might say, deeply disturbing rendering of the perilousness of flawed logic. That flawed logic, Steinbeck says, is teleological in nature: by the contrivance of cause-and-effect rules and the encouragement of backwards reasoning, teleological methods of inquiry circumscribe our view of the “whole picture” and thwart our pursuit of knowledge (*Log* 137). It is a comfort, to be sure, to put our trust in patterns of causation and in paradigms that stipulate a quality of order. But it is an exercise in self-deceit, Steinbeck warns us, one that distorts our understanding and image of the natural world: “out of this therapeutic poultice we build our iron teleologies and twist the tide pools and the stars into the pattern,” he intones (*Log* 86). Still, the author had no intention of robbing us of these notions and leaving us with nothing. In its place, he laid out what he saw as the most potent and profound evidence of the promise of redemption for mankind – although “promise,” in this sense, is not the right word, for it is neither a promise nor an order. The right

word is “choice,” or rather, *timshel*: “thou mayest.” With this word, in the pages of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck distills the whole of his latest and most hopeful theory of man. It is a theory that insists on the ever-present possibility of the greatness of the soul of mankind, by virtue of the exercise of *choice* – and its seeds exist already in non-teleology, that philosophy which opens the way to “deep and participating understanding, the ‘all-truth,’ which admits infinite change or expansion” (*Log* 137).

VII. Non-Teleology and *Timshel*: “The Danger and the Glory and the Choice”

Timshel is the triumphant and memorable doctrine, though an undogmatic one, at the heart of *East of Eden*. Steinbeck and Covici worked out its meaning in a long process of written correspondence with Hebrew scholars, academics, and religious leaders. It was critically important to Steinbeck to get the most faithful translation possible. He believed the inconsistencies with respect to its translation in various English editions of the Bible were potentially a deeply meaningful source of knowledge: “This little story turns out to be one of the most profound in the world,” he wrote of the elusive word (*Journal* 108). It is fitting that, when the time comes, Steinbeck chooses Lee to elucidate its meaning. *Timshel*, Lee learns after years of diligent study, expresses the meaning “thou mayest.” Unfolding his discovery to Samuel and Adam, Lee’s words strongly echo the author’s own: “‘Thou mayest’ – that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man” (303). It is a concept that goes against fatedness, against predestination and damnation, against any belief that an end is foreordained. It puts the full weight of accountability, and the power of choice, squarely on the shoulders of man. Steinbeck saw it as the principle by

which man might redeem himself from the murder of brother by brother, the sin that drove Cain into exile to a land east of Eden. Man's fate, this word says, is not sealed. In many ways, it is a profoundly hopeful principle, one that allows always for a change in course, for correction, for recommitment. It is also undeniably hazardous, because in its guarantee that choice, or the exercise of free will, governs the course of one's life, *timshel* also carries with it the burden of responsibility. The individual – not God, not fate, not divine providence – must be credited for both his triumphs and failures. In this way, it is both hopeful and disciplined: “Here is individual responsibility and the invention of conscience,” Steinbeck wrote of locating the word's meaning (*Journal* 108).

Although *timshel* in the form of the Hebrew word is not introduced until roughly halfway through the novel, the principle at work is legible even from its earliest pages. Steinbeck dwells in the novel's opening chapters on “when people first came to the West,” because he aims to establish this ethos of commitment and individual responsibility, illustrating the essential *timshel* doctrine “thou mayest” in its manifold possibilities (12). For, as Lee says much later, “if ‘Thou mayest’ – it is also true that ‘Thou mayest not’” (303). This fundamental non-certainty, this open possibility of success or failure, is no better illustrated than in the stories of early California as the farthest reach of the frontier, and in its settlers whose “destiny” was nothing but a reflection of their own choices. Steinbeck describes the very first settlers of the valley, and the challenges they faced trying to make a living in unfamiliar and unforgiving territory:

“They and the coyotes lived clever, disparaging, submarginal lives. They landed with no money, no equipment, no tools, no credit, and particularly with no knowledge of the new country and no technique for using it...It is argued that because they believed in a just, moral God they could put their faith there and let the smaller securities take care of themselves. But I think that because they trusted themselves and respected themselves as individuals, because they knew beyond

doubt that they were valuable and potentially moral units – because of this they could give God their own courage and dignity and then receive it back.” (12)

These early Californians were not saved by fate or providence, Steinbeck says. Their destinies were not ordained by God or by prophecy. It is instead “their own courage and dignity” that preserves them and rewards them (12). The individual responsibility and conscience that Steinbeck spoke of as the essence of *timshel* is fully apparent here. It is their striving, their discipline, and their trust and respect in themselves that supports their welfare and ensures their continued survival, rather than the hand of destiny or some predetermined fate. As Lee explains it, “that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods...He can choose his course and fight it through and win” (303). These early settlers did indeed have “stature with the gods,” for as Steinbeck makes clear, their “just, moral God” was primarily a reflection of themselves, an idea from which to draw upon their own strength and courage (12). As in much of Steinbeck’s fiction, the narrative landscape of *East of Eden* is a fundamentally God-less world – truly an “east of Eden,” in the tradition of the banished parents of mankind. Absent God, Steinbeck’s novels and stories are populated with people who must in some way reckon with the discovery of the false promise – the dissolution of the myth – of a new Eden in the American west. Instead of a formal faith in a religious creed, Steinbeck’s fiction more than anything presents what Louis Owens calls “the ideal of man’s commitment to man and place” (141). This commitment is precisely what is being upheld and glorified in each of the two theories elucidated in *East of Eden*: *timshel* and non-teleology.

Non-teleology and the message of *timshel* are two articulations of a shared underlying principle. They are only somewhat analogous in their expressions, but the same in their ultimate

substance. Non-teleology, the embrace of what *is*, resists the illusion of teleological causation and insists on commitment to the whole reality, which then opens the way for “understanding-acceptance” and “living into” the insight and self-responsibility that this thinking entails. Within *East of Eden*, Samuel Hamilton is the epitome of this ideal and Mrs. Trask is its antithesis. *Timshel* is the glory of choice: it resists the dogma of predestination or fatedness and insists on the continual, ever-present possibility of exercising one’s will, whatever the situation, whatever past sins or errors have been committed. Samuel is likewise a strong early example of this principle at work – “Do you see why I told Adam tonight? I exercised the choice,” he tells Lee – but after his death, the onus falls on Adam, Charles, Aron and Cal to discover through mighty struggle what Samuel had embraced long before (309). The fact that Samuel appears to typify both of these themes (timshel; non-teleology) so consistently is a reflection of the fact that they share, in essence, the same principle. Both are expressions of what Steinbeck called the importance of “*is*, the deepest word of deep ultimate reality,” which “[participates] in and [encompasses]” the “concept of *being*” (*Log* 151). In other words, both theories are stridently concerned with what *is* and *be*’s, rather than with the past or future: they recognize the errors of reasoning with reference only to perceived past causes or imagined futures. Both concepts insist on the necessity of meeting reality on its terms; both imply a strong sense of discipline and the need to assume personal self-responsibility. Both convey a reverence for and love of “the whole thing,” the whole picture of life that Steinbeck caught glimpses of in the Sea of Cortez and throughout his career. And both are ultimately deeply hopeful philosophies, capable of great joy and generosity. The author knew that his book’s essential optimism was at odds with what was fashionable in literature, but he cherished a conviction that the message was one people

deserved, and needed, to hear: “It is the fashion now in writing to have every man defeated and destroyed. And I do not believe all men are destroyed,” Steinbeck wrote to his editor. “The writers of today...have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and god knows it is destroyed often enough. But the beacon thing is that sometimes it is not” (*Journal* 115). Lee’s jubilant explanation of *timshel*, and Samuel’s triumphant exercise of choice, echo in the author’s words. In *East of Eden*, Steinbeck expressed what he saw as the most profound proof of the redeemability of mankind, even in a chaotic and uncertain age, even in weakness and wretchedness and sin: the power, and the glory, of choice.

In 1962, ten years after the publication of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. His selection was met with some surprise and a degree of “gratuitous nastiness” from certain critics, but many readers around the world were thrilled to see him recognized (Benson 45). As was customary, Steinbeck delivered an address at the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm. In it, he gave voice to a message which, to the reader of *East of Eden*, might sound strikingly familiar. “The danger and the glory and the choice rest finally in man. The test of his perfectibility is at hand,” the author avowed. “Having taken Godlike power, we must seek in ourselves for the responsibility and the wisdom we once prayed some deity might have. Man himself has become our greatest hazard and our only hope” (“Nobel Speech”). Steinbeck’s words speak to his abiding conviction in the same ideas that he articulated in the pages of *East of Eden*, the ideas expressed in non-teleology and *timshel*. The author saw these paired principles as evidence of the possibility of redemption, despite the errors, ordeals and afflictions that appeared to characterize the latter half of the twentieth century, affairs which had already disillusioned so many of his artist peers. In contrast, Steinbeck’s enduring motif was a

profoundly hopeful one. *East of Eden* was his second and last long work of fiction, but the ideas contained therein represented a continuation and fulfillment of the themes that had long occupied him. Steinbeck felt deeply that the charge of the writer was to “lift up, to extend, to encourage,” and it was a vocation to which he was fully devoted (*Journal* 115). In a sense, he wrote his novel against the impulse of despair, to show that “although east of Eden is not Eden,” Steinbeck admitted, “it is not insuperably far away” (*Journal* 116).

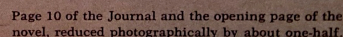


Figure 1: *Reproduction of the journal in which Steinbeck wrote the manuscript of East of Eden. On the left-hand page, a letter to Pascal “Pat” Covici, his editor at Viking Press. On the facing page, the opening of the novel, with the working title “The Salinas Valley” at the top. Image is printed on the inside cover of “Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters,” Viking Press, 1969. Checked out from The Claremont Colleges Library.*

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