

BOOK REVIEWS

John Steinbeck's first lengthy examination of the Dust Bowl migrants—a series of investigative reports that were published, alongside photos of the migrants by the Farm Security Administration's Dorothea Lange, in the pro-labor *San Francisco News* in the fall of 1936—made only passing allusions to their trek westward from Oklahoma and concentrated instead on the gypsy-like existence they were reduced to in agriculturally feudal California. Subsequently, he tried and failed to write a novel called *The Oklahomans*, in which, apparently, he zeroed in once again on the California scene. His third attempt to deal with the migrants was inspired by a bloody clash between workers and growers in a lettuce strike in Salinas, California, his birthplace. But *L'Affaire Lettuceberg*, as he dubbed the manuscript he produced, was nothing more, he eventually realized, than a "vulgar" tract, and in mid-May 1938, he destroyed it. With that dark act he might have lapsed into despair—except that it was immediately followed by the mightiest outburst of imaginative energy he would ever experience.

Across a span of no more than ten days, between May 15 and 25, the entire scheme of *The Grapes of Wrath* was envisioned by Steinbeck, beginning with the grand outlines of the Joad family's journey across the country, but also including the symphonic structure of the story, with its alternating modes of exposition and narrative, and the dramatic events of individual scenes, all the way down to Rose of Sharon's gesture at the close of offering her milky breast to a starving man. He also established a writing schedule of 2,000 words a day that would enable him—that did enable him—to complete the novel by the following October. Finally, he decided that he would make a map of his literary progress by keeping a journal. Thanks to Robert DeMott, a professor of English at Ohio University and a recognized authority on Steinbeck, that journal has now been published, with useful notes by Professor DeMott, under the title *Working Days*.

It is a harrowing document. For while *Working Days* testifies to Steinbeck's continuing grasp of his organizational plan for *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as to his dogged determination to meet his per diem quota of words, it is also

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THE GRAPES OF WRATH
(Fiftieth Anniversary Edition)
John Steinbeck/Viking/619 pp. \$25.00

WORKING DAYS: THE JOURNALS OF
"THE GRAPES OF WRATH," 1938-1941
John Steinbeck, edited by Robert DeMott/Viking/180 pp. \$18.95

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a record of doubts of his literary adequacy, of anger at being interrupted by friends and strangers, of disgust with himself about his drinking, cigarette smoking, and general lack of self-discipline, and of fears of nervous collapse and insanity. Here are some representative comments:

"Irritated today. People want to come to see me next Monday. Can't be. Just want to sit. Day not propitious. Have a loose feeling that makes me nervous . . . I get nuts if not protected from all the outside stuff" (June 3). "My whole nervous system is battered. Don't know why. I hope I am not headed for a nervous breakdown" (June 6). "Last night . . . drank a great deal of champagne [and] . . . am not in the dead sober state I could wish . . . I must not be weak. . . . The failure of will even for one day has a devastating effect" (June 13). ". . . once this book is done I won't care how soon I die, because my major work will be over" (July 11). "Drank lots of whiskey . . .

and now home with a little stomach ache that doesn't come from the stomach. Terrible feeling of lostness and loneliness" (July 18). "Demoralization complete and seemingly unbeatable" (August 16). "My nerves are going fast. Getting into confusion of many particles—each one beatable, but in company pretty formidable. And I get a little crazy with all of them" (August 24). "This place has become an absolute madhouse . . . I don't know what to do. I wish—Jesus!" (August 26). "Have to cut down smoking or something. I'm afraid this book is going to pieces. If it does, I do too" (September 7). "This book has become a misery to me because of my inadequacy" (September 26). "The disintegration lately has been terrible" (October 4).

Gradually, the struggling novelist became aware that keeping the diary had a therapeutic effect upon him. "Now at last I am getting calm," he wrote on August 2. "This diary is a marvelous method of calming me down every

day." And on September 26 he noted that his stomach and nerves were "screaming hell in protest," but that he had written an exceptionally long entry in order "to calm myself." His self-understanding, however, never grew beyond this point. Thus in 1952 he declared that when he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, "I was filled . . . with certain angers . . . at people who were doing injustices to other people." No doubt he was—but as the diary demonstrates, he also brought to his writing desk each day a variety of violent emotions that had nothing to do with objective social circumstances and everything to do with the personal life and psychic nature of John Steinbeck. What the diary forces us to reconsider is the relationship of the novelist to his fictive materials.

One of the odd things about the hero of the novel, Tom Joad, is his lack of interest in sex. From the time we meet him in Chapter Two, hitchhiking home to his parents' place after being released from prison in McAlester, Oklahoma, until his disappearance into the darkness of a California night near the end of the story, he is never shown in pursuit of a woman, in contrast to his younger brother, Al, who is constantly scratching a sexual itch. The explanation of Tom's conduct lies not in the novel but in the diary. By 1938, Steinbeck's relations with his wife, Carol, were frequently strained, even hostile, and the tension between them was heightened during the period when he was writing *The Grapes of Wrath* by his abstinence from sexual intercourse with her. Not until October 7, as he was nearing the end of his creative labors, did he feel "a change . . . coming over me—a goatish sexuality. The summer has just been the opposite—very low." So intense was Steinbeck's identification with his fictional hero that, whether consciously or unconsciously, he reduced Tom's sex drive to the same level as his own.

An even greater oddity about the good-guy hero of *The Grapes of Wrath* is defined by his homicidal outbursts. Tom not only has done time at McAlester for killing a man in a social quarrel, but before the novel is over he will kill another in a labor dispute. His sidekick, Jim Casy, the ex-preacher who has the same initials as Christ, is politically radicalized in the course of the novel, and after Casy's symbolic crucifixion Tom consecrates his own



life to the cause of social justice. In a secular world, he will be Jim Casy's self-sacrificing disciple. But the question that Steinbeck fails to examine is whether Tom's intentions, as outlined in a farewell speech to his mother, are not an ambiguous mixture of altruism and intoxication with violence for its own sake. "I'll be all aroun' in the dark," he assures Ma Joad. "I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. . . . I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there. See?" The diarist who but slenderly understood his own raw emotions ("My whole nervous system is battered. Don't know why.") was correspondingly incapable of plumbing the mysteries of his alter ego's.

The emergence of Ma Joad as a far stronger person than her husband and the other older men in the Joad family is another notable aspect of the novel on which the diary bears. "Carol does so much," Steinbeck said of his wife in the entry of August 2. Indeed she did. Although Carol Henning was a fairly talented poet, prose writer, and painter, as well as being more deeply involved in radical politics than Steinbeck ever was, she gave up her career when she got married. In addition to assuming all the domestic duties of the household, the strong-willed, tough-minded Carol did her best to shield her shy and easily stampeded husband from intrusions on his privacy; oversaw his business relations with his agents; typed and edited his manuscripts; and, in the case of *The Grapes of Wrath*, made critical comments on the manuscript and found the perfect title for it in Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." On the dedication page of the novel Steinbeck wrote, "To Carol, who willed this book." Just as weakness of the senior male Joads can be linked to Steinbeck's sense of his own weakness and to memories of his weak father, whose mismanagement of a store ended in bankruptcy (the diarist wrote on June 16: "I dreamed a confused mess made up of Dad and his failures and me and my failures"), so Ma Joad's indomitability was a reincarnation of Carol's.

Working Days also contains a section called "Aftermath," which is composed of the diary entries that Steinbeck continued to make in the two years following the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Professor DeMott aptly observes, the motif of self-doubt is still prominent in these entries, but

is compounded by guilt and tempered by foreshadowing, as though Steinbeck felt himself to be hovering on the brink of some enormous catastrophe. If the intimations of dark fatality are not fully articulated, it is because Steinbeck was fearful that the watchful Carol would discover the secret of his love affair with a 20-year-old showgirl named Gwyndolyn Conger, whom he began seeing in the summer of 1939 and whom he would marry in 1943. Was he already dreaming of betraying Carol while he was still writing *The Grapes of Wrath*—and did that dream, too, get into the novel? Quite conceivably. For the weakest link in the Joad family chain is Rose of Sharon's youthful husband, the androgynously named Connie, who, when the Joads finally reach

California, deserts his drastically pregnant wife and disappears. An author given to sexual guilt and paranoia might well have created such a character as Connie, out of a terrible premonition of how he intended to reward the woman who had done so much to bring his greatest book into being.

Working Days serves, in sum, to make *The Grapes of Wrath* and its author more complex and more interesting. Studs Terkel's introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of the novel accomplishes the reverse. Essentially, it seeks to show that *The Grapes of Wrath* is the fictional equivalent of Terkel's alleged transcripts of the voices of downtrodden little people and that that is a wonderful thing. □

DESTRUCTIVE GENERATION: SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT THE SIXTIES

Peter Collier and David Horowitz/Summit Books/338 pp. \$19.95

George Szamuely

Should one have occasion at times to doubt the need for yet more books of the I-have-seen-the-future-and-it-doesn't-work genre, then the critical reaction to Peter Collier and David Horowitz's *Destructive Generation* will surely relieve one of them. Through a series of character-studies, autobiographical essays, and reflective pieces, the two former editors of *Ramparts* and ex-supporters of the Black Panthers trace the consequences—both personal and national—of the left's hijacking of the American liberal movement during the 1960s. That their document was met by a torrent of abuse was only to be expected. After all, the authors of *Vekhi* had been excoriated by the liberal intelligentsia of pre-revolutionary Russia no less than Whitaker Chambers had been by their American counterparts for his *Witness*.

Yet what was interesting about the response to Collier and Horowitz was that few chose to question the truth of anything they said about the left. What particularly riled commentators was the political position the two adopt today, especially their support of Ronald Reagan. Yes, the left's utopianism and its hysterical, mindless opposition to the Vietnam war led its radical proponents to nihilism, violence, madness, and self-destruction. But how dare anyone draw certain conclusions from

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that, and cease to regard themselves as belonging to the left? In a piece of no more than 800 words' length in the *New York Times Book Review*, someone called David Burner managed at least seven times to equate the two authors' ideas today with the bizarre notions they once held and which they now totally repudiate: "The two have not recovered their senses," "the delirium of half-sleep remains," "they sound like their previous selves of the 1960s," "their likenesses exist today . . . in the legions of the right," and on and on. Echoing this line, Hendrik Hertzberg in the *Washington Monthly* sneered: "Twenty years ago they were uncritical supporters of communist jungle fighters who trampled on human rights. Now they're uncritical supporters of anticommunist jungle fighters who trample on human rights," and again: "20 years ago they were arrogant, mendacious know-it-alls who trafficked in hysterical hyperbole and diabolized those who disagreed with them. They haven't lost their touch."

But the nastiest and most scurrilous review—clearly the influence behind both Hertzberg and Burner—appeared in the *New Republic* and was written by Paul Berman. At excruciating length—7,000 words or more—he drummed the message home: Collier and Horowitz were the "sole militants of the '60s still good for a shocking gesture, a finger in the air, a coast-to-coast f--- you." And just in case we did not quite

catch that: "The transformation that these two men have undergone should not . . . be overestimated." Apparently, the essence of the New Left was the "notion . . . that you can batter down your own limitations, that conventions are oppressions, that an existential choice can turn you into something better, more heroic, more powerful." If this all makes Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Mark Rudd, and Bernadine Dohrn sound more like members of the Stefan George Circle, or perhaps of the Cambridge Apostles, or simply pupils of Martin Heidegger, then there is good reason for that. Since, according to Berman, "nothing about that idea . . . inherently tied it to socialist or liberal ideals," guess who will turn out to be today's two chief purveyors of this "existential" notion?

Though Berman's observation on the nature of the New Left in his review seems to contradict his main complaint that Collier and Horowitz concentrate far "too little on ideas," it is not without a certain devious logic. For members of the contemporary left to use terms suggestive of sociopathology to describe 1960s radicalism is a variant on the customary tone of lyrical lamentation. But the effect is the same. The New Left is still fundamentally all right as far as its original intentions go. (To question them is still a sign of reactionary proclivities, malign motives, or bad etiquette, or a combination of all three.) That it culminated in bombings, murder, senseless riots, black separatism can be blamed on the Vietnam war, on Nixon, on the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, much as Lenin's and Stalin's excesses were once only explicable with reference to the horrors of czarist autocracy, or the treachery of an Alger Hiss or a Kim Philby to the Great Depression, or the Khmer Rouge atrocities subsequently to the American B-52s. "The Devil made them do it," as Collier and Horowitz put it. With a bound, then, responsibility for whatever we think of as disagreeable about the New Left is ascribed to the right. So far so traditional. But here is the new twist. With the next bound we find that whatever we think of as disagreeable about the New Left is not really characteristic of the New Left at all, but of the right. Thus we have the idiotic equation. Collier and Horowitz circa 1980s are the same Collier and Horowitz circa 1960s. The contras are the Vietcong. The neoconservatives are the fanatical Berkeley radicals. And Ronald Reagan is presumably Angela Davis.

There is of course something very amusing about the critics of Collier and Horowitz donning the mantle of moderation. Neither Berman nor