

"THE GLASS BROGAN WILL NOT FIT": POSTMODERN
CONJUNCTIONS IN JOHN STEINBECK'S
EAST OF EDEN AND THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

by

MATTHEW M. ROSE, B.A.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND DERRIDEAN CONTEXT

Near the opening of *Journal of a Novel*, a set of letters that he wrote to his editor Pascal Covici during his composition of *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck writes: “In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable. And sometimes if he is very fortunate and if the time is right, a very little of what he is trying to do trickles through—not ever much” (4). The pessimism of this dark view of an author’s capabilities is truly striking for a man who had, by the time of his inditing of the *Journal*, achieved both critical success and a wide readership with books such as *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Despite its surprising quality, Steinbeck surely thought this way at the beginning of his composition of *East of Eden* and his negativity here naturally begs the question of why, exactly, he held such a dismal view of the possibilities for communication between an author and his or her readers.

One potential answer to this question can be found by tracing the specific contours of Steinbeck’s situation as he began the writing of *East of Eden*. The novel was clearly very important to Steinbeck, and yet he was relatively certain that it would be received favorably by neither the critical establishment in place at that time nor by his more general readership. At the very beginning of *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck reveals the significance that *East of Eden* has for him by characterizing the novel as “perhaps the greatest story of all—the story of good and evil, of strength and weakness, of love and hate, of beauty and ugliness” (4). Steinbeck reiterates his investment in the novel on

several occasions throughout the *Journal*. Rather late in the letters he comments that, “I have been writing on this book all of my life...it is the first book. The rest was practice. I want it to be all forms, all methods, all approaches” (117). Still later, Steinbeck affirms that, near the end of its composition, the novel still holds inordinate importance for him. “This is the Book still as far as I am concerned and I think it will continue until it is finally in your hands” (157).

Steinbeck’s anticipation of the reception for this “first book” of his must have aggravated his compositional sensibilities greatly. Certain that the novel will be denounced by his critical readership, Steinbeck assures Covici in the *Journal* that it will receive withering commentary: “You know as well as I do that this book is going to catch the same kind of hell that all the others did, and for the same reasons. It will not be what anyone expects and so the expecters will not like it” (26). Steinbeck re-articulates this idea shortly after in his musings on Melville’s *Moby Dick*. “The admired books now,” Steinbeck writes, “were by no means the admired books of their day. I believe that *Moby Dick* [sic], so much admired now, did not sell its first small edition in ten years. And it will be worse than that with this book” (29). From the critics Steinbeck was certain he would receive censure about his combination of the Hamilton and Trask narratives:

It will...be said that I could well leave the Hamiltons out of this book because they do not contribute directly nor often to the Trask development. And I must be very willful about this, because this is not a story about the Trasks but about the whole Valley which I am using as a microcosm of the whole nation. It is not a romanza. I know I will have that war to fight. (65)

It is clear that his waging of this battle against his critical readership irritated Steinbeck immensely, for near the end of the *Journal*, Steinbeck unleashes his frustration upon the critics whose condemnation he anticipates, comparing them to “curious sucker fish who live with joyous vicariousness on other men’s work and discipline with dreary words the thing which feeds them” (165).

These comments about the reception of his efforts indicate that Steinbeck perceived himself as creating a literary work in direct or almost direct defiance of the expectations of both his critical and more popular readerships. A most intriguing fact to recognize in conjunction with this is that in several places in the *Journal* itself, and in other works which present the thinking of Steinbeck himself and not that of some fictionalized persona, Steinbeck makes statements that either denote or imply ideas that are now recognized as parts of postmodern critical theory, even though, of course, Steinbeck would not have recognized those terms. In *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck expresses several ideas that are clearly harmonious with those which embody the postmodern critical phenomenon that emerged some time after his death. At one point in the *Journal*, for example, Steinbeck comments that “Words are strange elusive things and no man may permanently stick them on pins or mount them in glass cases” (122). By way of this taxonomic metaphor, Steinbeck argues that words cannot always and in every situation be said to have the same meaning. Instead, they are for him very dynamic, changeable phenomena which cannot be pinned down or put on permanent display. Even though its iteration precedes the essay by almost fifteen years (Steinbeck wrote this in 1952; Jacques Derrida presented his essay in 1966) the idea that Steinbeck expresses here

resembles the instability of language that Derrida outlines in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” At another point in the *Journal*, Steinbeck remarks that “There’s a double aspect to the world—always two and sometimes more faces to external realities” (13). This idea corresponds significantly with the postmodern ideas of subject-object fusion and discursive formation, ideas that will be explained more thoroughly in Chapter II.

These convergences increase in significance when one examines the introduction to *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, a work that significantly predates the *Journal* but which nevertheless bears resemblance to it because in reading it one can assume that one is encountering the ideas of Steinbeck himself rather than those of a fictional persona. In the very first sentence of the *Log*, Steinbeck suggests that “The design of a book is the pattern of a reality controlled and shaped by the mind of the writer” (1). In pointing out so explicitly the way in which reality is mediated (“controlled” and “shaped”) by the mind of the individual perceiving it, Steinbeck expresses an idea very closely akin to that underpinning the postmodern conception of discourse formulation. This conjunction becomes even more explicit when, later in the introduction to the *Log*, Steinbeck suggests that on their expedition he and his companion Ed Ricketts were fully aware that the reality they would encounter would ultimately be fused with their own perceptions and become indistinguishable from them. “We knew,” Steinbeck writes, “that what we would see and record would be warped, as all knowledge patterns are warped, first, by the collective pressure and stream of our time and race, second by the thrust of our individual personalities” (2). Furthermore, Steinbeck suggests that possessing this knowledge, he

and Ricketts embarked on their journey determined to dispense with the idea of external reality itself. Steinbeck writes that he and Ricketts decided that they did not wish to be “betrayed by this myth of permanent objective reality” (3). In suggesting first that reality is inevitably mediated by the subject encountering it and second that the idea of external reality is itself a fiction, Steinbeck expresses ideas that have much in common with postmodern critical theory.

Having pointed out this conjunction, however, it is important that some distinctions about its significance be made from the outset. I must emphasize, in particular, that I do not intend to assert that in the composition of his later work, Steinbeck purposefully included ideas that we can now perceive as allied with postmodernism. It is, of course, impossible to know what Steinbeck intended, and because of this any argument of intention is ultimately insupportable. The discussion of *Journal of a Novel* and *The Log from The Sea of Cortez* does insinuate, however, that in the composition of some of his later work, including *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, certain ideas that parallel what we now call postmodern critical theory made up part of Steinbeck’s views of reality, language, and fiction specifically. It is not unreasonable to assume that such ideas might very well have found their ways into Steinbeck’s later fiction, and the possible presence of such ideas in Steinbeck’s later work authorizes (and, as I shall suggest in the conclusion of this study, even necessitates) an examination (or re-examination) of that later fiction with the express purpose of revealing those ideas, and analyzing how they manifest within Steinbeck’s fiction.

Such analysis has, thus far, been only cursorily attempted when it has been attempted at all. In fact, *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* have been received in very much the fashion that Steinbeck anticipated. As Peter Valenti comments, “Steinbeck’s later fiction is problematic for many readers; some people who looked for a repetition of *The Grapes of Wrath* were disappointed with other, different voices” (111). *East of Eden*, one of the novels manifesting the “different voices” Valenti mentions, is one of the most-analyzed of Steinbeck’s novels, and with the exception of reviews published shortly after the novel emerged, the criticism has been almost uniformly negative. I should point out here that my analysis of the critical literature pertaining to *East of Eden* relies significantly on the work of Daniel M. Buerger, who provides a very thorough and lucid analysis of *East of Eden* criticism published up until 1981.

In his essay, Buerger points out that the paradigm for *East of Eden*’s critical reception was erected for the most part by Peter Lisca’s *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*. In this work, Lisca provides a thorough catalog of faults in Steinbeck’s novel. As Buerger suggests, Lisca “lambastes the moral theme [of *East of Eden*] as unconvincing, obvious, and uninteresting. More importantly, he suggests the structure of the book is seriously flawed, probably due to Steinbeck’s method of composition” (8). Buerger also points out that, providing the criticism which Steinbeck predicted, Lisca objects to the lack of connection between the Trask and Hamilton narratives. Buerger summarizes Lisca’s commentary by asserting that, for Lisca, “the novel simply shifts back and forth between the two families with no apparent purpose or method, resulting in awkward flashbacks and distracting fragments” (8). Protesting too about the point of

view management in the novel, Lisca remarks that the interpolation of the “I” narrator is seriously confusing (266). Furthermore, Lisca finds the language of the novel essentially unskilled. “For the most part,” he writes, “the prose of *East of Eden* alternates between...pseudo-poetry and an abandoned, unstudied carelessness incapable of organizing the sprawling materials” (272). Having articulated this litany of objections, Lisca concludes that Steinbeck’s attempt “to impose an order on his diverse materials [in *East of Eden* proves] unsuccessful” (263) and that “it is certain that...*East of Eden* had disastrous consequences for [Steinbeck’s] art” (275).

Buerger correctly suggests that Lisca’s work established the “gestalt of *East of Eden* criticism,” and that almost no subsequent reviews of the novel break with Lisca’s thesis (8). A selection of critical responses will serve to exemplify this point. R. W. B. Lewis, writing 15 years after Lisca in 1972, dismisses not only *East of Eden* but Steinbeck himself from the very outset of his evaluation. Lewis’ dismissive attitude emerges immediately, for he begins his study with the statement that “Steinbeck’s literary reputation is not very high at the moment, and I see few reasons why it should grow greater in the future” (183). The fact that Lewis feels compelled to open his study with this deprecating remark reflects the significant damage that Lisca’s work wrought upon Steinbeck’s reputation. Failure to manage his materials adequately represents another of the charges that Lewis, like Lisca, levels at Steinbeck, but Lewis sees the author as erring in his understanding of his prototype. Seeing *East of Eden* as a retelling of Genesis, Lewis writes that “Steinbeck has not understood the original story of Adam or he has failed to grasp the profound relevance to experience in America: which is not to

understand America itself” (170). Not surprisingly, the conclusion of Lewis’ work exhibits a denunciatory tone similar to that at the study’s opening: “Although [*East of Eden*] has been a huge economic success, it is, unhappily, a literary disaster, and of such proportions that it sheds a very disturbing light on the career that has allegedly culminated in it” (170).

Howard Levant, writing in 1974, takes a somewhat less extreme position on the novel, but his findings nonetheless differ very little from Lisca’s. If for Levant *East of Eden* is “admirably massive,” it is also an “essentially flawed narrative” (258). Pointing out that Steinbeck believed *East of Eden* to be the apotheosis of his creative and technical powers, Levant asserts that “The more balanced judgement is that *East of Eden* is an impressive, greatly flawed work, and a major summation of the various stresses between structure and materials which abound in Steinbeck’s novels” (234).

In an assessment of the novel written in 1985, Louis Owens essentially agrees with Levant. In his eyes, the novel obviously fails, and he premises his assertion on the novel’s structural awkwardness. “Steinbeck tried to put everything he had discovered during two decades of intense exploration into *East of Eden*,” Owens writes, “and it is this attempt which gives the novel what Lisca calls its ‘omnivorous, sprawling nature’ and which causes the book to fail, as it unmistakably does” (141). The structural density of *East of Eden* makes it, in Owens’ opinion, both “extraordinarily ambitious” and “flawed” (140).

While much negative criticism has indeed been published on *East of Eden*, there have been some favorable critiques as well. As Buerger correctly points out, critical re-

evaluation of *East of Eden* began with Lester Marks' *Thematic Design in the Novels of John Steinbeck*, first published in 1969. As Buerger explains, Marks carefully examines "Lisca's received notions," and "finds a coherence in themes, artistic control of the structure, and no proof that the narrator is anything other than a part of the fictional construct" (10). Marks also asserts that in *East of Eden*, "Steinbeck has carefully wedded theme to structure" (Marks 114). Furthermore, he finds that instead of representing a disastrous contrast to the works that preceded it, *East of Eden* successfully weaves together three themes that dominate Steinbeck's novels: the individual's creation of her own deity, the human being's dual existence as both group animal and individual, and Steinbeck's non-teleological view of life, his philosophy of "understanding acceptance" (124).

The positive critique that Marks produced undergirds much of the more contemporary criticism of the novel. Mimi R. Gladstein, for example, writing in 1991, joins Marks in suggesting that Steinbeck's treatment of his story is not as clumsy as Lisca, Levant, and others would propose. Gladstein suggests, in agreement with Lewis, that Genesis functions as the novel's prototype. Unlike Lewis, however, Gladstein comments that instead of misunderstanding this story, Steinbeck remains faithful to the conventional, phallogocentric interpretation of it. "[A]s a retelling of the story," Gladstein writes, *East of Eden* "maintains the patriarchal vision, though altered through Steinbeck's perspective" (31). Similarly, in a 1993 analysis, Barbara Heavilin finds, in concurrence with Marks, that the novel is well constructed. Framing the novel's structure as a balanced exploration of moral dichotomies, Heavilin suggests that "through the lives of

his characters, the Hamiltons and the Trasks, [Steinbeck] carefully delineates and defines the nature of good and evil” (92). She argues further that “This thematic exploration is closely allied to the novel’s structure, running from the opening pages describing the Salinas Valley to its dramatic enactment in the final scene” (92). In Heavilin’s eyes, thus, Steinbeck fuses structure and theme in the novel successfully: “Steinbeck has an Aristotelian sense of wholeness in which the parts fit together so that structure and theme melt into a unified, coherent whole,” she writes (92).

Worth noting in the context of my study is that the re-evaluation of *East of Eden*, of which the articles cited above constitute a part, also involves some application of postmodern critical theory to the text. According to Buerger, postmodern perspectives were first brought to bear on *East of Eden* in 1973 by Lawrence William Jones (10). Buerger chronicles Jones’ insistence “that we recognize the experimental nature of Steinbeck’s work in the light of postmodern critical theory” (10). However, Jones’ work aims primarily at making a case for Steinbeck as a fabulist (Buerger 10), and so while Jones’ exhortation is a provocative one, he leaves it up to other Steinbeck scholars to undertake the postmodern analysis he mandates.

Buerger himself acts as one of the first to answer Jones’ injunction. Suggesting that the postmodern conception of “fallibilism,” or “the belief that we can never be absolutely sure of anything” (10), can be found within *East of Eden*, Buerger applies this idea in particular to an analysis of the novel’s narrator, giving considerable emphasis, for example, to the narrator’s reversal of his characterization of Cathy Ames in Chapter 17 of the novel. This exemplifies, Buerger suggests, the provisionality of the narrator’s

assertions (11). Although intriguing, Buerger's analysis is hampered by two things, both of which involve context. First, Buerger fails to provide any specific or detailed postmodern theory within which to situate his assertions. He simply attributes the coinage of the term "fallibilism" to Charles Sanders Peirce. Given this absence of an appropriate critical context, it becomes difficult to understand how the narrator's provisionality is a specifically postmodern phenomenon. The second problem with Buerger's study surrounds the fact that the context he *does* provide hinders his study rather than enhancing it. Buerger cobbles his own analysis together with a lengthy literature review, and this apparent disjunction of purpose and form deprives his postmodern explication of both the clarity and credibility it might otherwise possess.

Steven Mulder carries out a somewhat more developed postmodern analysis of *East of Eden*. Highlighting the fact that the novel represents a "conscious departure in theme and technique that mystified [Steinbeck's] Viking editors and, in the years since, many of his critics" (109), Mulder argues that in the novel, Steinbeck "began using techniques later identified with postmodernism" (109). More specifically, according to Mulder, *East of Eden* can be classified as postmodernist metafiction. This is so, Mulder writes, first because the novel foregrounds its own fictional status, never allowing readers to forget that "they are encountering an artificial environment with only linguistic status" (110). A second testament to *East of Eden's* postmodern metafictional status lies in its "self-reflexive focus on the author and the writing process," in which "the writer explores the *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (113). As a result of these elements, Mulder asserts, "The novel becomes a case study of the process of self-

discovery all humans undertake” (117). If clear and insightful, Mulder’s analysis is also limited because it ignores several important aspects of postmodernism, including the drive toward decentralization, the emergence of discursive formation, and the problematization of both interpretation and the concept of the subject. I shall be employing each of these aspects in my own postmodern analysis of Steinbeck’s last two novels. First, however, it will be necessary to give some sense of the critical reception that *The Winter of Our Discontent* has received.

As was *East of Eden*, *The Winter of Our Discontent* has been summarily dismissed by several Steinbeck scholars. As Louis Owens writes,

Critics in general have not been kind to this novel. Contrasting the novel with the short story from which it grew, ‘How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank,’ Warren French in 1965 declared that ‘a delightful comic fantasy has been turned into a contrived melodrama.’ Joseph Fontenrose dismisses the novel as superficial and ‘improbable.’ Peter Lisca, in a 1965 attempt to explain what most critics saw as Steinbeck’s serious decline as a writer, attacks the novel for its ‘reworded clichés and stereotyped situations.’ (200)

Cursory examination of the work of several Steinbeck critics that Owens omits here serves to reinforce his point. Despite his championing of *East of Eden*, Lester Marks finds *The Winter of Our Discontent* wanting, suggesting that the novel “fails to support its moral contentions with believable events and characters” (135). Further, Marks goes to some lengths to reproduce the comments written by Arthur Mizener in a *New York Times Book Review* article published on the eve of Steinbeck’s acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this article, Mizener writes that it is

difficult to find a flattering explanation for awarding this most distinguished of literary prizes to a writer whose real but limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing and, in his worst books, overwhelmed by it....Perhaps...these Europeans who influence the awarding of the prize are simply behind the times and in all sincerity believe that the judgements of the thirties are still the established judgements. (qtd. in Marks 136)

Several other critics have echoed Marks' evaluation in terms somewhat less stringent than those of Arthur Mizener. John Timmerman, for example, finds that the novel is a collection of significant (albeit unprecedented) flaws. He suggests that the language of the novel is artificial and that there is much weakness in the novel's descriptions and imagery (253). In addition, Timmerman concludes that Ethan Hawley is mismatched with the poignant moralistic tale of which he is the central character. "However significant the moral revelation of the novel," Timmerman writes, "it fails to take root in character" (264). In a more contemporary review of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Robert Hughes essentially follows French in suggesting the novel is a flawed reproduction of an earlier and better crafted short story. "In the short story...Steinbeck succeeds with his materials, whereas with the novel, he fails," Hughes asserts (7).

While *The Winter of Our Discontent* has been the object of much vitriolic ink, it has, in recent years, received some positive reception as well. In the same way that Marks championed *East of Eden* and in doing so licensed a new, more positive outpouring of *East of Eden* criticism, Louis Owens forwards a positive evaluation of *The Winter of Our Discontent* which in many ways presages the positive evaluations that have followed his own. Owens takes up an essentially moderate position, for while he does argue that the novel has faults in moral vision, style, and structure, he also classifies *The Winter of Our*

Discontent as “one of Steinbeck’s most moving works” (199). Disagreeing directly with Timmerman, Owens finds that Ethan Hawley is one of Steinbeck’s most fully realized characters. He writes that, “Ethan, far more than any previous Steinbeck character, transcends the role of what Steinbeck earlier termed ‘symbol people’ and becomes fully human with all of the personal agony that entails” (99). Owens’ conclusions about the quality of *The Winter of Our Discontent* have been repeated by several critics, including John Ditsky, who describes the novel as “among the richest of Steinbeck’s [works] in both with and sensitivity to the effects of language” (“Naturalism” 43), and Hassell A. Simpson, who describes *The Winter of Our Discontent* as a “mature and balanced, if somewhat cryptic, assessment of the American dream and what happened to it” (317).

Owens forecasts much of the *The Winter of Our Discontent* criticism that has followed his own by examining the novel’s symbolism in light of an external context. Owens explicates the text’s symbolism from within the context of Arthurian Romance, and many critics, including more contemporary ones, have used essentially the same critical strategy by applying various external contexts to their analyses of *The Winter of Our Discontent*. John Ditsky, for example, examines the Biblical allusions present within *The Winter of Our Discontent*, and he finds that the novel contains evidence of Biblical misattribution (“Devil” 21-2). Michael Meyer shares the Biblical context with Ditsky, and has achieved surprising results with his tenacious application of this Biblical context to *The Winter of Our Discontent*. In “Citizen Cain: Ethan Hawley’s Double Identity in *The Winter of Our Discontent*,” Meyer argues that the mixture of allusions to both Cain and Abel applied to Ethan Hawley frame his character in a very ambiguous fashion. In

the first part of the novel, Steinbeck “brings his protagonist, Hawley, to a confrontation between his two natures, natures embodied symbolically in the images of a revengeful and aggressive Cain and a victimized, passive Abel,” Meyer writes (200). In “Transforming Evil to Good: The Image of Iscariot in *The Winter of Our Discontent*,” Meyer once again finds that Ethan is defined ambiguously as a result of the conflicting Biblical allusions attached to him. Where in the first study the conflicting images were those of Cain and Abel, however, in the second the images are those of Iscariot and Christ. According to Meyer, “Ethan...becomes a composite Christ/Judas figure in the novel, vacillating between the supposed moral legacy of the past...while simultaneously struggling with the realization that the future belongs to those who use the corruption around them to their own benefit” (“Iscariot” 103).

Interestingly, while the Biblical context has been much used in the analysis of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, some contemporary critics have also begun to analyze the novel from a diametrically opposed context: that of the occult. Douglas Verdier, for example, examines the novel in light of the tarot future-divination system, paying specific attention to the tarot card reading scene in *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Verdier concludes that “Steinbeck intended the reader to perceive a certain meaning from the outcome of Margie’s [tarot card] reading, a meaning which cannot be fully recognized without a careful examination of the tarot scene and some knowledge of the tarot itself” (45). Similarly, in “Witchcraft and Superstition in *The Winter of Our Discontent*,” Kevin M. McCarthy finds in the novel several occult allusions, including “references to witches,

the superstitions about fishing and the weather, and the many images of water and storms” (197).

Although several contrasting contexts have been applied to the examination of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, none of these published studies has made use of postmodern critical theory in either a cursory or detailed fashion. Examination of both *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* from an explicitly and fully-contextualized postmodern critical context shall be the purpose of my study. However, one of the central problems that must be addressed in undertaking the analysis of these two novels from the postmodernist context is the resolution of what, precisely, “postmodernism” is. The difficulty associated with defining this term is reflected by the fact that consultation of different sources yields widely divergent definitions of the postmodern phenomenon. In his widely-known and influential study, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, for example, Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism as an essentially ahistorical culmination of modernism. “In modernism,” Jameson argues, “some residual zones of ‘nature’ or ‘being,’ or the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that ‘referent.’ Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good” (ix). With the disappearance of nature follows the disappearance of historical consideration, Jameson argues. For him, postmodernism is “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten to think historically in the first place” (ix).

Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodernism differs substantially from Jameson's. Hutcheon writes that "The view that postmodernism relegates history to 'the dustbin of an obsolete episteme, arguing gleefully that history does not exist...' is simply wrong. History [in postmodernism] is not made obsolete. It is, however, being rethought—as a human construct" (16). Hutcheon sees this type of rethinking and of foregrounding the constructed nature of reality as central to postmodernism: "The challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might have once accepted the existence of some absolute 'truth'—this is the project of postmodernism," she writes (48). Hutcheon's analysis also defines postmodernism as an inherently contradictory discourse, for it "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (3). For Hutcheon, thus, "Postmodernism attempts to be historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive" (30).

While he agrees with Hutcheon about the "hybrid" nature of postmodernism, arguing that "poststructuralism and postmodernism...characteristically seek out entanglements, contaminations, and hybridizations" (x), Vincent Leitch would disagree with both Hutcheon and Jameson about postmodernism's essential character. For Leitch, postmodernism is neither modernism culminated nor the simultaneous installation and subversion of conventions. Instead, it is

the corrosive cultural moment when suspicion of master narratives becomes widespread and the margins solicit the matrix. The most striking figure for these two related phenomena is the rise of new social movements and subaltern groups, especially feminists, racial separatists, Third World militants, gay and lesbian rights activists, antinuclear campaigners, radical environmentalists, and animal rights activists. From

the margins, the status quo looks to be cobbled together and managed by repression, omission, exploitation, and violence. (ix)

Leitch contends, therefore, that while postmodernism is indeed “poststructuralism writ large, suspecting the operations and undermining the enlightened values of modern Western cultures” (x), it is also an intrinsically political phenomenon.

In contrast, for Brian McHale, postmodernism has very little to do with politics. McHale sees the differentiation of postmodernism from other critical discourses like modernism as a question of which kind of philosophical speculation dominates. Thus, McHale suggests, modernist fiction is primarily epistemological, for it “deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as...‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’” (9). Conversely, postmodernist fiction is primarily ontological, for it “deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ‘Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?’” (10).

Clearly, then, considerable disagreement exists as to what postmodernism as a phenomenon actually is. My own definition of postmodernism shall be framed by the range of poststructuralist ideas about language, literature, and reality articulated by Jacques Derrida. This study will focus in particular on the ideas enunciated within Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” and *Of Grammatology*. I wish to provide Derrida’s ideas as context for the postmodern elements I shall explore in this study in part because some of those postmodern elements hail directly from Derrida’s linguistic and philosophical theories, and in part because Derrida’s poststructuralist formulations incontrovertibly form one of the matrices for

present-day postmodernism. Having situated it within this context, the definition of postmodernism I shall use in this study comes directly from Hutcheon's analysis.

Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* founds a stable and lucid outline of postmodern theory which is essentially Derridean in its genesis. In addition, because Hutcheon's analysis is both more lucid and somewhat more specific about the way in which postmodern conceptions manifest in text, I shall rely on it heavily throughout this work for the establishment of theoretical background within which to inscribe my analyses of Steinbeck's later fiction. Detailed erection of the critical context for this work will occupy the balance of this chapter, which shall focus specifically on Derrida, and Chapter II, in which I will extrapolate and explain the specific and applicable postmodern elements which emerge from the more general Derridean context.

Having established both text and context for my definition of postmodernism, I shall argue that Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* exhibit convergences with selected aspects of postmodern critical theory, including the decentering of narrative structure, the replacement of objective "reality" with discourses, and the problematization of both interpretation and the concept of the subject. Explanation of each of these postmodern aspects will occupy the second chapter of this work. Chapter II will also demonstrate the way in which these postmodern elements can be found in nascent form within two of Steinbeck's earlier novels, *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*. Analysis of the occasional convergences between these novels and the postmodern elements listed above shall serve not only to complete the explication of those postmodern concepts, but also to demonstrate the way such convergences begin to

manifest in text. The third and fourth chapters of this study will contain the analysis of the postmodern elements that emerge within *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*, respectively. Finally, in the fifth and concluding chapter, I will examine the benefits of postmodern analysis of Steinbeck's opus and add a final suggestion for the serious and self-conscious postmodern re-evaluation of his later works.

In order to establish the context with which I wish to frame my discussion of Steinbeck's last two novels, I will first summarize at some length the philosophical and linguistic ideas of Jacques Derrida that are applicable to this study. My summary begins with the essay within which Derrida lays the poststructuralist groundwork for the more contemporary postmodern critical paradigm: "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." This essay focuses considerably on the Western concept of structure, and Derrida opens with the announcement that a "rupture" has taken place in the understanding of this concept. Before elaborating on this rupture, or on its implications, however, it is important to understand exactly how Derrida views the concept of structure. Derrida suggests that the concept of structure is primordial. It is so old and so common, he writes, that it is virtually united with the Western episteme. "The concept of structure," Derrida writes, "and even the word 'structure' itself are as old as... Western science and Western philosophy....their roots thrust deep into ordinary language, into whose deepest recesses the episteme plunges in order to gather them up and make them part of itself in metaphorical displacement" ("Structure" 109). Structure, Derrida would suggest, is a concept so ancient that Western thinkers have lost sight of the fact that the idea is essentially only a useful analogy. As Michael Payne paraphrases, the

idea of structure “is so much a part of the root network of ordinary language and thought that it is easy to forget its metaphorical character” (12). Structure, thus, is an extremely common and, importantly, metaphorical construct that most Western thinkers use to organize their thinking about the world. Indeed, since the Enlightenment it has been difficult for Western thinkers to divorce themselves from the idea that the universe and everything within it exist as, if not an extremely complex machine, at least a structured totality the components of which are themselves smaller structures within the greater, all encompassing whole. Thus it is difficult for Western thinkers to consider society, language, law, or even themselves as anything other than small systems within the larger system of the universe itself.

Western thinkers’ deep—in fact, almost excessive—familiarity with structure, Derrida suggests, compels them to ignore a second concept which is just as pervasive and important as that of structure itself: that of “center.” According to Derrida, the concept of center necessarily accompanies that of structure; the duality is so common, in fact, that in the Western episteme “the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself” (“Structure” 109).

Derrida elaborates on the concept of center by explaining the privileged and contradictory space that it occupies vis-à-vis the idea of structure. On the one hand, Derrida suggests, the center lies within a structure works to define it. Derrida views this part of the center’s function as both additive and restrictive. It is additive because the center provides the structure it inhabits with its essence (indeed, “essence” is one of the ideas that Derrida will suggest has become synonymous with center, as will be discussed

later). The center, Derrida writes, functions to “orient, balance, and organize the structure” in which it exists (“Structure” 109). While serving this provisional function, however, the center delimits the structure within which it resides by defining and organizing the elements within the structure and by specifying the relationships that exist between those elements. Derrida labels this definitive purpose as “limiting the *play* of the structure.” “By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system,” Derrida writes, “the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form” (“Structure” 109). The center exists within the structure, thus, and both permits the play of elements within the structure and establishes the boundaries for that play.

Derrida’s project entails more than simply elaborating on the concept of center, however. It also includes unveiling what he perceives as an intrinsic contradiction associated with the idea. The contradiction arises, Derrida suggests, when one notices that while the center is the agent that permits the play of a structure, it is not, itself, susceptible to this activity. The center, Derrida explains,

is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation of the transformation of elements is forbidden....Thus, it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality. (“Structure” 109)

The center’s avoidance of structurality implies that it cannot reside within a structure, and it is this insinuation, Derrida suggests, that leads to the contradiction at the heart of the Western concept of center: as Derrida writes, “the center is *within* the structure and *outside* it” (“Structure” 109). This paradox and its attendant logic, which Derrida

subsumes under the label “the structurality of structure” are usually ignored, owing mostly to Westerners’ familiarity with and dependence on the concept of structure. Put another way, the “structurality” of structure comprises structure’s essentially metaphorical status, a status that has “always been neutralized or reduced” (“Structure” 109) by endowing structures with centers which define, organize, and limit them. The rupture that Derrida heralds at the opening of his essay represents the moment when “the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought” (“Structure” 110), or the moment at which Western thinkers were forced to acknowledge structure as essentially metaphorical and the “center” as essentially absent.

The consequences of the “rupture” Derrida announces can only be understood when one fully comprehends the function of the “neutralizing” centralization he describes. It has already been demonstrated that, according to Derrida’s analysis, the center exists both within and outside the structure it occupies and functions to organize it and limit its “play” of signification. The center also serves a much more fundamental function: not only does it organize and delimit the structure it resides within, it also *verifies* the structure. Derrida writes that the center ensures that the play of signification within a structure is understandable and valid by grounding that play within an intelligible matrix: “The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play” (“Structure” 109). According to Derrida, therefore, the center represents the fundamental axiom guaranteeing the validity of a structure’s signification. As David Lodge

paraphrases, the center functions as the “secure ground...or ‘transcendental signified’ that is outside the system under investigation and guarantees its intelligibility” (107).

For Derrida, understanding the fundamentally conflicted nature of the concept of center conduces the recognition that despite its guarantee of a secure physical or metaphysical ground upon which to found a structure, the center is itself a “philosophical fiction” (Lodge 107). The paradoxical logic defining the center as simultaneously internal and external to the structure it dominates reveals, for Derrida, that the center is little more than a convenient illusion having no innate character of its own. The authentic center (which is also the non-center by virtue of not actually being within the structure) has, Derrida suggests “always already been exiled from itself,” and replaced by a series of substitutions. So pervasive is this kind of supplementarity, Derrida suggests, that “the entire history of the concept of structure...must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center” (“Structure” 109). According to Derrida, therefore, the ostensible centers of Western metaphysical structures have no authentic existence of their own. Instead, myriad substitutes replace these “transcendental signifieds” which, Derrida claims, are “always already” absent.

Understanding these “central” characteristics permits comprehension of the ramifications of the “rupture” that Derrida proclaims. Where before structure had been recognized as a valid construct owing to the guarantee implicit in its central presence, post-rupture structure must be considered fundamentally and radically de-centered. Following the disruption in the structurality of structure, Derrida writes,

it [is] necessary to begin thinking that there [is] no center, that the center [cannot] be thought in the form of a present being, that the center [has] no natural site, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play. This [is] the moment when language enter[s] the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything [becomes] discourse...that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. (“Structure” 110)

The rupture in the structurality of structure can be likened to a kind of epistemological earthquake, for it does violence to structure by working with a power that, instead of striking structures themselves, shakes the very foundation upon which those structures are laid.

Derrida’s assertion of the “rupture” that has taken place in the structurality of structure is, on its own, of more philosophical than literary interest. Nevertheless, the implications of Derrida’s philosophical discussion bear greatly upon literary studies, for his explanation of structure is specifically relevant to language, which Derrida calls the “structure of structures” (“Structure” 110). Derrida’s theories concerning language mesh naturally with his analysis of structure. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida applies a specific label to the Western-episteme thinking which precedes the structural disruption he pinpoints. Derrida chooses “the Word” or *logos* as his metaphor for the ultimate (and fictional) transcendental signified, and he labels the type of thinking which depends on this basis *logocentric*. Because it relies so heavily on a central presence to confirm its validity, Derrida frames logocentric thinking such that it dovetails with what he calls the “metaphysics of presence.” The root at which logocentrism and “the metaphysics of presence” converge is “the orientation...toward an order of meaning—thought, truth,

reason, logic, the Word—conceived as existing in itself, as foundation” (Culler 92). The “metaphysics of presence” comprises the idea that there exists some sort of central, self-identical presence that serves as a foundation for discourse.

With reference to language and the linguistic system in general, the central presence assumed by this “metaphysics of presence” is, Derrida suggests, encompassed by the ideas of truth and meaning. Derrida points out in *Of Grammatology* that the foundation of language is the unambiguous transference of meaning. In particular, logocentric thinking assumes that signs exist as secondary references to external truths and meanings which precede them. According to Derrida, in logocentric thinking, “reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos” (*Grammatology* 14). As Keith Booker summarizes, “Derrida notes that logocentric logic sees language as a reflection of some pre-existing meaning or reality” (57).

In contravention of this logocentric attitude toward language, Derrida proposes a radically different conception of the signification process. Rejecting the notion that meaning and reality are stable elements pre-existing language and incontrovertibly present within it, Derrida argues that language *creates* meaning and reality rather than being validated by them. In Derrida’s conception, language and meaning are associated not because the latter naturally inhabits the former, but as a result of the originary differences present in the linguistic system. As Booker puts it,

Derrida proposes a fundamentally different conception of the process of signification in which meaning is dynamically generated on the fly in the process of writing....There is, then, a fundamental difference between traditional authorship and what Derrida calls 'writing': The theological notion of authorship points backward (and inward) to a prior point of origin; writing is radically contemporary, pointing forward and outward, irreducibly caught up in the flow of history and in an explosive dissemination of multiple meanings. (63)

For Derrida, the signification process actually embodies the reverse of its conventional orientation; it actually creates meaning and reality by virtue of the differences intrinsic to any linguistic system. As Jonathan Culler explains, on a fundamental level the process of signification depends on each signifier's difference from the other signifiers within the linguistic system. "Acts of signification," Culler writes, "depend on differences, such as the contrast between 'food' and 'nonfood' that allows food to be signified, or the contrast between signifying elements that allows a sequence function as signifier. The sound sequence *bat* is a signifier because it contrasts with *mat*, *bad*, *bet*, etc." (96).

It is precisely this differentiation of signifiers which Derrida highlights as the main force behind the signification process. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida asserts that

the play of differences involves synthesis and referrals that prevent there from being any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each 'element'—phoneme or grapheme—is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the *text*, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences. (*Grammatology* 26)

Derrida argues, therefore, that no intrinsic presence automatically occupies the linguistic system; instead, signification hinges on the differences between signs. In Derrida's thinking each signifier contains meaning not because meaning resides as a self-evident presence within each signifier, but because whenever a signifier is uttered or written, it is contrasted automatically with the traces of other signifiers that are not present. As Booker paraphrases, "To Derrida...all words bear the traces of their previous appearances in other texts...[and] they also bear the traces of other words in the text. In fact, the system of self-reference in literary language extends outward to encompass the entire linguistic system" (63). Derrida's theory that differences constitute the only signifying presence within the linguistic system represents a significant critique of logocentrism, for it subverts the logocentric assumption that language is intrinsically saturated with meaning. As Jonathan Culler points out, "to conclude that the system consists only of differences undermines the attempt to found a theory of language on positive entities which might be present either in the speech event or in the system" (99).

Having concluded, thus, that the sign is not a guarantor of presence—that is, that the sign cannot be said to automatically and independently contain any inherent meaning, Derrida continues this line of argument by suggesting how signs *do* in fact function. In order to do this, Derrida introduces the concept of supplementation. From the beginning of his discussion of the supplement, Derrida acknowledges that the concept has two significations: "the concept of the supplement...harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary" (*Grammatology* 144). On the one hand, a supplement is an extra addition; it is, as Derrida suggests, "a surplus, a plenitude

enriching another plenitude” (*Grammatology* 144). The second signification of supplement complicates this definition somewhat, however. In addition to adding, Derrida writes, the supplement *substitutes*: “It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in the place of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image [as writing or language is claimed to do with objects and ideas present within the “real world”] it is by anterior default of presence” (*Grammatology* 145).

According to Derrida, therefore, the supplement, while “foreign to the essential nature of that to which it is added” (Culler 103) nevertheless re-defines that original concept or object as inherently lacking or incomplete, for it is this sort of incompleteness or imperfection that makes supplementation possible. As Culler explains, “A supplement to a dictionary is an extra section that is added on, but the possibility of adding a supplement indicates that the dictionary itself is incomplete” (102). While the supplement is an “inessential extra,” it cannot be ignored that “the supplement is added to complete, to compensate for a lack in what was supposed to be complete in itself” (Culler 103).

Using this logic of the supplement, Derrida suggests that “The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself,” a definition which in some ways accords rather nicely with the Saussurian definition of the signifier as the thing which works as a linguistic supplement for the real-world signified. Having already undercut the traditional logocentric viewpoint of the sign, Derrida proceeds to use the logic of supplementation to deconstruct the logocentric conception of the signified, or “the thing itself” to which the signifier is designed to refer. Derrida argues, essentially, that if the “the thing itself” can be supplemented by the implementation of a signifier, then the metaphysical contours of

the signified cannot be complete, as logocentric thinking would have it, because the possibility of supplementation reveals an essential lack of wholeness within the signified. Because such a signified can no longer be said to constitute a whole presence, it must, Derrida suggests, be viewed as inherently separate from and exterior to the thing itself: an incomplete substitute. Thus it turns out, according to Derrida's logic, that the signified is really only another signifier, for it is an imperfect supplement to the thing itself. For Derrida, the linguistic system forms an endless chain of continual substitutions in which each signifier, or supplement, refers not to a stable and present signified, but to another supplement. Language represents "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself" (*Grammatology* 157). The thing itself has, for Derrida, never been anything more than a "mirage," an imagined self-identical presence that, while seemingly produced and reflected by writing, is nevertheless endlessly deferred by it.

The implications of this assertion are far-reaching, and Derrida does not fail to produce them. Because "the thing itself" and presence are only derived from language in the process of being indefinitely deferred, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate signifier from signified, or to distinguish the consistently postulated "real world" from writing. "What we have tried to show," Derrida writes,

in following the connecting thread of the...supplement is that in what we call real life...there has never been anything but writing, there have never been anything but supplements and substitutional significations which could arise only in a chain of differential references. The 'real' supervenes or is added only in taking meaning from a trace or an invocation of supplements. (*Grammatology* 158-9)

It is thus by way of the concept of supplementarity, and the violence that this concept does to the logocentrically postulated conception of the external “real world” that Derrida arrives at his famous and much-quoted axiom, “There is nothing outside the text” (*Grammatology* 158). As Vincent Leitch succinctly summarizes, “The world is text. Nothing stands behind....” (58-9).

In fashioning his textual world Derrida jettisons the concepts of truth, origin, a stable signified, or anything outside of the text. Given this almost wholesale abandonment of the Western ontological apparatus, one might be compelled to wonder what, for Derrida, remains. The answer to this question is that Derrida can envision two alternative ways of responding to the “rupture” in the structurality of structure and all of that rupture’s concomitant effects. One response, which Derrida links to the thought and writing of Rousseau, is the “saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty” (“Structure” 121) continuation of the search for presence, for the “reassuring foundation” which represents “the origin and the end of play” (“Structure” 122). The second alternative, which Derrida aligns himself with, for, as he says, “I do not believe today that there is any question of *choosing*” (122), is one he associates with the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. This response consists of “*affirmation*, that is, the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (“Structure” 121).

Indeed, Derrida’s vision of a world consisting of little more than the interpretation of the ambiguous and unlimited free play of language is probably one of the most important of his ideas vis-à-vis the practice of literary study. In Derrida’s vision,

transparent, accessible meaning disappears, or at least becomes inherently ambiguous, and within this obscurity fades the idea of literary art as either a means of fixed and stable communication or a means of transmission of stable authorial intent. As Booker writes, “The intricate interrelationships among different parts of the linguistic system [in Derrida’s model] are beyond authorial control and often lead to results that authors neither intend nor anticipate. Because of such relationships, no author can produce a pure expression of her own thoughts, which in any case are themselves a product of language” (63). Articulating much the same idea in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes that “The writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and up to a point, be governed by the system” (158).

Given this instability, it is not surprising that analyses which emerge from the Derridean paradigm tend to stress the “inherent instability and ambiguity of language” (Booker 66). I feel it appropriate to emphasize here, however, that such shall not be the purpose of this analysis. It is not the project of this study to analyze Steinbeck’s work in order to demonstrate the validity of Derrida’s linguistic formulations. Such a project, while perfectly valid, would be stymied by the fact that, as M.H. Abrams pointed out initially, and as many other critics have suggested subsequently, it would culminate in a result which, from the deconstructive point of view, is a “foregone conclusion”: the conclusion that language is inherently unstable and uninterpretable by virtue of being so endlessly interpretable. “The deconstructive method works,” Abrams suggests, “because it can’t help working...there is no complex passage of verse or prose which could

possibly serve as a counter-instance to test its limits....The reading comes back again and again, with different texts, to the ‘same impasse’” (273). Instead relegating my study to this sort of repetition, I shall attempt to break new ground in the field of Steinbeck studies by employing Derridean theory and elements of postmodern critical theory as contexts for my analysis. It will be the project of this study to show that using Derrida and postmodernism as analytical contexts clarifies some of the more confusing problems posed by *East of Eden*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent*. After demonstrating scattered conjunctions between Steinbeck’s earlier works and these two contexts, this study will illustrate in some detail that problems in *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* which critics have, heretofore, classified as startling novelistic failures on Steinbeck’s part can be thoroughly reframed by examining them with different assumptions. As John Ditsky insightfully concludes, “the fault [for Steinbeck’s critical dismissal is] not really his but that of the individuals who sought to reduce a significant and original writer’s output by means of the constraints of prior assumptions” (“Naturalism” 42). Implicit in my argument throughout shall be the suggestion that what is needed now in Steinbeck criticism is a radical re-formulation of the standards according to which his work is evaluated. We, as critics of Steinbeck’s fiction, need what Warren French terms a “variation upon the ancient act of communion—a sharing that recognizes...the need for the acceptance of the necessity for change, no matter how disagreeable it may be to our preconceptions” (48). Specifically then, I shall argue that when the assumptions that undergird the analysis of Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* are changed to those of Derridean philosophy and postmodern critical theory, the works

emerge not as failures to manage the novelistic form effectively, but as attempts at experimentation which resulted, unbeknownst to both Steinbeck and his critical readership, in significant and surprising convergences between Steinbeck's later fiction and what has come to be labeled postmodernism. The four specific postmodern elements I shall apply to Steinbeck's later novels all emerge directly from the Derridean context outlined earlier in this chapter; filling out the Derridean framework established above with explications of those postmodern elements will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER II
POSTMODERN INTIMATIONS: *CANNERY ROW*
AND TORTILLA FLAT

While *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* provide the clearest examples of the ways in which Steinbeck's work can be profitably analyzed from a postmodern perspective, such analysis can be enhanced by noting that there are, in fact, conjunctions with Derridean philosophy and postmodern critical theory within some of Steinbeck's earlier works as well. While several of Steinbeck's works contain elements warranting postmodern analysis, this chapter will focus specifically on the postmodern conjunctions present within two of Steinbeck's early, short novels: *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*. These two novels display significant accordances with Derridean ideas and postmodern theory in each of the aspects I shall apply to *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* later in this study: the decentering of narrative structure, the problematization of stable meaning, the replacement of reality by discourse, and the problematization of subjectivity. As such, this study benefits from pointing out the emergence of these postmodern elements in Steinbeck's earlier works in three ways. First, such analysis will allow the full explication of those postmodern elements before they are applied to Steinbeck's later novels. In addition, this examination will introduce the reader of this study to how the postmodern elements upon which I shall focus manifest in text. Third, this type of explication will demonstrate a kind of nascent postmodern continuity in Steinbeck's work that further validates my thesis.

One of the conjunctions between Steinbeck's earlier works and postmodern critical theory involves narrative structure. As has already been demonstrated, the absence of center forms a central concept of Derridean poststructuralism. As Derrida himself explains, following the rupture in the structurality of structure, the controlling and defining center has to be acknowledged as an essentially constructed fiction. Selden and Widdowson explain this idea somewhat more lucidly than does Derrida himself. "If there is a summarizing idea" for postmodernism, they write,

it is the theme of the absent centre. The postmodern experience is widely held to stem from a profound sense of ontological uncertainty. Human shock in the face of the unimaginable (pollution, holocaust, the death of the 'subject') results in a loss of fixed points of reference. Neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence, meaning. They are radically decentered. (178)

One of the central (if it can be said to be so) ideas of postmodernism, thus, is decentralization, the displacement or destruction of the center which controls, defines, and limits a structure.

This postmodern drive toward decentralization works significant effects on the structure of narrative, and it clearly manifests in postmodern narratives as the displacement or actual erasure of any central narrative concern. The conventional, Western, novelistic narrative is unified and singular – that is, it most often contains what can be called a central narrative framework. This central framework is usually constructed around a singular set of events or characters, with all other, minor characters and happenings branching off from and relating to the central ones in some clear fashion. In other words, a traditional Western narrative involves a central core surrounded by and

connected with a hierarchical set of sub-narratives, and such a narrative is therefore singular, unified, and centralized. These characteristics contrast with what Linda Hutcheon calls “the pluralizing rhetoric of postmodernism,” the central components of which are “the multiple, the heterogeneous, [and] the different” (66). The postmodern emphasis on multiplicity displaces traditional, centralized narrative structure; in postmodern narrative, “Narrative continuity is threatened” or destroyed (Hutcheon 59). In this dislocation of narrative continuity, radically decentralized narrative structure or multifarious narrative structure replaces narrative design structured around a central core, and this usurpation reflects the postmodern movement “away from centralization and its associated concerns of origin, oneness, and monumentality” (Hutcheon 58). Postmodern narratives, thus, reflect the impetus toward decentralization through their multiplicity and plural concern.

One of the clearest examples of this type of decentralized narrative design to be found in Steinbeck’s earlier work exists within *Cannery Row*. This design stems from the fact that unlike *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *To a God Unknown*, and other of Steinbeck’s earlier works, *Cannery Row* does not contain a unified narrative structure. One of the ways in which *Cannery Row* displays this decentralization is through the plurality of its narrative concerns. In this novel there exists no centralized plot line to unify the separate characters and events. Instead, the novel evolves as a web of narratives, and while some of these stories connect in various places, they do not crystallize to form any sort of unitary narrative structure. The narrator of *Cannery Row* acknowledges, and even emphasizes, this multiplicity in several places. Early in the

novel, for example, Steinbeck's narrator describes Cannery Row (both place, and, it could be argued, text) as the essence of multiplicity:

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and the scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses. (5)

As Steinbeck's narrator defines it here, Cannery Row is the quintessence of postmodern decentralization, for its essence is plurality. One cannot understand Cannery Row by totalizing it, the narrator seems to suggest; instead, comprehending Cannery Row must be accomplished by grasping its innate multiplicity.

The novel's narrator makes a similar point shortly after when he describes Cannery Row and its relationship with language.

The Word is a symbol and a delight which sucks up men and scenes, trees, plants, factories, and Pekinese. Then the Thing becomes the Word and back to the Thing again, but warped and woven into a fantastic pattern. The Word sucks up Cannery Row, digests it and spews it out, and the Row has taken the shimmer of the green world and the sky-reflecting seas. (17)

At first glance, this passage seems to belie the connection between Cannery Row and the postmodern sensibility. If the narrator is willing to suggest that Cannery Row exists in a "fantastic pattern" that mirrors the "shimmer of the green world and the sky reflecting seas," is this not the very sort of unification and totalization that postmodernism establishes itself by subverting? The answer to this question, and the unraveling of this conundrum, lies in the recognition that the unified "fantastic pattern" that the Row takes

on is emphatically a product of language. The narrator's remarks here underline the idea that the place itself (the Thing, in the passage above) is not itself unified, but only becomes such when symbolized with language. By demonstrating that the Row's pattern emerges in its relationship to language, the narrator actually emphasizes the Row's inherent multiplicity, for the linguistic creation of the totalized, patterned Row represents, the narrator suggests, a "warped" picture of the place, a perversion of the Thing accomplished only through significant violence. Language can only make the Row unitary by sucking up, digesting, and spewing it out. The unified, patterned Cannery Row is, thus, a distorted product of the violence which the Word does to the Thing, and the narrator's emphasis of this point underscores the Row's inherent (and very postmodern) multiplicity.

The intrinsic plurality that the narrator attaches to Cannery Row the place is equally applicable, I assert, to *Cannery Row* the text. One of the reasons for this lies in the fact that the text never concentrates on any dominant narrative concern. Instead, it focuses extensively, on a multitude of characters and events which often lack any kind of significant interconnection. Two examples from the novel should suffice to exemplify this point. Early on in the novel, the novel's narrator stakes out the Row's geographical and interpersonal layout. He begins with Lee Chong's grocery, calling it a "miracle of supply" (19), and he describes Dora's place as "a decent, clean, honest, old-fashioned sporting house where a man can take a glass of beer among friends" (19). One might expect, in a chapter that begins this way, to encounter a narrative that somehow elaborates on or reveals the significance of one or the other of these two seemingly

central locations. Instead, Steinbeck's narrator frustrates this narrative expectation and undermines any supposed centrality that these two locations might have acquired by centering the narrative on a character named William, "a dark and lonesome-looking man" whose only tangential connection to either of the locations lies in the fact that he worked as the previous watchman at Dora's place. The narrator then provides a very short but very jarring story in which William falls into a depression, tells a few people that he might commit suicide, and, at the end of the chapter, actually does "bump [himself] off" to save face before a Greek short-order cook. The narrator concludes the story of William this way:

[William's] hand rose and the ice-pick snapped into his heart. It was amazing how easily it went in. William was the watchman before Alfred came. Everyone liked Alfred. He could sit on the pipes with Mack and the boys any time. He could even visit up at the Palace Flophouse. (23)

The decentralization of the novel's narrative structure is aptly symbolized by this moment because at the instant the reader expects to be the climactic one, the narrator abruptly shifts the narrative focus. Despite the intensity of the narrative moment in which William kills himself by perforating his heart with an ice pick, the narrator moves the narrative focus to Alfred, a character whose connection with William is as insignificant as William's with the geographical description that precedes his story: Alfred is the watchman who takes over after William's suicide. This moment thus functions as a fitting emblem for the decentered structure of *Cannery Row*, for it exhibits the way that the narrative moves abruptly and tangentially between multiple, often unrelated foci.

The narrative unmooring exemplified by this chapter reflects the dislocation that takes place between each of the novel's chapters. If the episode described above undermines narrative unity by its abrupt shift in focus, then each consecutive chapter of the novel accomplishes very much the same thing by failing to focus in any significant way on the subjects in the chapters by which it is bracketed. Examination of the shift in focus that takes place in the juncture between the story chronicled above and the section of the text that succeeds it will exemplify this point. Immediately after the section containing William's story, there follows a chapter in which the novel's narrator describes the interaction between a very old Oriental man and a young boy named Andy. The young boy taunts the old man cruelly until the old man turns back and glares at him. The old man's glare has the power, in some supernatural fashion that Andy "[is] never able either to explain or to forget" (26), to make him feel a "loneliness—the desolate cold aloneness of the landscape [which makes] Andy whimper because there [is not] any one at all in the world and he [is] left" (26). Clearly, any connection (at least on a practical level) between the narrative concerns of this chapter and the one preceding it remains completely absent. Furthermore, after this short and puzzling narrative, the narrator never mentions the Oriental man, Andy, or the relationship between them again. It certainly could be argued that this short narrative and the Williams story that precedes it connect via the theme of loneliness and isolation, but the point remains that the shift in focus that occurs at the nexus between the Williams story and that of the Oriental man effects a dislocation that deprives *Cannery Row* of any vestige of centralized character. This concept will be brought to bear in the next chapter on the novel *East of Eden*, and its

application will reveal the connections between that novel's structure (which has been considered by many critics as a novelistic failure) and the postmodern ethos.

The root of the postmodern questioning of narrative centrality lies in the fact that postmodernism calls all totalities into question. "Postmodernism questions centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems" (Hutcheon 41). As has already been explained in the preceding chapter, language itself represents another "closed system" that, owing to its Derridean heritage, postmodernism challenges. To review briefly, Derrida levels two criticisms at the closed system of language. He argues first that signifiers indicate meaning not because meaning is inherently contained within them, but because of their differences with other signifiers. Derrida argues further that the "thing itself" to which signifiers refer actually consist of little more than other signifiers. As Madan Sarup explains, in the Derridean paradigm, "Sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other as signifier and signified in turn" (Sarup 33). These two criticisms imply that the relationship between language and meaning, which logocentric logic characterizes as obvious and transparent, is actually clouded and ambiguous. According to Sarup, for Derrida, "No one can make the 'means' (the sign) and the 'end' (meaning) become identical...For Derrida the sign cannot be taken as a homogenous unit bridging an origin (referent) and an end (meaning), as semiology would have it" (34).

One of the central things that Derrida accomplishes, thus, is the complication of the relationship between language and meaning. Derrida seems to wish to reveal to us that this relationship is not as simple as we might have suspected; it is, instead, a problematic relationship at best. The nexus between Derrida's project and postmodernism

appears most clearly in this context, for postmodernism valorizes “the challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might have once accepted the existence of some absolute ‘truth’” (Hutcheon 48). Part of this postmodern project focuses on the problematization of stable meaning. Hutcheon explains that, very much like Derrida’s philosophical writings, what postmodern fiction “explicitly does...is to cast doubt on the very possibility of *any* firm ‘guarantee of meaning’” (55). Postmodern fiction “works to problematize the entire activity of reference” (Hutcheon 152), and in doing so it does not exactly suggest that no meaning exists as it suggests that the production and interpretation of meaning is far more complicated than one might suspect.

Tortilla Flat, one of Steinbeck’s earlier works, contains very clear examples of the complication of meaning. Meaning in *Tortilla Flat* remains problematic because the novel seems to both install the idea of singular, transparent meaning and to subvert this conception. On the one hand, meaning seems to be something to which the paisanos have very clear, unambiguous access. For example, at one point in the novel the paisanos encounter a corporal whose wife has been stolen away from him by a “capitán.” The corporal tells his story to the paisanos, and at several points during the telling, the paisanos misinterpret the story or wrongly predict its conclusion, a fact which testifies to the story’s convoluted, ambiguous nature. The paisanos err first in assuming that that the corporal himself kills the capitán. Then, finding this assumption incorrect, the paisanos misapprehend the story again by supposing that the corporal is raising his son to be a general for the sake of reaping his revenge on the capitán. It is not until the end of this

vignette that the corporal reveals his real (and very surprising) motivation for raising his son to be a general. “Consider,” the corporal explains, “if that capitán, with the little epaulets and the little sash, could take my wife, imagine what a general with a big sash and a gold sword could take!” (100). This response surprises the paisanos enough that they are forced to consider their own responses for quite some time. Danny, the avowed head of the paisano group, articulates their collective interpretation:

“It is to be pitied,” [says] Danny at last, “that so few parents take the well-being of their children at heart. Now we are more sorry than ever that the baby is gone, for with such a father, what a happy life he has missed.”
(100)

There are two important things to note about Danny’s response. The first is that despite the obvious complications of the corporal’s story {his raising of his son to be a general so that that son will be able to “take” more simply ratifies the unjust power structure that disenfranchised him originally) Danny imposes a singular, unambiguous meaning on it. For him, the significance of this story lies in the example it provides of positive paternal ethics. The second noteworthy aspect of the paisanos’ interpretation involves the fact that it is ratified implicitly by the entire group. This is not, emphatically, the interpretation of Danny only, an idea reflected by Danny’s usage of the pronoun “we” to describe his group’s collective explication. The corporal and the reader of this story accept that Danny relates the interpretation of *all* of the corporal’s auditors, and the lack of dissent on the part of the paisanos reinforces the singular, unitary, and transparent meaning they perceive the story as possessing.

Another, somewhat more striking example of this sort of distillation of singular, unitary meaning comes at the end of the story. After Danny's death, his paisano companions become distressed because they cannot invent a method of acquiring an appropriate set of clothes for his funeral. The paisanos attempt to formulate ways of earning money, including going to the Salvation Army and cutting squids for Chin Kee, but Pilon finally silences their brainstorming by assigning a specific meaning to their experiences. "In this we learn a lesson," Pilon says. "We must take it to heart that we should always have a good suit of clothes laid by. We can never tell what may happen" (170). The coldheartedness of this interpretation of their circumstances notwithstanding, Pilon's exegesis sublimates the very complex circumstances surrounding Danny's death to a singular, unified meaning. In addition, in the same way that Danny's usage of the pronoun "we" in response to the corporal underlines the totality of the meaning he creates, the fact that, following Pilon's statement, the paisanos cease their discussion of the issue emphasizes the unitary nature of Pilon's explanation.

While these two episodes in the novel suggest that individuals can access clear, unambiguous meaning, other of the novel's events undermine this intimation. It is important to note that the problematizations of meaning that occur in *Tortilla Flat* are momentary and receive less emphasis than do instances of interpretive totalization in the novel. In this way *Tortilla Flat* contrasts with *East of Eden*, a novel in which (as Chapter III will explain) the complication of meaning is tied directly to the novel's thematic structure. Despite the more transient nature of the interpretive problematizations that occur in *Tortilla Flat*, however, attending to them benefits this discussion in two ways.

First, it indicates that the practice of interpretive complication, while more present in *East of Eden*, is not isolated there, an idea which validates the use of the postmodern rubric to investigate Steinbeck's corpus. Second, it introduces the reader to the ways in which such problematizations manifest in texts, thereby establishing useful context for investigation of the problematizations installed much more thoroughly in *East of Eden*.

The clearest gesture toward the problematization of meaning occurs late in the novel as Jesus Maria Corcoran tells a very long and complex story involving Petey Ravanno, the old man Ravanno, and two young women named Gracie and Tonia. This story provides a significant example of interpretive entanglement because the concept of meaning itself changes character as the story is narrated. At the beginning of the story's narration, meaning retains the character of a single, unitary, and immediately accessible phenomenon. Such is the concept of meaning undergirding Corcoran's comment, after only half the story is narrated and it seems to be that of Gracie's transformation into a "good," church-attending wife, that the story is "a good story" because "it would be a story for a priest to tell..." (137). This comment assumes that all of the story's auditors will construe the narrative's meaning in exactly the same way; for the story to be self-evidently edifying enough to be appropriate for a priest, its meaning must be both singular and completely accessible. Thus, as Corcoran understands it in the moment of his comment, meaning is intrinsically unitary and accessible. This totalized characterization of meaning is emphasized by the fact that the paisanos do, in fact, share Corcoran's understanding of the meaning of the story. They "[nod] appreciatively, for they liked a story with a meaning" (137). At this point in the telling of the story,

therefore, Corcoran and his companions assume, in their collective interpretation of Corcoran's story, that meaning itself is singular and unambiguous.

The meaning of Corcoran's story does not remain obvious, however, and in the dislocation that occurs in the interpretation of his story, the concept of meaning itself is fragmented as well. Meaning takes on this dispersed character when, after pausing briefly, Corcoran tells the remainder of the story, in which the old man Ravanno inadvertently kills himself in the attempt to win Tonia's love, and, for perhaps the only time in the novel, the paisanos disagree with one another about their interpretations. Pilon dislikes the story because of its sudden lack of apparent meaning; "It is not a good story," he complains, "There are too many meanings and too many lessons in it. Some of those lessons are opposite" (139). Pablo, conversely, enjoys the story for very much the same reason. He comments that narrative pleases him "because it hasn't any meaning you can see, and still it does seem to mean something" (140). The paisanos' differing interpretations problematize meaning in two ways. First, these interpretations emphasize the fact that they, themselves, have inadvertently jettisoned the concept of obvious, unitary meaning that underpinned their earlier responses to Corcoran's story. The suggestion of the group's abandonment of their earlier understanding of meaning is that meaning can, in fact, exist (and be acknowledged to exist) as a plural and inherently ambiguous entity. *Tortilla Flat's* narrator ratifies this implication, for he offers no evaluative language that might provide a reader with the tools she could use in deciding which interpretation is more valid. Instead, the narrator presents the paisanos'

interpretations as equivalent, and in doing so he underlines the idea that a single narrative can be distilled to reflect multiple, equally valid meanings.

If the fact that the narrator refuses to privilege any of the paisanos' interpretations retains significance vis-à-vis the problematization of meaning, then the apparent equilibrium between the varying interpretations of the concept of meaning itself in this episode retains even more importance. Clearly, several different versions of the concept of meaning arise in this episode. Pilon's complaint about Corcoran's story implies one of these versions. Centering on the fact that Corcoran's narrative can be interpreted in various and even contradictory ways, Pilon's dissent reveals his logocentric assumption that meaning should be singular, coherent, and non-contradictory. Pablo, alternatively, possesses a conception of meaning very different from that of Pilon. For Pablo, meaning must neither be evident nor singular and coherent. Satisfied even though the story has "no meaning that you can see," Pablo believes nonetheless that the story "does *seem* to mean something" (140, emphasis added). Pablo, then, construes meaning as a very subtle and potentially very fluid entity. The narrator mediates this interpretive dispute between Pilon and Pablo as objectively as possible, providing no indication that he considers either of the versions of meaning more appropriate. Thus, Pablo's narration deals the unitary conception of meaning a double blow: it results not only in conflicting interpretations of the narrative, but in contrasting and equivalent interpretations of the possibilities for interpretation itself. Like the decentralization of narrative structure, the problematization of meaning factors significantly into the postmodern analysis of *East of Eden*; the next

chapter of this work will outline the relationship between *East of Eden* and interpretive entanglement.

Clearly, interpretive problematization presupposes that meaning does not simply exist naturally and independently of human beings; it assumes instead that meaning is something that human beings *create*. This idea, certainly, is not one that is totally foreign to many people today, whether or not they are literary critics. The implications of this concept, however, are far-reaching, for in the same way that postmodernism problematizes the notion of single, universal, and transparent meaning, so too does it problematize the notion of stable, fixed reality by replacing that concept with that of discursive formation.

The concept of discursive formations is rooted in Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside of the text" (*Grammatology* 158). To understand this statement, it is important to comprehend the way in which, in addition to subverting the distinction between the "central" and the "peripheral," Derrida's project also blurs the boundaries between internal and external realities. As Booker explains,

Derrida's challenge to the Western tradition of logocentric thought involves a fundamental challenge to the long-cherished notion of the 'transcendental subject'—that is, to the idea that human beings exist as stable entities identifiably separate from the world around them. But just as Derrida sees no clear boundary between text and context, he also sees no absolute distinction between subject and world. (57)

The redrawing of the borders between "subject" and "world" transforms the concept of reality. Displacing the idea of a stable, independent reality that lies outside of and unmediated by human consciousness and language, this fusion redefines reality as an

entity inextricably linked to the subject. Owing to this linkage, reality becomes a phenomenon unavoidably mediated by the subject and his or her perceptions and language. This alteration involves the jettisoning of the empiricist paradigm and the advancement of the concept of discursive formation. As Selden and Widdowson explain, in the empiricist paradigm, “the subject [is] the source of all knowledge. The human mind receives impressions from without which it sifts and organises into a knowledge of the world, which is expressed in the apparently transparent medium of language. The ‘subject’ grasps the ‘object’ and puts it into words” (125). The basis of the conception of discursive formation, however, is the “refus[al] to separate subject and object into separate domains” (125), and advocates of this conception argue that, “Knowledges are always formed from discourses which pre-exist the subjects’ experiences” (125). The theory of discursive formation, thus, essentially erases the concept of the fixed, external reality, and changes the concept of “reality” such that it refers not to a transcendent entity but to a collection of disparate discourses which compete with one another for power and primacy. In the theory of discursive formations, one is left with what Vincent Leitch calls the proliferation of simulacra, the “transformation of reality into representations.” (118). As Leitch succinctly summarizes, in the postmodern view, “there is no independent reality, only discourses about it” (118-9).

The conception of discursive formation manifests most clearly in the anti-totalizing theme that circulates throughout postmodern critical theory. As has already been explained, postmodernism itself resists any kind of totalizing or absolutizing gesture in favor of allowing the things which resist such systematizations to pose problems about

the very act of systematization itself. In the postmodern schematic, the conception of reality as transcendent represents yet another absolutist, totalizing strategy. Postmodern theory predictable refuses to let such a strategy rest uninterrogated and unproblematized. In postmodern narrative, such interrogation can be found undergirding the emphasis that any version of reality is inimitably adjoined to the subject who produces it.

Postmodernism “acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (Hutcheon 42). Postmodern fiction incorporates this idea by foregrounding itself as “another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality” (Hutcheon 40). Postmodern critical theory thus takes to heart Derrida’s assertion that nothing truly exists “outside of the text” by emphasizing that “reality” is bound inextricably to the perception and language of the human subject.

Importantly, intimations of the fragmentation of the human subject can be found in *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat*. Both exhibit noteworthy conjunctions with this postmodern conception. The idea of discursive formations manifests most clearly within *Cannery Row*. At the beginning of this novel, as has already been explained, the narrator offers a very lengthy description of the row itself. At one point very near that quoted in the discussion of *Cannery Row* above, the narrator makes the oft-quoted remark that Cannery Row’s “inhabitants are, as the main once said, ‘whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,’ by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, ‘Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men,’ and he would have meant the same thing” (5). This passage juxtaposes two different realities,

one in which the people of Cannery Row can be labeled as riff-raff, and another in which it is appropriate to give the row's inhabitants more lofty description. Instead of suggesting that one of these perspectives is more accurate than the other, the passage implies that the two realities exist simultaneously. While several interpretations of this passage could be argued for, the most significant interpretation is that informed by the postmodern concept of discourse formations. The linkage between this concept and the passage itself arises in conjunction with the narrator's comment that the individuals described change character when one views them through "another peephole." Using this noun, the narrator links the objects being observed (the Row's inhabitants) with the observer's angle of vision, and in doing so he duplicates the subject-object fusion which forms the foundation of discursive formation. Steinbeck's narrator indicates, in other words, that the object observed is connected with the entity doing the observing, and in making this connection the narrator articulates a conception allied closely with postmodernism. Because all of the inhabitants in the row (and, in fact, Everybody, according to the narrator's language) are subject to this sort of observation, then in fact the entire novel can be taken as one piece of discourse or, in the language of the narrator, a collection of views from one among many different "peepholes."

Another instance which foregrounds the idea that individuals manufacture their realities in accordance with their own very specific angles of vision occurs in *Tortilla Flat*. In an episode already explicated above, Jesus Maria Corcoran tells a story about the Ravanno family which elicits disparate interpretations of both the narrative itself and the concept of meaning generally. Worth noting in this context is that in addition to

providing a clear example of the problematization of meaning, this episode foregrounds ideas which resonate with that of discursive formation. When Steinbeck's narrator juxtaposes two characters' contrasting responses to a single set of signs without providing language establishing one of the two as more valid, he suggests not only that meaning itself is problematic, but that the characters involved have *constructed* their realities in responding to the story. The point implied by this episode is not solely that the story is unstable and not subject to simplistic reduction. It is also that the characters doing the interpreting actually manufacture their interpretations in accordance with what they believe meaning is or should be. By placing the two characters' interpretations in direct confrontation with one another, Steinbeck's narrator allows the reader to see the process of discourse formulation at work, and by doing so he makes the implicit point that "there are all kinds of orders and systems in our world—and...we create them all" (Hutcheon 43). Discursive formation occupies a very important position with reference to the postmodern analysis of *The Winter of Our Discontent*; detailed explanation of the relationship between the novel and this postmodern concept will occupy part of Chapter IV.

The blurring of the distinction between subject and object seriously undercuts traditional Western notions of reality and truth. Insofar as the *concepts* of subject and object can still be conceived of as separate (for the sake of analytical expedience, if nothing else), the effacement of reality and truth by the concept of discursive formation seriously entangles the "object" side of the distinction, for it deprives thinkers of any simple, uncomplicated relationship with the object. It is important to note, however, that,

owing mostly to the subject-object distinction it refuses to accept, postmodern critical theory also seriously fragments the “subject” portion of the (apparently false) dichotomy as well.

Postmodernism accomplishes this fragmentation by subverting the “humanist notion of the unitary and autonomous subject,” and replacing this notion with “alternative notions of subjectivity” (Hutcheon 159). Where liberal humanist and modernist discourses accept the subject as independent, coherent, and autonomous, postmodern discourse undermines this conception by associating subjectivity with plurality, discontinuity, and incoherence. Point of view manipulation comprises one of the primary mechanisms used in postmodern discourse to undercut traditional humanist notions of subjectivity. Because point of view is “traditionally...the guarantee of subjectivity [in] narrative” (Hutcheon 160)—that is, because stability in point of view tacitly confirms the logocentric conception of the unitary and stable subject—postmodern discourse can subvert traditional notions of subjectivity by destabilizing point of view.

Tortilla Flat provides a significant example of the way in which postmodern narrative “profoundly disturbs the notion of the individual, coherent subject” (Hutcheon 166), but it would be incorrect to suggest that the novel consistently subverts subjectivity. In fact, the novel provides a very clear example of what Hutcheon describes as the quintessentially postmodern contradiction that arises when a discourse implements the very conventions that it attempts to subvert. Postmodernism conflicts with itself, Hutcheon writes, because “it uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3).

This type of alternate installation and subversion factors prominently in Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, particularly vis-a-vis the notion of subjectivity. On the one hand, the novel enforces traditional notions of subjectivity. Most importantly, it is narrated for the most part in third person omniscient point of view. This narrational style works to enforce the traditional notions of subjectivity by erasing the subject articulating the discourse and thus allowing traditional notions of subjectivity to remain implicit and unchallenged. As Hutcheon explains,

...the art of enunciation always involves an enunciating producer as well as a receiver of the utterance, [but] in the collective name of scientific universality (and objectivity), novelistic realism, and various critical formalisms, that enunciating entity is what has been suppressed—both as an individual humanist subject and even as the postulated producer of a 'situated' discourse. (75)

Effacement of the enunciating subject guarantees not only the "objectivity" of a discourse, therefore, but also the stability of the notions of subjectivity within which novelistic and scientific discourses are inscribed.

The third person narration of *Tortilla Flat* effects precisely the suppression of the enunciating subject that Hutcheon describes. As a result, in the majority of the novel questions concerning subjectivity simply do not arise. Perhaps the clearest examples of the disappearance of the articulating entity are those in which the narrator offers descriptive commentary about the context in which the paisanos live. At one point in the novel, for example, the narrator pauses in his or her narration of the specific events in the paisanos lives and describes Monterey. "There is a changeless quality about Monterey," the narrator writes,

Nearly every day in the morning the sun shines in the windows on the west sides of the streets; and, in the afternoons, on the east sides of the streets. Everyday the red bus clangs back and forth between Monterey and Pacific Grove. Everyday the canneries send a stink of reducing fish into the air. (141)

This description of the changeless quality of Monterey renders the notion of subjectivity that subtends it totally unproblematic. Containing no reference to any enunciating subject, this passage glosses over the fact that it is, in fact, a situated discourse. The reader of this subsequently accepts the traditional notions of subjectivity undergirding this passage without any consideration. A very similar dynamic operates with most of the narrator's utterances concerning the novel's characters. When the narrator suggests, for example, that "clocks and watches were not used by the paisanos of Tortilla Flat" (128), or that "For Big Joe Portagee, to feel love was to do something about it" (101), the reader accepts such assertions without even noting the implied subject who is the source of the utterances. In large part, thus, the novel suppresses its status as a situated discourse, and this suppression installs and validates traditional notions of subjectivity.

One very important point in the novel, however, marks the significant undermining of these traditional notions of subjectivity. As Hutcheon explains, postmodern narratives can subvert the neutralization of the enunciating subject that traditionally legitimizes conventional notions of subjectivity by placing emphasis on the subject as the source of a situated discourse (76). In fiction, this stress "[takes] the form of overt textual emphasis on the narrating 'I'" (76). Steinbeck fragments traditional notions of subjectivity in *Tortilla Flat* through precisely this means. The novel's thirteenth chapter, which deals with Señora Teresina Cortez and her children, opens with

the narrator's declaration that "Teresina was busy with the eighth [child] and with making certain preparations for the ninth" (119). A few paragraphs later, after providing some more background on Cortez, the narrator effects a very puzzling dislocation of temporal and narrational circumstances: he explains that "During the time I have been telling this, Teresina's ninth child was born, and for the moment she was unengaged" (120). In the moment of this sentence's utterance, the narrator severely dislocates the reader's notions of subjectivity. By introducing the personal pronoun "I," the narrator suddenly and unexpectedly foregrounds both his own subjective status and the intrinsically situated nature of his discourse. This sudden and only momentary shift in vantage point dislocates the reader's conceptions of subjectivity by forcing her to confront two points of view which she cannot reconcile. The reader moves in this moment from the observer position conferred upon her by third person point of view to the position of participant, and for this moment, the reader paradoxically exists both inside and outside the narrative. The multiple points of view in the novel thus effect a startling destabilization; as Hutcheon remarks, "multiple points of view prevent any totalizing concept of the protagonist's subjectivity, and simultaneously prevent the reader from finding or taking any one subject position from which to make [a] novel coherent" (169). In other words, encountering multiple points of view vis-à-vis the same set of characters and events forces a reader to occupy multiple subject positions with reference to a single experience. In order to continue his or her participation in the narrative, the reader undergoes the forcible fragmentation of his or her own subjective status, and because this fragmentation is incompatible with traditional notions of subjectivity, the

reader is compelled to jettison any traditional, unitary conception of the subject. Like discursive formation, the fragmentation of the subject marks a very important postmodern conjunction present within *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Chapter IV of this study will treat the presence of this conjunction in the novel at length.

Tortilla Flat and *Cannery Row*, two of Steinbeck's earlier works, exhibit significant conjunctions with postmodern critical theory. By decentering narrative structure, entangling the concept of meaning, reflecting the replacement of transcendent reality by situated discourses, and problematizing traditional notions of subjectivity, these two novels exemplify and prefigure the postmodern convergences that arise in *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*. Although the issues that arise in these earlier novels remain mostly free from these novels' central thematic structures, analysis of the postmodern elements in these earlier works not only provides a convenient introduction to the postmodern conjunctions manifest within the later works, it also validates the propriety and productivity of the postmodern re-evaluation of Steinbeck's work.

CHAPTER III
AMBIGUITY AS ESSENCE: A POSTMODERN
EXAMINATION OF *EAST OF EDEN*

The previous chapter of this study outlines various ways in which some of the earlier works of John Steinbeck accord with Postmodernism and Derridean philosophy. As such, it establishes a prelude for this and the following chapter, which will deal with the more pronounced Postmodern conjunctions present within *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

East of Eden, in particular, has received the most negative criticism of all of Steinbeck's works. As the critical commentary cited in the introductory chapter of this study suggests, most critics now regard the novel as a poorly-constructed failure. Examination of some of the Postmodern elements in the novel, however, authorizes a re-evaluation of it, for several of the elements deemed failures in the novelistic form by critics, such as non-traditional narrative structure and unprecedented intrusion on the part of the fictional narrator, can be positively explained through analysis of how these elements accord with Derridean philosophy and the Postmodern ethos. In fact, *East of Eden* exhibits significant congruencies with both of these contexts. Specifically, the novel can be characterized as Postmodern because it contains a decentered narrative structure, because it consists of elements that seriously problematize meaning and interpretation, and because it calls traditional notions of subjectivity into question.

Discussion of decentered narrative structure requires some contextualizing discussion about what exactly a “centralized” narrative structure is, and about what exactly it means when this centralized narrative structure is “decentered.” *The Grapes of Wrath* contains a centralized narrative structure, for in it the Joads and their westward travels represent the locus at which all other elements of the novel converge. The novel’s narrative chapters focus almost without exception on the Joads and their experiences as they move west. Certainly different parts of the narrative concentrate on different members of the family, but the family unit and Tom Joad remain central to the novel throughout. *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, deploys another kind of “centralized” narrative: an essentially dual narrative focus. On the one hand, the story revolves around Nick Carraway, the novel’s center of consciousness. All of the experiences the reader encounters in *The Great Gatsby* are filtered through Carraway’s senses, intellect, and imagination. This technique results in a very stable, centralized narrative because while settings, characters, and events vary continuously, the novel raises no questions about Carraway’s centrality within this whirlpool of changes. While Nick represents an intrinsic concern of the narrative because his consciousness unifies all of the novel’s elements, it would be inappropriate to suggest that Gatsby plays no part in the novel’s narrative structure. In fact, one could argue that Nick’s character exists primarily for the revelation of Gatsby’s. The narrative structure of *The Great Gatsby* thus circulates around two dominant characters. No single individual represents the novel’s primary narrative concern, but the novel leaves no doubt that Nick and Gatsby are the paramount characters, and they remain dominant throughout.

In contrast to these more centralized narratives, *East of Eden* contains a very decentered narrative structure for instead of revolving around an unequivocally primary narrative concern (the touchstone quality of the “centralized” narrative structure), *East of Eden* subverts the centrality of its seemingly dominant narrative core. *East of Eden* exhibits decentralization because instead of installing a specific group of characters as unequivocally dominant, the novel both establishes and continually challenges the dominance of its ostensible narrative focus, the Trask family. Unlike *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Great Gatsby*, both of which contain clear narrative foci, *East of Eden* alternates between two very different and virtually unconnected narratives. The first and seemingly primary of these two narratives, that of the Trasks, proceeds linearly and coherently, while the second, that of the Hamiltons, evolves in almost random fragments. While one could suggest that *East of Eden* has a central narrative concern, the dominance and centrality of the Trask story is continually challenged and thrown off balance because of that narrative’s repeated juxtaposition with the fragmentary Hamilton sections.

This contiguity of the Hamilton and Trask narratives has earned the novel much negative criticism. Perhaps the fiercest of this dispraise has come from Peter Lisca, who suggests that this structure is one of the novel’s many inherent deficiencies. Contending that the juxtaposition of the Trask and Hamilton narratives is fruitless, Lisca writes that “...the Trasks and the Hamiltons pursue separate courses, and nothing *results* from their juxtaposition” (266). Howard Levant performs a more thorough analysis of the novel’s structural juxtaposition, but he arrives at conclusions essentially the same as Lisca’s. “The major structural presumption [of *East of Eden*],” Levant comments, “is the

necessity of a close, working parallel between the two families. Steinbeck does not provide any structure of this kind” (237). For Levant and Lisca, then, the juxtaposition of the Trask and Hamilton narratives constitutes a serious flaw.

The criticisms of Lisca and Levant indicate that the flaw they perceive emerges from the fact that rather than unifying the novel, the apposition of the Trask and Hamilton plots fragments it. Very little argument can be mustered against this assertion that the novel is fragmented. Nevertheless, Lisca and Levant fail to notice that, in contravention of Lisca’s indictment, something does, indeed, result from the juxtaposition of the mostly linear Trask material with the fragmentary and almost random Hamilton material. Recognition of this “result,” however, requires a change from the critical context prevalent in the interpretations cited above. Lisca’s and Levant’s interpretations emerge from the New Critical context, a context that emphatically valorizes structural unity. In contrast with the New Critical context, the Postmodern critical context aims its deconstructive sights at structural unity; whereas New Critical theory emphasizes the structured, the orderly, and the coherent, the Postmodern admits “the multiple, the heterogeneous, [and] the different” (Hutcheon 66). The myopia of Lisca and Levant, therefore, concerns not so much their expectation of the wrong result from the disorderly convergence of the novel’s two storylines, but their refusal to recognize that the unity for which they long is dictated by their inscription within the New Critical context of literary analysis. Lisca and Levant fault *East of Eden* for failing to accord with the criteria of the New Critical paradigm rather than finding the New Critical paradigm wanting for its failure to intelligibly explain or account for *East of Eden*’s structural composition. As this

chapter will demonstrate, *East of Eden* does not fit within the novelistic criteria of the New Criticism, and when one replaces the New Critical norms of Lisca and Levant with a Postmodern assessment apparatus, the novel's decentralization appears not as a fault but as the anticipation of a critical ethos of which Steinbeck himself had little or no formal knowledge.

The clearest indication of the novel's decentralization resides in the fact that the Trask and Hamilton storylines remain almost completely independent of one another. Lisca provides a very valuable analysis of the very few times the two storylines actually converge:

Of the Hamilton family, only Samuel and Will...become in any way involved with the Trasks. Samuel first meets Adam Trask on page 140, and dies halfway through the novel. Will's only contacts with the Trasks consist of three short scenes. In one of these he sells them a Ford, in another he has a short and unimportant conversation with Adam in a lunch wagon, and in the third he accepts Caleb Trask as a short-term partner in a bean-growing venture. (265)

With the exception of these insignificant instances, the novel's two plots evolve separately.

In addition, while the Trask story line seems to occupy the novel's main focus, its ostensible centrality is continually challenged by the way in which the Trask sections are bracketed and interlarded with unassociated pieces of the Hamilton plot. Two episodes from the Hamilton narrative suffice to exemplify this point. In the first, which occurs late in the novel, Dessie, one of the daughters of Samuel and Liza Hamilton, travels to the ranch of her brother, Tom, intending to stay with him for a short time. Shortly after her

arrival, Dessie suffers from extreme abdominal pains resulting, in all probability, from a ruptured appendix, and Tom prescribes a tonic of “salts” for her. With this prescription, Tom unwittingly acts as an agent in his sister’s death, and his realization of this destroys some of his sanity and all of his desire to live. Tom begins to converse with his deceased father and becomes suicidal. Near the end of this misadventure, Tom reveals his self-loathing and suicidal intentions to the deceased Samuel Hamilton: “My father,” Tom says,

I’m sorry. I can’t help it. You overestimated me. You were wrong. I wish I could justify the love and the pride you squandered on me. Maybe you could figure a way out, but I can’t. I cannot live. I’ve killed Dessie and I want to sleep. (409)

Consumed with guilt, self-loathing, and remorse, Tom writes letters to his mother and his brother Will, and then, presumably, he kills himself.

This episode (and the others like it within the Hamilton plot) works to displace the centrality of Trask narrative because the novel’s narrator refuses to connect this event with the seemingly dominant narrative focus in any fashion. The narrator of this tale simply ends it with the statement that “Tom was a gallant gentleman” (410). In many ways this episode functions similarly to the Williams story in *Cannery Row* explicated earlier. In particular, the story is completely isolated; there is no indication at all of how it connects with the ostensibly central Trask story, or even, in fact, if it is supposed to connect with that narrative. Instead, the story, much like Tom himself, exists in isolation, and fails to connect with the larger structure in which it plays a part. In existing so independently from the Trask plot, this episode deprives that plot of any obvious

centrality, for in encountering this episode, and the others like it interspersed throughout the novel, the reader possesses no concrete information or indication of which, if either, of the two narratives is supposed to dominate. The isolated narratives like this one thus function to dislodge the Trask story from any kind of central position in the novel.

The “Olive and the Airplane” narrative from early in the novel emphasizes much the same point. During the Second World War, Olive Steinbeck, daughter of Samuel and Liza Hamilton and mother of John, sells enough war bonds to earn herself the opportunity to take a ride in an army airplane. Even though she is petrified, Olive accepts the ride anyway, for she decides that failing to go would “let her family down” (152). Courageously, Olive makes her will and takes the ride. At one point during the adventure, however, a miscommunication between Olive and the pilot leads Olive to believe that the pilot has lost control and that the plane is going to crash. Determined to “help the pilot so that he would not be too afraid before they hit the earth” (155), Olive smiles and nods each time the pilot asks her if she would like him to perform another stunt. As with the earlier story, the narrator concludes this episode epigrammatically: the ride over, the pilot exclaims, “Good Christ, what a pilot she would have made” (155).

Writing about this “amusing” episode, Levant correctly suggests that it “has no relationship to plot or theme.” He further concludes that this failure to relate is evidence of “a lack of organic form” (239). As was explained earlier in this chapter, Levant’s adjudication of this episode and the lack of unity it emblemizes issues from his immersion within a critical context which the novel itself simply does not fit within. Thus, where the lack of organic unity is clearly a fault in Levant’s eyes, from the

Postmodern context it is clear that this episode, much like that with Dessie and Tom later in the novel, unseats the Trask narrative from any kind of unequivocal centrality, and therefore decenters *East of Eden* pronouncedly.

In dispossessing the Trask narrative of any unambiguous claim to narrative centrality in *East of Eden*, the decentering of the novel's narrative structure complicates the novel's possession and conveyance of meaning considerably. In most cases, the meaning of a narrative develops directly from whatever episodes in that narrative are obviously central to its thematic structure. A narrative lacking centralized structure, thus, immures attempt to derive meaning from it in great difficulty. The confounding of meaning and interpretation do not function simply as issues subsidiary to the decentering of the *East of Eden*'s narrative structure, however; in *East of Eden*, the problematization of meaning and interpretation works as a very important issue in its own right.

The problematization of interpretation occupies the foreground most clearly in those parts of the novel which deal with the "timshel" theme, a theme that most Steinbeck critics agree is crucial to the novel's interpretation. Levant suggests, for example, that "timshel" represents the novel's "controlling allegorical sign" (243), while Mark Govoni suggests that the conflict between good and evil represented by the "timshel" signifier "is a major theme of the novel as manifest in the initiation of Cal Trask" (21). Lester Marks agrees, suggesting that the "timshel" signifier "describes the chance given to man to choose between good and evil" (120). As with the decentering of the novel, however, most critics have concluded that the novel's "timshel" theme is another of its faults. Levant remarks that the use of the sign strains and distorts the story and that its use

ultimately backfires because “Steinbeck ignores its...inherent defects” (243-4). Similarly, Lisca, who lumps his discussion of the *timshel* theme with his discussion of the entire Cain-Abel motif in the novel, suggests that the theme is both tedious and too overt. Steinbeck “badgers” his theme into “uninteresting obviousness,” Lisca writes (269).

Examining the “*timshel*” theme in the novel from the Postmodern context is both more positive and more revealing, for it becomes clear that through this theme a critical thematic issue in the novel, the issue of whether or not human beings such as Cathy, Charles, and finally Cal are able to overcome the evil that seems to reside in their natures, is also a locus of linguistic instability. Discussing the Cain and Abel story late in the novel, Lee, the Trasks’ manservant, exposes this plasticity when he reveals to Samuel Hamilton that he has uncovered a divergence in two of the translations of the phrase containing “*timshel*”: The King James Version of the Bible translates the phrase “thou shalt rule over sin,” while the American Standard Bible construes the same passage as meaning “Do thou rule over sin.” These divergent understandings of this crucial phrase yield two very different interpretations of the entire Cain and Abel story. Accepting the “thou shalt” translation frames the story as concerning God’s promise that Cain’s progeny will overcome sin, while accepting the “do thou” translation refashions the story such that it involves God’s commanding Cain to overcome sin. To add to the complexity that arises because of these two interpretations, Lee explains that he has submitted the interpretation question to a group of elderly Chinese intellectuals and that the outcome of their two years’ worth of labor on this question has led them to interpret the Hebrew word

as “thou mayest.” Lee explains that this translation is crucial because it confers a choice upon Cain’s progeny. “Don’t you see?” he asks Samuel Hamilton,

The American Standard Translation *orders* men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James Translation makes a promise in “thou shalt,” meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*—“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 man. For if “Thou mayest”—it is also true that “Thou mayest not.” (303)

The novel contains, therefore, no less than three separate interpretations for the crucial word “timshel.” Furthermore, the novel comes into close accord with Postmodern and Derridean problematization of meaning because the narrator of the novel hinges the answer to one of the crucial questions of the novel on the interpretation (or the lack thereof, as will be shown shortly) of an individual signifier.

The Postmodern character of this interpretive enigma crystallizes even more completely when one notes that the ambiguity that plagues the interpretive issue for Lee is never fully resolved by the solution that he proposes. Both of the interpretations that Lee rejects lead to outcomes that are resolved. The “thou shalt” interpretation assumes the triumph of humanity over sin, while the “Do thou” interpretation assures that there will be a struggle between humanity and sinfulness. Conversely, as Lee points out, interpreting “timshel” as “thou mayest” introduces equal probability for human apathy as for a human attempt to prevail against sinfulness. “Thou mayest” does more than leave the outcome of the struggle between humanity and sin uncertain; it calls into question whether any struggle will take place at all. From this point of view, then, Lee’s

“resolution” of the interpretive problem is nothing of the sort, for it fails to untangle the problem; instead, it gives rise to further questions. Lee’s “solution,” therefore, comprises the decision to leave the questions associated with the word “timshel” *unresolved*. Lee’s search for interpretation culminates in irresolution, and the fact that his quest for interpretation ends undecided echoes the Derridean assertion that unresolvability is, ultimately, what all texts must necessarily produce.

Irresolution and interpretive entanglement also arise in the narrator’s characterization of Cathy Ames. Ambiguity associated with Cathy emerges first because the narrator introduces her with statements that seem to come from two very different modes of thought: one in which “monstrosity” is an independent, objective reality, and another in which “monstrosity” is an inherently relative phenomenon. The narrator commences his description of Cathy with a contextual sketch designed to explain “monstrosity” as a demonstrable, fixed reality:

I believe that there are monsters born in the world to human parents. Some you can see, misshapen and horrible, with huge heads or tiny bodies; some are born with no arms, no legs, some with three arms, some with tails or mouths in odd places. They were accidents and no one’s fault, as used to be thought. Once they were considered the visible punishments for concealed sins. (72)

This passage establishes “monstrosity” as an indelible reality within which the narrator wishes to inscribe his introduction of Cathy. Shortly after this excerpt, however, the narrator suggests that the “monstrosity” inherent to Cathy’s character is simply an aberration from a perceived norm. In making this point the narrator reminds us that “You must not forget that a monster is only a variation, and that to a monster the norm is

monstrous” (72). This sentence muddles the narrator’s definition of Cathy because the “monstrous” quality that it seemed the narrator was going to attribute to her at first devolves into something relative and questionable. Ambiguity surfaces here because the statements contained within these two successive passages emerge from very different ontological paradigms. The first depiction is rooted within the ontological bedrock of objective reality; “monstrosity” remains, in this template, an independent and stable, “real” phenomenon. The second frames monstrosity as a result of human perception. The narrator offers no reconciliation between these two statements, and Cathy’s alleged “monstrosity” is therefore mired in ontological ambiguity.

An event shortly after these conflicting pretexts magnifies the obscurity surrounding Cathy. Following the two passages cited above, the narrator suggests, simply, that Cathy was born a monster. The hundred pages that follow this declaration further detail Cathy’s monstrosity, for they depict her lying, manipulation, and adultery. At the beginning of Chapter 17, however, the narrator calls his characterization of Cathy into question:

When I said that Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and re-read the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true. The trouble is that since we cannot know what she wanted, we will never know whether or not she got it. If rather than running toward something, she ran away from something, we can’t know whether she escaped. Who knows but that she tried to tell someone or everyone what she was like and could not, for lack of a common language. Her life may have been her language, formal, developed, indecipherable. It is easy to say that she was bad, but there is little meaning unless we know why. (184)

Few contemporary critics have commented at any length on this narratorial ambivalence. John Timmerman provides a very typical treatment of this aspect of the novel when he points out that the narrator “partly retracts” his comments about Cathy, but “Cathy remains a monster” nonetheless (220). Louis Owens offers a more thorough analysis of the narrator’s retraction when he suggests that it represents Steinbeck’s maladroit attempt to manage the theme of free will in the novel. Assuming that the theme of free will is intended to unify *East of Eden*, Owens asserts that Steinbeck, recognizing that “the negation of free will inherent in the character of Cathy represents a serious contradiction in the novel,” attempts to resolve this conflict by adding more texture to Cathy’s characterization (*Re-Vision* 148). David Wyatt breaks from Timmerman and Owens significantly by suggesting that the narrator’s equivocation concerning Cathy is representative of the innovations that Steinbeck incorporated into his work. Wyatt argues that Cathy’s characterization is innovative because “Steinbeck... grants [Cathy the] extraordinary freedom” of refusing to figure her out (xxvi). This inconclusive characterization represents, Wyatt argues, “a critique of standard notions of [characterization]” (xxvi).

Wyatt is certainly correct, and the irresolvable nature of Cathy’s personality works as an appropriate culmination to the ambivalence that surrounds her characterization from its introduction. It is important to note that both the critique that Wyatt highlights and the ambivalence that surrounds the narrator’s treatment of Cathy are quintessentially Postmodern, for they resist and undercut totalizing moves vis-à-vis the act of characterization and the contours of Cathy’s personality, respectively.

While the implications of the passages cited thus far complicate Cathy enormously, the suggestions that the passage quoted above makes concerning textual interpretation carry striking import. The first lines of the passage deploy an extended metaphor that equates Cathy with a text. In this equation, Cathy comprises a text whose fine print can be scrutinized closely and whose footnotes can be re-read. This characterization evolves later in the passage when the narrator suggests that Cathy's life is her language, a depiction that also identifies her as a text. Texts can have no corporeal reality, or "life," without the language that constitutes them. Thus, for a text, life certainly resides within and because of language. The comparison of Cathy with a text implies, on the one hand, that character is inherently textual. Just as significant, however, is the suggestion that what is being said here about Cathy could also be said about texts.

When the extended metaphor is perceived as having this emphasis, it becomes clear that the remarks about texts embedded within this passage correlate with the complex Postmodernist conception of texts. On the most fundamental level, this passage establishes that Cathy's character is, essentially, unreadable. Having unambiguously labeled Cathy as a monster, the narrator retracts that label, but he offers no other unambiguous description to take its place. The narrator therefore admits the inherent uninterpretability of Cathy's character and implies, by way of the extended metaphor, that the interpretation of texts is similarly problematic. In addition, by equating Cathy with a text and suggesting that we cannot understand what Cathy wanted because her language, although "formal" and "developed," is "indecipherable," this passage also suggests that the language texts contain, even when well-fashioned, remains insufficient

for the communication of any desired effect. This assertion accords very closely with Derrida's theory that any intentions that exist on the author's part at the moment of a text's composition are irrelevant because the signs which comprise the text are not, and cannot be, wholly in the author's control. Moreover, the narrator's suggestion that instead of moving toward her goal Cathy moved away from it re-articulates allegorically Derrida's assertion of the continual deferral of the signified. Even when aimed at a particular end, Derrida would suggest, texts, as with Cathy in this passage, move away from these objectives rather than toward them because they are subject to unpredictable interpretations. By comparing Cathy with a text and suggesting that Cathy is ultimately indecipherable, then, this passage recapitulates the interpretive problematic which functions as a cornerstone of both Derridean philosophy and Postmodernism.

In addition to foregrounding Postmodern uninterpretability, the narrator's characterization of Cathy functions as a crucible in which another Postmodern conjunction emerges. The genesis of this conjunction lies in the mixture of points of view in the novel. As has already been pointed out, the narrator begins his characterization of Cathy by making an overtly declarative statement to contextualize her "monstrous" personality. While the narrator does use the personal pronoun "I" in offering this context, the overtly declarative nature of the prose gives the reader the feeling that the narrator wishes to present an objective truth about reality, and to place little or no emphasis on himself as the subject offering the declaration. The fact that the narrator uses the personal pronoun "I" only once, at the beginning of the description, confirms this analysis. This passage thus carries out a "suppression" of the "enunciating entity" (Hutcheon 176) in the

name of novelistic realism that obscures the fact that the discourse being produced is inscribed within a specific context that defines its character and limits the objectivity to which it aspires. As was also explained above, the narrator retracts his initial description and suggests that he was wrong about his earlier definition of Cathy's character. In making this move, the narrator retracts not only his earlier definition of Cathy's character, he also discontinues the obfuscation of the subjective nature of his discourse. Postmodern analysis of this situation elucidates it considerably, for it reveals that the shift in tone on the narrator's part places significant emphasis on the fact that the description of Cathy we receive is in fact a "situated discourse" (Hutcheon 176) that comes from a postulated textual subject. This emphasis undercuts the "suppressed" subject positions present in many discourses pretending to realism.

The emphasis explained here involves a significant shift in subject positions that the narrator takes vis-à-vis the story he is telling: the narrator shifts from a third-person presentation of objective truth to an overtly situated, first-person discourse. This type of shift is not at all uncommon in *East of Eden*; in fact, such shifts are prevalent. On the one hand, the narrator presents information with the "subject suppression" innate to novelistic realism. At the beginning of Part Two of the novel, for example, the narrator has the occasion to characterize a change in cultural character as if such a change were an objective truth. "Another hundred years were ground up and churned," the narrator explains,

and what had happened was all muddied by the way folks wanted it to be—more rich and meaningful the farther back it was. In the books of

some memories it was the best time that ever sloshed over the world—the old time, the gay time, sweet and simple, as though time were young and fearless. Old men who didn't know whether they were going to stagger over the boundary of the century looked forward to it with distaste. For the world was changing, and sweetness was gone, and virtue too. Worry had crept on a corroding world, and what was lost—good manners, ease and beauty? Ladies were not ladies any more, and you couldn't trust a gentleman's word. (129)

In this passage, the transmutation of the cultural gestalt appears as an objective truth by virtue of the narrator's erasure of his own subjective status.

Less than a page later, however, the narrator shifts subject positions completely, and presents his beliefs and opinions in a manner that actually highlights the subjectivity of the discourse being presented. “[T]his I believe:” the narrator suggests, “that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected” (132). This passage undercuts the supposed objectivity of the earlier passage in two ways. First, the manner in which the opinions are presented, especially the repeated emphasis of the subject pronoun “I,” underscores the subjective source of the presentation. Second, the content of the passage, in which the narrator offers a kind of paean to the subject by valorizing the individual human mind and its ability to move unfettered in any direction it chooses, reinforces the emphasis of subjectivity that this passage accomplishes.

Point of view oscillations in the novel have received a great deal of critical attention. Not unexpectedly, those critics whose views of the novel are predominantly negative characterize these shifts as intrusions on the part of the novel's first-person narrator. In these critics' eyes, the shifts therefore constitute yet another flaw in the

novel's overall composition. Lisca writes that the "I" narrator of the novel throws the narration of the story out of balance: "Each time it appears it effects a...shock of intrusion" (266-7). Apart from its disturbing aesthetic quality, Lisca suggests that the intrusions of the first person narrator are also confusing. "Steinbeck...makes use of the narrator 'I' to interlard the objectively rendered details of plot with moral essays.... What makes this device particularly unsuccessful is that...the narrator 'I' in *East of Eden* is confused with the 'me' and the 'John' and the 'my' and the 'we' of the actual narrative," Lisca writes (266). Lisca concludes that, owing to its shocking and confusing nature, the "I" narrator must be a vestigial element left over from the time when Steinbeck addressed the novel directly to his sons. It is not surprising that in this area, as with the others discussed above, Levant follows Lisca's lead. He writes that, "the familiar tone and the sense of personal involvement" associated with the intrusions of the "I" narrator produce unusual strains on credibility" (240). Levant sums up his criticism of the novel's point of view management with the assertion that "The novel is in no sense...given form by its narrator, and the narrator is in no sense defined by the novel. He is merely the third major fragment" (267). For Levant, then, like Lisca, the first person narrator represents an intrusion that damages the novel rather than augmenting it.

While most critics who have commented on the shifts in point of view in *East of Eden* agree with Lisca and Levant, it should be noted that more recently a cadre of critics has emerged in support of the point of view shifts in the novel. In confrontation with Lisca, Lester Marks suggests that "Steinbeck's shifting point of view is really quite

legitimate.” Marks goes on to explain that the dominant point of view is third-person objective, and that

Steinbeck shifts to the role of a first-person observer only when the action in some way involves the second or third generation of Hamiltons. At this point young ‘John’ is himself a minor character who serves to provide a unique perspective by telling the story of his grandfather Samuel, and of his aunts and uncles, from the viewpoint of a child. (119)

Steven Mulder moves the discussion of the point of view shifts into the Postmodern realm by discussing it as one of the elements with which Steinbeck foregrounds the process of fiction-making. Mulder suggests that the management of point of view in *East of Eden* “is a tool for jarring the reader into the realization that s/he is encountering a fictional construct” (111). Mulder, thus, regards the entrances of the first-person narrator as deliberate. “The narrator intrudes with the word ‘I’ more than 120 times through the novel; just when readers adjust to third-person narration, Steinbeck jumps in again to remind them of his constructed reality,” Mulder writes (112).

In his own evaluation of *East of Eden*, Louis Owens comments that, as a result of the “narrative intrusions” of the implied author of the novel, there results a “narrative complexity that, while giving rise to much misgiving on the part of critics, has yet to be fully appreciated” (“Mirror” 240). Owens’ comment is surely correct, for while Mulder’s study definitely works to accord Steinbeck’s novel with the Postmodern ethos, he, Lisca, Levant, and most of the other critics who have commented on the point of view shifts in *East of Eden* have missed the fact that these shifts effect a much more dramatic, and much more Postmodern, dislocation. By moving between points of view, the novel

accomplishes a very Postmodern problematization of subjectivity by preventing the reader from occupying a single subject position vis-à-vis the novel and its contents. Such prevention subverts traditional notions of subjectivity by transforming the reader's conception of the subject from an inherently single, unified entity to a forcibly multiple, fragmentary phenomenon.

The problematization of subjectivity amounts to only one of several very Postmodern tasks that Steinbeck's novel accomplishes, and as such, it reveals once again the novel's convergence with Postmodern ideas of which Steinbeck himself was almost certainly unaware. While it is true that Steinbeck had no knowledge of the phenomenon that has come to be labeled Postmodernism, this does not preclude his understanding that he was breaking the novelistic conventions prevalent in his day. The textual evidence described above firmly establishes the text's subversion of convention; one can acquire further insight, however, by glancing briefly at the intimations of Steinbeck's intentions. Mark Govoni, in his analysis of the earlier manuscripts of *East of Eden*, which, he hastens to point out, actually contain *more* philosophical speculation on the part of a first person narrator than do the later drafts, suggests that Steinbeck was, from the very inception of his composition of *East of Eden*, consciously defying the expectations of his critical and general readerships. Govoni asserts that the undercutting of novelistic conventions was actually part of Steinbeck's purpose in his composition of the novel. "Steinbeck often ventured outside the boundaries of conventional fictional forms," Govoni writes, "to find modes of expression which allowed him to say all that he wanted to say...and *East of Eden* exhibits renewed desire" to search out such innovative modes

of expression (18). So strong was his belief in himself as a literary experimenter, Govoni writes, that Steinbeck characterized his task as fundamentally different from that of the novelist. Examining one section of the manuscript which Steinbeck later deleted, Govoni finds that Steinbeck did not “perceive himself as a novelist in the strict sense of the term” (18-19).

While speculation about authorial intention is always fragile and almost insupportable, Govoni’s comments about Steinbeck’s earlier manuscript do point up the possibility, at least, that Steinbeck intended to experiment with fictional forms. The revelation of this possibility in Steinbeck’s intentions further augments the argument that analyzing *East of Eden* from a strictly New Critical point of view, while valid, eventually becomes inefficient (as is revealed in the way that Levant and several others simply clothe the criticisms of Lisca in different language). This lack of productivity mandates the acquisition and usage of a critical context from which one can appreciate the new, and perhaps even radical, subversions of the New Critical novelistic and ontological paradigms that *East of Eden* contains. The argument of this chapter and of this study generally is that Postmodern and Derridean ideas provide a context from within which it is possible to appreciate the innovative and, finally, distinctly Postmodern elements of *East of Eden*.

CHAPTER IV
MANIPULATION AND MEDIATION: *THE WINTER*
OF OUR DISCONTENT AND POSTMODERN
PROBLEMATICS

Thus far this analysis has explicated the conjunctions between *East of Eden* and the Postmodern and Derridean contexts. This chapter will demonstrate that like *East of Eden*, *The Winter of Our Discontent* accords with Derridean philosophy and the Postmodern ethos. Specifically, by virtue of its point of view variations, *The Winter of Our Discontent* interrogates and fragments the conventionally unitary concept of subjectivity. Furthermore, the novel also connects with Postmodernism by presenting a case study in what Selden and Widdowson term “discursive formation” (125). The novel exhibits, that is to say, the way in which, in the Postmodern paradigm, any concept of “objective reality” is replaced by discourses that represent reality by foregrounding contextually specific and therefore imperfect “versions” of it.

The dissolution of the notion of subjectivity effected in *The Winter of Our Discontent* occurs, as in *East of Eden*, primarily through Steinbeck’s manipulation of point of view. The novel’s point of view alternates between objectively-rendered third person and subjective first person narration. Repeatedly dislocating the reader, this fluctuation prevents him or her from locating a stable and coherent subject position from which to regard the contents of the novel. This difficulty subsequently forces the reader to redefine his or her conception of the human subject. The conventional Enlightenment

theory of subjectivity holds that the individual is a coherent, self-identical, and unitary phenomenon. The reader of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, by being confronted with multiple vantage points from which to participate in the novel, must tacitly accept a kind of enforced schizophrenia if he or she wishes to continue his or her interaction with the text. The reader of *Winter* is therefore subtly indoctrinated with a conception his or her own “selfhood” that is multiple, fragmented, and incoherent. The point of view shifts in *The Winter of Our Discontent* are Postmodern, therefore, because they dislocate the reader and force the reader to fundamentally re-characterize his or her conception of the human subject.

The subtly disturbing point of view oscillations in the novel commence near its opening. Third person point of view dominates the novel’s first two chapters. The narration of these two chapters is almost objective, for both of them consist mostly of dialogue, with very little indication of characters’ thoughts or tones of voice. The initial chapter of the novel, for example, begins with dialogue and fails, at first, to fix that dialogue within a meaningful context:

When the fair gold morning of April stirred Mary Hawley awake, she turned to her husband and saw him, pulling a frog mouth at her.
 “You’re silly,” she said. “Ethan, you’ve got your comical genius.”
 “Okay, Miss Mousie, will you marry me?”
 “Did you wake up silly?”
 “The year’s at the day. The day’s at the morn.” (3)

This passage is clearly third-person objective. The characters’ statements comprise its major narrative element, and those remarks remain naked of any adjectives describing the speakers’ tones. In addition, the author of this section of text allows the

reader no perspective into the minds, feelings, or motivations of the individuals involved in the dialogue it transcribes. Furthermore, this interlocution contains no acknowledgement of any subjective entity articulating the discourse. Instead, the discourse seems to exist as an independent and indelible reality without any specific context or origin. In the novel's opening, therefore, Steinbeck renders objects in strict, third person point of view, without a nod to any kind of subjective intrusion.

Objective narration like that explicated above continues for two chapters. Then, in the novel's third chapter, the point of view makes a dramatic shift from purely objective to purely subjective. Whereas the first two chapters relate external events, the third chapter of the novel installs Ethan Allen Hawley as narrator. Hawley renders his narration in a strictly subjective, first-person mode. In the beginning of the third chapter, for example, in direct contrast with both the first and second, one encounters only Ethan's thinking and perception rendered in subjective terms:

My wife, my Mary, goes to her sleep the way you would close the door of a closet. So many times I have watched her with envy. Her lovely body squirms a moment as though she fitted herself into a cocoon. She sighs once and at the end of it her eyes close and her lips, untroubled, fall into that wise and remote smile of the ancient Greek gods. (35)

Clearly, then, in the first three chapters of *The Winter of Our Discontent*, Steinbeck deploys two diametrically opposed modes of narration, one third person and objective, the other first person and subjective. A second point of view shift very similar in character to the one explained above arises at the juncture between *Winter's* two sections. The end of the first part of the novel retains the first-person narration begun in

the third chapter, and in this section Hawley acts as the novel's narrator. At the beginning of the next chapter, which also opens the second part of the novel, the narration shifts back to the third-person style with which *The Winter of Our Discontent* begins. Unlike the dialogue-oriented objectivity of the novel's beginning, however, the objective narration in the beginning of the novel's second part is that of an effaced narrator providing context for the events that will take place later in this section. One example from this context presentation suffices to exemplify the third-person objective nature of the narration. In his discussion of a change that occurred in New Baytown quite some time before his own commentary, the narrator suggests that

Communities, like people, have periods of health and times of sickness—even youth and age, hope and despondency. There was a time when a few towns like New Baytown furnished the whale oil that lighted the Western World. Student lamps of Oxford and Cambridge drew fuel from this American outpost. And then petroleum, rock oil gushed out in Pennsylvania and cheap kerosene, called coal oil, took the place of whale oil and retired most of the sea hunters. Sickness or the despair fell on new Baytown—perhaps an attitude from which it did not recover. (161)

Like the presentational style extant at the opening of the novel, this passage is strictly third-person. One might object that, regardless of the third-person mode of this presentation, Ethan himself could easily and believably be the source of the comments above. This assertion, while valid, is immaterial. The relevant feature of the passage above is that, whomever the speaker might be, it provides no indication of any articulating subject. In this way, it achieves a wholly objective character.

Very much like the opening of the novel, however, shortly after the passage quoted above the point of view shifts from third-person style to a distinctly first-person

mode. An example of this first-person narration can be observed at the beginning of Chapter Thirteen. Here, shortly after hinting at the plans for robbing the bank that he has begun to set in motion, Ethan pauses for a moment and presents his thoughts directly to the reader.

One of our oldest and most disproved myths is that a man's thoughts show in his face, that the eyes are windows of the soul. It isn't so. Only sickness shows, or defeat or despair, which are different kinds of sickness. Some rare people can feel beneath, can sense a change or hear a secret signal. I think my Mary felt a change, but she misinterpreted it, and I think Margie Young-Hunt knew—but she was a witch and that is a worrisome thing. It seemed to me that she was intelligent as well as magic—and that's even more worrisome. (187)

This passage differs completely from that which opens the second part of the novel.

Whereas the inception of the second section of *Winter* contains an overtly third-person narrational style, this passage is rendered in unambiguously first-person language. The intersection of the first and section parts of the novel contains, therefore, a pronounced and somewhat puzzling shift in point of view much that which takes place between the novel's second and third chapters.

The point of view deviations in *Winter* such as ones demonstrated here have received much critical attention, some negative and some merely explanatory. Louis Owens, one of the negative commentators of the negative stripe, sees the novel's point of view shifts as inherent deficiencies. Writing in 1989, Owens concludes that the novel's narrational oscillations are clear novelistic flaws. Owens argues that by mixing points of view, Steinbeck "slips in a way that [he] has not slipped before, raising the confusing question of just who the author of the...book, with its mixture of first and third-person

narrative, really is” (*Re-Vision* 201). Robert Hughes, writing four years later, adjudicates the point of view shifts in *Winter* in much the same way. Hughes clearly considers the shifting point of view of *Winter* a deficiency, for he cites it as one of the ways in which *Winter* is qualitatively inferior to its short story precursor “How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank” (10). Whereas the point of view in the earlier short story is stable and unshifting, Hughes asserts, “the novel includes editorial intrusions from shifting points of view, leaving the reader to wonder sometimes who is talking...” (10). Few critics have rendered a positive assessment of Steinbeck’s point of view management in *Winter*, although some, such as Robert Ditsky, have attempted to provide explanations for it. Ditsky suggests that the shifting points of view in *Winter* abet the moral theme of the novel. “Ethan Allen Hawley uses a double narrational voice to bring about a sort of objectivity in his own moral vision of himself,” Ditsky concludes (“Naturalism” 25).

Respectfully dissenting from the opinions offered by Ditsky, Owens, Hughes, and other evaluators of the novel, I assert that what Steinbeck accomplishes through his point of view management in *Winter* can be understood more thoroughly from a Postmodern context. The problematization of the concept of stable, coherent subjectivity forms one of the key aspects of Postmodern discourse, and the point of view shifts in *Winter* mirror this Postmodern practice. As with *East of Eden*, the distinct contrasts in points of view in *Winter* repeatedly displace the reader who is striving to take and maintain a single subject position vis-à-vis the novel’s events and characters. When the novel’s narration takes the objective, third-person style, the reader relegates him or her self to the position of observer. In this situation, the reader expects to have to ascertain the thoughts and

feelings of the characters and the significance of the narrative itself for him or herself, without assistance from a narrator. When the point-of-view shifts to the distinctly subjective first-person style of narration, the reader forcibly revises his or her earlier position vis-à-vis the material being presented. Instead of being confined to the position of uninvited observer, the reader now takes the position of acknowledged participant, a kind of privileged empath who is privy to the thoughts and feelings of selected characters and to the meaning that the events of the narrative have for them. Independently, these two subject positions signify very little, conventional or otherwise. When the two are combined within a single narrative structure, however, a significant problematization of subjectivity takes place. To be able to take two subject positions vis-à-vis the events of the novel alternately, and, in some cases, simultaneously, the reader is compelled to accept the disruption of his or her concept of the subject. This disruption results because the reader, in being forced to alternate between two different subject positions vis-à-vis the events being narrated, is led into a kind of forcible schizophrenia in which he or she can no longer maintain a subjective frame of reference like coherent, unitary entity defined by conventional, logocentric thought. In other words, the reader cannot maintain the position of either external observer or quasi-internal participant; he or she is forced by the contrasting points of view in the novel to take on both of these positions. As has already been explicated, these two positions differ diametrically—so diametrically, in fact, that a conventional, logocentric conception of subjectivity cannot possibly accommodate both of them. The reader of *The Winter of Our Discontent* is forced, if he or she wishes to continue participating in the novel, to jettison such a conventional

understanding of the subject in favor of a more postmodern, fragmented conception. The reader of *The Winter of Our Discontent* must therefore abide a fragmentation of his or her own subjective status, and this acceptance develops his or her conception of the subject from a single, unitary entity into a fragmented, multiple one.

While, clearly, the narrational variations of the novel significantly problematize the concept of subjectivity, they also reflect, in a kind of nascent form, the Postmodern idea of “discursive formation.” This idea is underwritten by the postmodern practice of blurring distinctions. As Selden and Widdowson note, one of the key distinctions undercut by postmodern theory is that between subject and object (125). The most important ramification of the premised merger between subject and object, as was explained in Chapter II, is the conclusion that no unmediated version of reality exists. In the postmodern paradigm reality, as the quintessential “object,” intertwines irrevocably with the subject who fashions it. As a result, a multitude of subjectively-bound discourses which represent necessarily limited versions of “reality” replace any objective and totalized version of it.

Steinbeck’s point of view management in *The Winter of Our Discontent* can be usefully examined in light of the postmodern concept of discourse formation, for this management reflects both the premised fusion between subject and object and a basic, nascent form of the theory of discursive formation which, in Postmodern theory, proceeds from this matrix. Steinbeck incorporates the basic idea of subject-object merger first through his management of point of view. By including points of view from both the purely objective and strictly subjective bases, Steinbeck crafts *The Winter of Our*

Discontent such that the subject (in this case Ethan Hawley) and the world coalesce within the context of a single textual artifact. A second way in which the novel can be seen as accordant with postmodern theories of subject-object fusion resides in the way in which its clarity increases in direct proportion with the intervention of Hawley's consciousness in the narrative framework. The beginning of the novel, in which Hawley's consciousness is absent from the narration, proceeds very obscurely. One need only remember the novel's opening, which consists of obscure, extra-contextual dialogue, for proof of the novel's initial vagueness. The novel becomes more intelligible, however, when Ethan Hawley takes over the narration. Once this mediating consciousness intervenes in the narration, all contextual, and clarifying, elements reappear.

Relationships between characters, for example, such as those between Ethan, his wife, and his children, clear up significantly. This linkage between intelligibility and first-person narration implies, in very postmodern fashion, that access to "Reality" per se is impossible. The novel enacts the idea that the world and reality are only accessible when one perceives them through the eyes of a intercessory consciousness. Thus, the seemingly awkward shifts of point of view become an affirmation of the subject-world fusion proposed by Derrida and amplified by other postmodern theorists after him.

In addition to enacting the fundamental premise of the postmodern idea of subject-object mixture, the novel also contains a nascent version of the postmodern conception of discursivity explained above and explicated more thoroughly in Chapter II. At its root, as was explained above, the theory of discourse formation holds that "reality," although conventionally considered external, is actually composed by the subject rather

than simply “observed” by her. It is by depicting reality as created by a human subject rather than simply observed that *The Winter of Our Discontent* insinuates a nascent form of the discursive formation idea. Two textual positions featuring the idea of subjective reality composition should suffice for this discussion.. The first of these examples emerges late in the novel as Ethan Hawley muses about text in a way that makes the distinction between himself and Steinbeck rather indistinct.

I was thinking how wise a man was H.C. Andersen. The king told his secrets down a well, and his secrets were safe. A man who tells secrets or stories must think of who is hearing or reading, for a story has as many version as it does readers. Everyone takes what he wants or can from it and thus changes it to his measure. Some pick out parts and reject the rest, some strain the story through their mesh of prejudice, some paint it with their own delight. (70)

This passage thoroughly deconstructs the barrier between external reality (here represented by the story) and the consciousness perceiving it. The situation framed in this passage is not one in which the operating consciousness simply perceives the story and likes or dislikes it. Instead, the story and the consciousness are closely intermingled and the story itself, instead of being external and distinct, actually changes character based on the vagaries of the consciousness interacting with it. In depicting this dynamic so explicitly, the novel clearly accords very closely with the postmodern idea of discourse formation, for it presents reality as an intensely mediated phenomenon composed, rather than simply observed, by a subject.

A second example of precisely the same phenomenon occurs during one of Ethan’s interactions with his boss, the Italian-American Marullo. During a discussion that

he and Marullo have early on in the novel, Ethan confronts Marullo for calling him “kid,” and in his anger Ethan reminds Marullo that Ethan’s “family’s been here for two hundred years” (22). Marullo counters with the heritage of his own surname, a heritage that significantly predates Ethan’s. “My *geniori*, my name,” Marullo says, “is maybe two, three thousand years old. Marullus is from Rome, Valerius Maximus tells about it. What’s two hundred years?” (22). As a result of this interlocution, Ethan undergoes a profound perceptual change, and the narrator describes this transition in very postmodern terms:

Now Ethan, his rage all leaked away, saw something that makes a man doubtful of the constancy of the realities outside himself. He saw the immigrant, guinea, fruit-peddler change under his eyes, saw the dome of the forehead, the strong beak nose, deep-set fierce and fearless eyes, saw the head supported on pillared muscles, saw pride so deep that it could play at humility. (22)

A dynamic very similar to the one described in the previous example exists here. The thing ostensibly external to Ethan’s consciousness and perception, in this case the character of his boss Marullo, merges inextricably with his perception. No objectively understandable Marullo exists for Ethan (or, for that matter, the reader). He and the reader only have access to the entity which begins as the “immigrant, guinea, fruit-peddler” and transforms into the proud man of extensive lineage at the behest of Ethan’s perception. The self-respecting, familiarly-aware individual that Ethan comes to appreciate does not simply represent Marullo’s authentic identity; Ethan does not simply come to recognize a reality which pre-exists his perception of it. Instead, Ethan, having garnered a new piece of knowledge, alchemizes his former perception of Marullo and

thus patterns his reality differently. Predicating this transition not in Marullo's character but in Ethan's consciousness, the narrator of the novel portrays the transition explained above in terms that clearly reflect the postmodern conviction that no unmediated version of reality exists.

Clearly, in its problematization of subjectivity through point of view manipulation and its revelation of the way in which objective reality is effaced by discourses about it, *The Winter of Our Discontent* demonstrates some very significant correlations with Derridean philosophy and the postmodern ethos. Like *East of Eden*, *The Winter of Our Discontent* has received much criticism for the way in which it breaks from typical novelistic convention, as the critics cited earlier in this chapter exemplify. While examination of this work in light of postmodern poetics and Derridean philosophy does not necessarily refute these critical evaluations of the novel, it does authorize the careful re-evaluation of Steinbeck's later work from a postmodern perspective. Discussion of this suggestion, and some of the other conclusions of this study, will be the subject of the next and concluding chapter.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: “THE GLASS BROGAN WILL NOT FIT”

Very late in his composition of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck penned a letter to Pascal Covici in which he despairs about the very act of writing itself. “Writing,” Steinbeck laments,

is a very silly business at best. There is a certain ridiculousness about putting down a picture of life. And to add to the joke—one must withdraw for a time from life in order to set down that picture. And third one must distort one’s own way of life in order in some sense to simulate the normal in other lives. Having gone through all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections. Oh! It’s a real horse’s ass business. (Benson 692)

These sentiments echo an oft-quoted sentence that Steinbeck included in one of his letters to Covici now collected in *Journal of a Novel*, a sentence in which Steinbeck concludes that “The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness” (4).

For one familiar with Steinbeck’s work and his attitude toward his own work, these sentences evoke little or no surprise. Jackson J. Benson’s thorough biography of Steinbeck boils down, from one point of view, into a repeated chronicle of the utter joy and enthusiasm Steinbeck felt for his work at the inception of each project and the despair, melancholy, and fear he felt when his projects neared completion. More important in the context of this project, however, is that even in his most despairing

moments, when he was sure that his conscious experimentation would be misunderstood, Steinbeck expresses ideas containing definite postmodern resonances.

The distinctly postmodern flavor verifies once again that much is to be gained from the postmodern evaluation of Steinbeck's later work. Before addressing these benefits, however, I shall pause briefly to recapitulate this study's major conclusions. These conclusions converge upon a single ideological nexus: the idea that *East of Eden* and *The Winter of Our Discontent* contain elements that correspond in very significant ways with postmodern critical theory. Buttressing this idea is the fact that, in scattered, peremptory ways, the earlier novels *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat* contain postmodern correspondences. In particular, *Cannery Row* exhibits a decentered narrative structure and the replacement of reality by discourses about it, while *Tortilla Flat* hints at the complication of meaning and interpretation and also at the problematization of subjectivity. Using these correspondences with postmodern critical theory as foundation, one discovers that *East of Eden* converges with postmodernism in its decentered narrative structure, its entanglement of the idea of interpretation (an idea which, importantly, dovetails with the novel's thematic structure), and its fragmentation of the notion of subjectivity. Having this fragmentation in common with *East of Eden*, *The Winter of Our Discontent* also reflects postmodern critical theory in its demonstration of the postmodern concept of discursive formation.

The conclusion arrived at via these premises, of course, is that significant conjunctions exist between Steinbeck's later works and postmodern critical theory. Such a conclusion naturally begs the question, however, of how exactly the recognition of such

connections benefits us, either as literary critics or as human beings. The answer to this question actually encompasses two distinct responses, the first of which resides as a kind of implicit thesis in one recent essay of Steinbeck criticism by John Ditsky. I should note that the focus of Ditsky's study diverges from that of this work, for instead of discussing Steinbeck's later works or discussing any connection between Steinbeck's corpus and postmodern critical theory, in the essay in question Ditsky offers a re-reading of the controversial final scene of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Nevertheless, in his conclusion, Ditsky makes a comment that is very germane to this study. "Naturalist, sentimentalist, non-teleologist—a succession of terms such as these has been used to describe, and thus to dismiss, the author of *The Grapes of Wrath*," Ditsky writes, but

As the work of a new generation of Steinbeck critics has shown (I am thinking especially of Richard Astro and Robert DeMott), the thinking of this humblest of writers cannot so easily be encapsulated in a single descriptive noun; and as the recent publication of the man's own commentary on his creative processes has helped us to see, it has always been particularly absurd to limit Steinbeck to some especial or singular intention, such as those of the social engineer or documentary journalist. The glass brogan simply will not fit. ("Reconsideration" 215)

Perhaps the clearest point of convergence between Ditsky's comment and this study lies in his recognition of the fatuousness associated with attempting to limit Steinbeck the writer to any singular and specific intention. As I have already pointed out, no such assertion is being made in this work regarding Steinbeck and postmodernism. It is impossible, that is to say, to label Steinbeck a postmodern author. The most that can be said, I think, is that the nascent connections between Steinbeck's work and postmodern critical theory can allow Steinbeck to be viewed as a "transitional figure in the shift from

Modernism to post-Modernism” (Buerger 12). Less obvious, however, is that the assumptions that Steinbeck aspired to realism or anything like the conventional novelistic form, assumptions which clearly undergird the evaluations of those critics who label Steinbeck’s later works as failures, is also insupportable. One cannot notice both Steinbeck’s declarations of his intention to experiment and the postmodern correlations present within his later work and assert that the conventional novelistic form played any role in his intentions or aspirations. Louis Owens articulates the more balanced conclusions vis-à-vis Steinbeck’s intent when he describes Steinbeck as a “novelist who never had much use for realism and who experimented ceaselessly with the forms of his fiction” (246). Examination of the postmodern elements within Steinbeck’s later work benefits us as literary critics, therefore, by forcing us to acknowledge the need for alternative critical paradigms from which to assess his art and accomplishments. More importantly, however, the revelation of these correspondences is in our critical interest because it demonstrates that there *are*, in fact, unexplored territories within Steinbeck’s work, and that there is, in fact, still more to be learned from him. As Warren French suggests,

One of the fascinating things about keeping up with John Steinbeck is that continually expanding one’s knowledge of him is no antiquarian pursuit. Even in the time since the Salinas Congress, several things have come to light that place his work in a new perspective and require further appraisal of his position among the writers of this nation and of the world. (35)

Little argument can be leveled against the assertion that the postmodern explication of Steinbeck’s work promises to reap great benefits for us as literary critics.

Retiring this conundrum, however, the question remains of how exactly the study of Steinbeck's work in the context of postmodernism stands to benefit us more generally, as human beings. Unlike the answer posed above, which deals only with the more rarefied atmosphere of the academy, the response to this question verges, because of its more general quality, on the realm of the purely subjective. Having acknowledged that any response to such a query must take subjective form, I feel it appropriate to offer what I believe to be the humanistic benefit of the postmodern study of Steinbeck's works. Simply put, this benefit is that of understanding, and it is, appropriately enough, a benefit of which Steinbeck himself was aware. Near the end of *Journal of a Novel*, Steinbeck writes that

If the written word has contributed anything at all to our developing species and our half developed culture, it is this: Great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and a courage to support sick cowardice. (116)

If it is true, as Selden and Widdowson suggest, that in the face of the Holocaust, nuclear annihilation, and other incomprehensibles of the twentieth-century we now drift unmoored in a virtually unintelligible postmodern sea, then the exposure to Steinbeck's sense of those waters might serve as one of the planks we use in manufacturing the vessel to return us to a more comprehensible landscape. In fact, there is some suggestion that the reading of Steinbeck is already serving that purpose. Perhaps the greatest testament to Steinbeck's continued relevance is the fact that his disenfranchisement with a large part of the American critical establishment has not had commensurate effects on his popularity with more general readers. Steinbeck remains one of the most read, most

anthologized, and most discussed authors of this century. If there is truth, then, as there surely is, to Steinbeck's assertion that great writing can serve as "wisdom to pick up stumbling folly," then it is conceivable that re-examining his work will provide us, in some small part, with the crucial insights we need to render intelligible this postmodern world in which we live.

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