

# THE PARIS REVIEW



Interviews

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\$1.25 6/- 5F

## John Steinbeck: The Art of Fiction No. 45

*Interviewed by Nathaniel Benchley*

Paris Review (No. 48, Fall 1969)



*[John Steinbeck had agreed to a Paris Review interview late in his life. He had earlier been coy about it but then wanted the interview very much. He was, unfortunately, too sick to work on the project, though it was at the end often in his thoughts. With this interest of his in mind, the editors of this magazine compiled a number of comments on the art of fiction that John Steinbeck made over the years. Some come from the East of Eden diaries, published in December 1969 by Viking Press under the title Journal of a Novel. Others are excerpted from letters, some of which have been collected under the title Steinbeck: A Life in Letters and published in October 1975 by Viking. The quotes have been organized under various topic headings rather than chronologically, as they are in the diaries and letters. Nathaniel Benchley, a close friend of the author, has provided the introduction.]*

*By rights this preface or introduction or whatever it is should be called "Compliments of a Friend," because I have neither the perspective nor the desire to offer up a critique of John Steinbeck's writing even if anyone would listen. Furthermore, nobody has asked me to, so we're all that much better off. I knew him, and I know a little bit of what he thought about writing, and that will be my contribution.*

*He once said that to write well about something you had to either love it or hate it very much, and that in a sense was a mirror of his own personality. Things were either black or white, and although he might change his basic position (as he eventually did about the Vietnam war), if you were on his side, you could do no wrong, and if you were agin him, you could do no right. It wasn't as simplistic as that may make it sound, but there were very few gray areas where he was concerned. And when he wrote, you certainly knew whose side he was on. You hoped it was yours.*

*Long ago, he was quoted as saying that genius was a little boy chasing a butterfly up a mountain. He later insisted that what he'd really said was that it was a butterfly chasing a little boy up a mountain (or a mountain chasing a butterfly up a little boy; I've forgotten which), and I think in some ways he was haunted by having caught his butterfly so early in the game. He never said this in so many words (to me, at any rate), but his fierce dedication to his writing, and his conviction that every word he put down was the best he could find, were signs of a man who dreaded ever having it said that he was slipping, or that he hadn't given it his best. One time, at the behest of a son of mine at Exeter, he wrote a few paragraphs for the seventy-sixth anniversary edition of *The Exonian*; he called it "In Awe of Words," and with the permission of the management I'll reproduce it here, because as usual he says these things better for himself.*

A man who writes a story is forced to put into it the best of his knowledge and the best of his feeling. The discipline of the written word punishes both stupidity and dishonesty. A writer lives in awe of words for they can be cruel or kind, and they can change their meanings right in front of you. They pick up flavors and odors like butter in a refrigerator. Of course, there are dishonest writers who go on for a little while, but not for long—not for long.

A writer out of loneliness is trying to communicate like a distant star sending signals. He isn't telling or teaching or ordering. Rather he seeks to establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing. We are lonesome animals. We spend all life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel—

“Yes, that's the way it is, or at least that's the way I feel it. You're not as alone as you thought.”

Of course a writer rearranges life, shortens time intervals, sharpens events, and devises beginnings, middles and ends. We do have curtains—in a day, morning, noon and night, in a man, birth, growth and death. These are curtain rise and curtain fall, but the story goes on and nothing finishes.

To finish is sadness to a writer—a little death. He puts the last word down and it is done. But it isn't really done. The story goes on and leaves the writer behind, for no story is ever done.

*Reading through his obituaries, I found a good deal of analytical writing about his work, and one rewrite man ventured the personal note that he was considered shy, but nowhere did I see a word about one of the most glorious facets of his character, which was his humor. All good humor defies analysis (E. B. White likened it to a frog, which dies under dissection), and John's defied it more than most, because it was not gag-type humor but was the result of his wildly imaginative mind, his remarkable store of knowledge, and his precision with words. This respect for, and precision with, words led him to avoid almost every form of profanity; where most people would let their rage spill out the threadbare obscenities, he would concoct some diatribe that let off the steam and was at the same time mildly diverting. One example should suffice: At Easter about three years ago we were visiting the Steinbecks at Sag Harbor, and John and I arose before the ladies to make breakfast. He hummed and puttered about the kitchen with the air of a man who was inventing a new form of toaster, and suddenly the coffee pot boiled over, sending torrents of coffee grounds over the stove and clouds of vapor into the air. John leaped for the switch, shouting, “Nuts! No wonder I'm a failure! No wonder nobody ever asks for my hand in marriage! Nuts!” By that time both he and the coffee had simmered down, and he started a new pot. I think that this was the day he stoutly denied having a hangover, and after a moment of reflection added, “Of course, I do have a headache that starts at the base of my spine . . .” He spent the rest of the morning painting an Easter egg black, as a protest.*

*There was, oddly, a lot of little boy left in him, if by little boy you can mean a searching interest in anything new, a desire to do or to find or to invent some sort of diversion, a fascination with any gadget of any sort whatsoever, and the ability to be entertained by comparative trivia. He was the only adult I have ever seen who would regularly laugh at the Sunday comics; he raised absolute hell in our kitchen with an idea for making papier-mâché in the Waring blender with a combination of newspaper and water and flour; and he would conduct frequent trips to the neighborhood toy store, sometimes just to browse through the stock and sometimes to buy an item like a cap pistol as a*

*Valentine's Day present for his wife. To be with him was to be on a constant parranda, either actual or intellectual, and the only person bewildered by it was his children's nurse, who once said, "I don't see why Mr. Steinbeck and Mr. Benchley go out to those bars, when there's all that free liquor at home."*

*And late at night, over some of the "free" liquor at home, he would sometimes read Synge's translations of Petrarch's sonnets to Laura, and then he would weep. It wasn't the liquor; it was the lilt of Synge's words and the ache in Petrarch's heart, and there was one of the sonnets that I never once heard him read through to the end.*

— Nathaniel Benchley

## ON GETTING STARTED

It is usual that the moment you write for publication—I mean one of course—one stiffens in exactly the same way one does when one is being photographed. The simplest way to overcome this is to write it *to* someone, like me. Write it as a letter aimed at one person. This removes the vague terror of addressing the large and faceless audience and it also, you will find, will give a sense of freedom and a lack of self-consciousness.

Now let me give you the benefit of my experience in facing 400 pages of blank stock—the appalling stuff that must be filled. I know that no one really wants the benefit of anyone's experience which is probably why it is so freely offered. But the following are some of the things I have had to do to keep from going nuts.

1. Abandon the idea that you are ever going to finish. Lose track of the 400 pages and write just one page for each day, it helps. Then when it gets finished, you are always surprised.

2. Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on. It also interferes with flow and rhythm which can only come from a kind of unconscious association with the material.

3. Forget your generalized audience. In the first place, the nameless, faceless audience will scare you to death and in the second place, unlike the theater, it doesn't exist. In writing, your audience is one single reader. I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person—a real person you know, or an imagined person and write to that one.

4. If a scene or a section gets the better of you and you still think you want it—bypass it and go on. When you have finished the whole you can come back to it and then you may find that the reason it gave trouble is because it didn't belong there.

5. Beware of a scene that becomes too dear to you, dearer than the rest. It will usually be found that it is out of drawing.

6. If you are using dialogue—say it aloud as you write it. Only then will it have the sound of speech.

## **ON LUCK**

You know on my left hand on the pad just below the little finger, I have a dark brown spot. And on my left foot in a corresponding place I have another one almost the same. One time a Chinese, seeing the spot on my hand, became very much excited and when I told him about the one on my foot he was keenly interested. He said that in Chinese palmistry the hand spot was a sign of the greatest possible good luck and the one on my foot doubled it. These spots are nothing but a dark pigmentation. I've had them from birth. Indeed, they are what is known as birthmarks. But the reason I brought it up is this. For the last year and a half, they have been getting darker. And if I am to believe in my spots, this must mean that the luck is getting better. And sure enough I have Elaine [Mrs. John Steinbeck] and what better luck could there be. But the spots continue to darken and maybe that means that I am going to have a book, too. And that would be great good luck, too.

## **ON WORK HABITS**

Mark Twain used to write in bed—so did our greatest poet. But I wonder how often they wrote in bed—or whether they did it twice and the story took hold. Such things happen. Also I would like to know what things they wrote in bed and what things they wrote sitting up. All of this has to do with comfort in writing and what its value is. I should think that a comfortable body would let the mind go freely to its gathering.

You know I always smoke a pipe when I work—at least I used to and now I have taken it up again. It is strange—as soon as a pipe begins to taste good, cigarettes become tasteless. I find I smoke fewer and fewer cigarettes. Maybe I can cut them out entirely for a while. This would be a very good thing. Even with this little change, my deep-seated and perennial cigarette cough is going away. A few months without that would be a real relief.

I have dawdled away a good part of my free time now carving vaguely on a scrap of mahogany, but I guess I have been thinking too. Who knows. I sit here in a kind of a stupor and call it thought.

Now I have taken the black off my desk again, clear down to the wood, and have put a green blotter down. I am never satisfied with my writing surface.

My choice of pencils lies between the black Calculator stolen from Fox Films and this Mongol 2 3/8 F which is quite black and holds its point well—much better in fact than the Fox pencils. I will get six more or maybe four more dozen of them for my pencil tray.

I have found a new kind of pencil—the best I have ever had. Of course it costs three times as much too but it is black and soft but doesn't break off. I think I will always use these. They are called Blackwings and they really glide over the paper.

In the very early dawn, I felt a fiendish desire to take my electric pencil sharpener apart. It has not been working very well and besides I have always wanted to look at the inside of it. So I did and found that certain misadjustments had been made at the factory. I corrected them, cleaned the machine, oiled it and now it works perfectly for the first time since I have it. There is one reward for not sleeping.

Today is a dawdly day. They seem to alternate. I do a whole of a day's work and then the next day, flushed with triumph, I dawdle. That's today. The crazy thing is that I get about the same number of words down either way. This morning I am clutching the pencil very tight and this is not a good thing. It means I am not relaxed. And in this book I want to be just as relaxed as possible. Maybe that is another reason I am dawdling. I want that calmness to settle on me that feels so good—almost like a robe of cashmere it feels.

It has been a good day of work with no harm in it. I have sat long over the desk and the pencil has felt good in my hand. Outside the sun is very bright and warm and the buds are swelling to a popping size. I guess it is a good thing I became a writer. Perhaps I am too lazy for anything else.

On the third finger of my right hand I have a great callus just from using a pencil for so many hours every day. It has become a big lump by now and it doesn't ever go away. Sometimes it is very rough and other times, as today, it is as shiny as glass. It is peculiar how touchy one can become about little things. Pencils must be round. A hexagonal pencil cuts my fingers after a long day. You see I hold a pencil for about six hours every day. This may seem

strange but it is true. I am really a conditioned animal with a conditioned hand.

I am really dawdling today when what I want to write is in my head. It is said that many writers talk their books out and so do not write them. I think I am guilty of this to a large extent. I really talk too much about my work and to anyone who will listen. If I would limit my talk to inventions and keep my big mouth shut about work, there would probably be a good deal more work done.

The callus on my writing finger is very sore today. I may have to sandpaper it down. It is getting too big.

The silly truth is that I can take almost any amount of work but I have little tolerance for confusion.

## ON INSPIRATION

I hear via a couple of attractive grapevines, that you are having trouble writing. God! I know this feeling so well. I think it is never coming back—but it does—one morning, there it is again.

About a year ago, Bob Anderson [the playwright] asked me for help in the same problem. I told him to write poetry—not for selling—not even for seeing—poetry to throw away. For poetry is the mathematics of writing and closely kin to music. And it is also the best therapy because sometimes the troubles come tumbling out.

Well, he did. For six months he did. And I have three joyous letters from him saying it worked. Just poetry—anything and not designed for a reader. It's a great and valuable privacy.

I only offer this if your dryness goes on too long and makes you too miserable. You may come out of it any day. I have. The words are fighting each other to get out.

## ON VERSE

Certain events such as love, or a national calamity, or May, bring pressure to bear on the individual, and if the pressure is strong enough, something in the form of verse is bound to be squeezed out. National calamities and loves have been few in my life, and I do not always succumb to May.



My first gem called forth quite adverse criticism, although I considered it extremely apropos at the time. It was published on a board fence, and was in the form of free verse. It ran something like this:

*Gertie loves Tom,  
and Tom loves Gertie.*

This is the only one of my brain children which has attracted attention, and the attention it attracted has made me backward about publishing any of my later works.

## ON THE SHORT STORY

Although it must be a thousand years ago that I sat in your class in story writing at Stanford, I remember the experience very clearly. I was bright-eyed and bushy-brained and prepared to absorb from you the secret formula for writing good short stories, even great short stories.

You canceled this illusion very quickly. The only way to write a good short story, you said, was to write a good short story. Only after it is written can it be taken apart to see how it was done. It is a most difficult form, you told us, and the proof lies in how very few great short stories there are in the world.

The basic rule you gave us was simple and heartbreaking. A story to be effective had to convey something from writer to reader and the power of its offering was the measure of its excellence. Outside of that, you said, there were no rules. A story could be about anything and could use any means and technique at all—so long as it was effective.

As a subhead to this rule, you maintained that it seemed to be necessary for the writer to know what he wanted to say, in short, what he was talking about. As an exercise we were to try reducing the meat of a story to one sentence, for only then could we know it well enough to enlarge it to three or six or ten thousand words.

So there went the magic formula, the secret ingredient. With no more than that you set us on the desolate lonely path of the writer. And we must have turned in some abysmally bad stories. If I had expected to be discovered in a full bloom of excellence, the grades you gave my efforts quickly disillusioned me. And if I felt unjustly criticized, the judgments of editors for many years afterwards upheld your side, not mine.

It seemed unfair. I could read a fine story and could even know how it was done, thanks to your training. Why could I not do it myself? Well, I couldn't, and maybe it's because no two stories dare be alike. Over the years I have written a great many stories and I still don't know how to go about it except to write it and take my chances.

If there is a magic in story writing, and I am convinced that there is, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula seems to lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes but by no means always find the way to do it.

It is not so very hard to judge a story after it is written, but after many years, to start a story still scares me to death. I will go so far as to say that the writer who is not scared is happily unaware of the remote and tantalizing majesty of the medium.

I wonder whether you will remember one last piece of advice you gave me. It was during the exuberance of the rich and frantic twenties and I was going out into that world to try to be a writer.

You said, "It's going to take a long time, and you haven't any money. Maybe it would be better if you could go to Europe."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because in Europe poverty is a misfortune, but in America it is shameful. I wonder whether or not you can stand the shame of being poor."

It wasn't too long afterwards that the depression came down. Then everyone was poor and it was no shame any more. And so I will never know whether or not I could have stood it. But surely you were right about one thing, Edith. It took a long time—a very long time. And it is still going on and it has never got easier. You told me it wouldn't.

## **ON HACK WRITING**

I think the manuscript ["Murder at Full Moon"] enclosed in this package is self-explanatory. For some time now, I have been unhappy. The reason is that I have a debt and it is making me miserable.

It is quite obvious that people do not want to buy the things I have been writing. Therefore, to make the money I need, I must write the things they want to read. In other words, I must sacrifice artistic integrity for a little while

to personal integrity. Remember this when this manuscript makes you sick. And remember that it makes me a great deal sicker than it does you.

Conrad said that only two things sold, the very best and the very worst. From my recent efforts, it has been borne to me that I am not capable of writing the very best yet. I have no doubt that I shall be able to in the future, but at present, I cannot. It remains to be seen whether I can write the very worst.

I will tell you a little bit about the enclosed MS. It was written complete in nine days. It is about sixty-two or -three thousand words long. It took two weeks to type. In it I have included all the cheap rackets I know of, and have tried to make it stand up by giving it a slightly burlesque tone. No one but my wife and my folks know that I have written it, and no one except you will know. I see no reason why a nom de plume should not be respected and maintained. The nom de plume I have chosen is Peter Pym.

The story holds water better than most, and I think it has a fairish amount of mystery. The burlesqued bits, which were put in mostly to keep my stomach from turning every time I sat down at the typewriter, may come out.

## ON SIZE

It has been said often that a big book is more important and has more authority than a short book. There are exceptions of course but it is very nearly always true. I have tried to find a reasonable explanation for this and at last have come up with my theory, to wit: The human mind, particularly in the present, is troubled and fogged and bee-stung with a thousand little details from taxes to war worry to the price of meat. All these usually get together and result in a man's fighting with his wife because that is the easiest channel of relief for inner unrest. Now—we must think of a book as a wedge driven into a man's personal life. A short book would be in and out quickly. And it is possible for such a wedge to open the mind and do its work before it is withdrawn leaving quivering nerves and cut tissue. A long book, on the other hand, drives in very slowly and if only in point of time remains for a while. Instead of cutting and leaving, it allows the mind to rearrange itself to fit around the wedge. Let's carry the analogy a little farther. When the quick wedge is withdrawn, the tendency of the mind is quickly to heal itself exactly as it was before the attack. With the long book perhaps the healing has been warped around the shape of the wedge so that when the wedge is finally withdrawn and the book set down, the mind cannot ever be quite what it was before. This is my theory and it may explain the greater importance of a long

book. Living with it longer has given it greater force. If this is true a long book, even not so good, is more effective than an excellent short story.

## ON CHARACTER

It is hard to open up a person and to look inside. There is even a touch of decent reluctance about privacy but writers and detectives cannot permit the luxury of privacy. In this book [*East of Eden*] I have opened lots of people and some of them are going to be a little bit angry. But I can't help that. Right now I can't think of any work which requires concentration for so long a time as a big novel.

Sometimes I have a vision of human personality as a kind of fetid jungle full of monsters and demons and little lights. It seemed to me a dangerous place to venture, a little like those tunnels at Coney Island where "things" leap out screaming. I have been accused so often of writing about abnormal people.

It would be a great joke on the people in my book if I just left them high and dry, waiting for me. If they bully me and do what they choose I have them over a barrel. They can't move until I pick up a pencil. They are frozen, turned to ice standing one foot up and with the same smile they had yesterday when I stopped.

## ON INTENT

The craft or art of writing is the clumsy attempt to find symbols for the wordlessness. 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. And if he is a writer wise enough to know it can't be done, then he is not a writer at all. A good writer always works at the impossible. There is another kind who pulls in his horizons, drops his mind as one lowers rifle sights. And giving up the impossible he gives up writing. Whether fortunate or unfortunate, this has not happened to me. The same blind effort, the straining and puffing go on in me. And always I hope that a little trickles through. This urge dies hard.

Writing 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. The mountain labors and groans and strains and the tiniest of rodents come out. And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not worth even what it might otherwise have been.

All this is a preface to the fear and uncertainties which clamber over a man so that in his silly work he thinks he must be crazy because he is so alone. If what he is doing is worth doing—why don't more people do it? Such questions. But it does seem a desperately futile business and one which must be very humorous to watch. Intelligent people live their lives as nearly on a level as possible—try to be good, don't worry if they aren't, hold to such opinions as are comforting and reassuring and throw out those which are not. And in the fullness of their days they die with none of the tearing pain of failure because having tried nothing they have not failed. These people are much more intelligent than the fools who rip themselves to pieces on nonsense.

It is the fashion now in writing to have every man defeated and destroyed. And I do not believe all men are destroyed. I can name a dozen who were not and they are the ones the world lives by. It is true of the spirit as it is of battles—the defeated are forgotten, only the winners come themselves into the race. The writers of today, even I, have a tendency to celebrate the destruction of the spirit and god knows it is destroyed often enough. But the beacon thing is that sometimes it is not. And I think I can take time right now to say that. There will be great sneers from the neurosis belt of the south, from the hard-boiled writers, but I believe that the great ones, Plato, Lao Tzu, Buddha, Christ, Paul, and the great Hebrew prophets are not remembered for negation or denial. Not that it is necessary to be remembered but there is one purpose in writing that I can see, beyond simply doing it interestingly. It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage. 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. And how any negative or despairing approach can pretend to be literature I do not know. It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millenniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth, and a few remnants of fossilized jawbones, a few teeth in strata of limestone would be the only mark our species would have left on the earth.

It is too bad we have not more humor about this. After all it is only a book and no worlds are made or destroyed by it. But it becomes important

out of all proportion to its importance. And I suppose that is essential. The dunghill beetle must be convinced of the essential quality in rolling his ball of dung, and a golfer will not be any good at it unless striking a little ball is the most important thing in the world. So I must be convinced that this book is a pretty rare event and I must have little humor about it. Can't afford not to have. The story has to move on and on and on and on. It is like a machine now—set to do certain things. And it is about to clank to its end.

I truly do not care about a book once it is finished. Any money or fame that results has no connection in my feeling with the book. The book dies a real death for me when I write the last word. I have a little sorrow and then go on to a new book which is alive. The rows of my books on the shelf are to me like very well embalmed corpses. They are neither alive nor mine. I have no sorrow for them because I have forgotten them, forgotten in its truest sense.

## **ON THE CRAFT OF WRITING**

The time now comes finally to move the book. I have dawdled enough. But it has been a good thing. I don't yet know what the word rate will be. That will depend on many things. But I do think the hour rate should be fairly constant. I am about finished with these long and characteristic meanderings. It is with real fear that I go to the other. And I must forget even that I want it to be good. Such things belong only in the planning stage. Once it starts, it should not have any intention save only to be written. All is peace now. And all is quiet. What little things there are, are here and good. Posture and attitude are so very important. And since these things have to go on for a very long time, they must become almost a way of life and a habit of thought. So that no one may say, I lost by being lost. This is the last bounce on the board, the last look into the pool. The time has come for the dive. The time has really come.

I suffer as always from the fear of putting down the first line. It is amazing the terrors, the magics, the prayers, the straitening shyness that assail one. It is as though the words were not only indelible but that they spread out like dye in water and color everything around them. A strange and mystic business, writing. Almost no progress has taken place since it was invented. The Book of the Dead is as good and as highly developed as anything in the 20th century and much better than most. And yet in spite of this lack of a continuing excellence, hundreds of thousands of people are in my shoes—praying feverishly for relief from their word pangs.

I learned long ago that you cannot tell how you will end by how you start. I just glanced up this page for instance. Look at the writing at the top—

ragged and angular with pencils breaking in every line, measured as a laboratory rat and torn with nerves and fear. And just half an hour later it has smoothed out and changed considerably for the better.

Now I had better get into today's work. It is full of strange and secret things, things which should strike deep into the unconscious like those experimental stories I wrote so long ago. Those too were preparation for this book and I am using the lessons I've learned in all the other writing.

I have often thought that this might be my last book. I don't really mean that because I will be writing books until I die. But I want to write this one *as though* it were my last book. Maybe I believe that every book should be written that way.

I hope I can keep all the reins in my hands and at the same time make it sound as though the book were almost accidental. That is going to be hard to do but it must be done. Also I'll have to lead into the story so gradually that my reader will not know what is happening to him until he is caught. That is the reason for the casual—even almost flippant—sound. It's like a man setting a trap for a fox and pretending with pantomime that he doesn't know there is a fox or a trap in the country.

I split myself into three people. I know what they look like. One speculates and one criticizes and the third tries to correlate. It usually turns out to be a fight but out of it comes the whole week's work. And it is carried on in my mind in dialogue. It's an odd experience. Under such circumstances it might be one of those schizophrenic symptoms but as a working technique, I do not think it is bad at all.

I do indeed seem to feel creative juices rushing toward an outlet as semen gathers from the four quarters of a man and fights its way into the vesicle. I hope something beautiful and true comes out—but this I know (and the likeness to coition still holds). Even if I knew nothing would emerge from this book I would still write it. It seems to me that different organisms must have their separate ways of symbolizing, with sound or gesture, the creative joy—the flowering. And if this is so, men also must have their separate ways—some to laugh and some to build, some to destroy and yes, some even creatively to destroy themselves. There's no explaining this. The joy thing in me has two outlets: one a fine charge of love toward the incredibly desirable body and sweetness of woman and second—mostly both—the paper and pencil or pen. And it is interesting to think what paper and pencil and the wriggling words are. They are nothing but the trigger into joy—the shout of beauty—the carcajada of the pure bliss of creation. And often the words do not even parallel the feeling except sometimes in intensity. Thus a man full of a bursting joy may write with force and vehemence of some sad picture—of

the death of beauty or the destruction of a lovely town—and there is only the effectiveness to prove how great and beautiful was his feeling.

My work does not coagulate. It is as unmanageable as a raw egg on the kitchen floor. It makes me crazy. I am really going to try now and I'm afraid that the very force of the trying will take all the life out of the work. I don't know where this pest came from but I know it is not new.

We work in our own darkness a great deal with little real knowledge of what we are doing. I think I know better what I am doing than most writers but it still isn't much.

I guess I am terrified to write "finish" on the book for fear I myself will be finished.

Suddenly I feel lonely in a curious kind of way. I guess I am afraid. That always comes near the end of a book—the fear that you have not accomplished what you started to do. That is as natural as breathing.

In a short time that will be done and then it will not be mine anymore. Other people will take it over and own it and it will drift away from me as though I had never been a part of it. I dread that time because one can never pull it back, it's like shouting good-bye to someone going off in a bus and no one can hear because of the roar of the motor.

## **ON COMPETITION**

You know I was born without any sense of competition. This is a crippling thing in many ways. I don't gamble because it is meaningless. I used to throw the javelin far, but I never really cared whether it was farthest. For a while I was a vicious fighter but it wasn't to win. It was to get it over and get the hell out of there. And I never would have done it at all if other people hadn't put me in the ring. The only private fights I ever had were those I couldn't get away from. Consequently I have never even wondered about the comparative standing of writers. I don't understand that. Writing to me is a deeply personal, even a secret function and when the product is turned loose it is cut off from me and I have no sense of its being mine. Consequently criticism doesn't mean anything to me. As a disciplinary matter, it is too late.



## ON PUBLISHING

Although sometimes I have felt that I held fire in my hands and spread a page with shining—I have never lost the weight of clumsiness, of ignorance, of aching inability.

A book is like a man—clever and dull, brave and cowardly, beautiful and ugly. For every flowering thought there will be a page like a wet and mangy mongrel, and for every looping flight a tap on the wing and a reminder that wax cannot hold the feathers firm too near the sun.

Well—then the book is done. It has no virtue any more. The writer wants to cry out, “Bring it back! Let me rewrite it,” or better: “Let me burn it. Don't let it out in the unfriendly cold in that condition.”

As you know better than most, Pat, the book does not go from writer to reader. It goes first to the lions—editors, publishers, critics, copyreaders, sales department. It is kicked and slashed and gouged. And its bloodied father stands attorney.

EDITOR – The book is out of balance. The reader expects one thing and you give him something else. You have written two books and stuck them together. The reader will not understand.

WRITER – No, sir. It goes together. I have written about one family and used stories about another family as—well, as counterpoint, as rest, as contrast in pace and color.

EDITOR – The reader won't understand. What you call counterpoint only slows the book.

WRITER – It has to be slowed—else how would you know when it goes fast?

EDITOR – You have stopped the book and gone into discussions of God knows what.

WRITER – Yes, I have. I don't know why. Just wanted to. Perhaps I was wrong.

SALES DEPARTMENT – The book's too long. Costs are up. We'll have to charge five dollars for it. People won't pay five dollars. They won't buy it.

WRITER – My last book was short. You said then that people won't buy a short book.

PROOFREADER – The chronology is full of holes. The grammar has no relation to English. On page so and so you have a man look in the World Almanac for steamship rates. They aren't there. I checked. You've got the Chinese New Year wrong. The characters aren't consistent. You describe Liza Hamilton one way and then have her act a different way.

EDITOR – You make Cathy too black. The reader won't believe her. You make Sam Hamilton too white. The reader won't believe him. No Irishman ever talked like that.

WRITER – My grandfather did.

EDITOR – Who'll believe it.

2ND EDITOR – No children ever talked like that.

WRITER (*losing temper as a refuge from despair*) – God damn it. This is my book. I'll make the children talk any way I want. My book is about good and evil. Maybe the theme got into the execution. Do you want to publish it or not?

EDITORS – Let's see if we can't fix it up. It won't be much work. You want it to be good, don't you? For instance, the ending. The reader won't understand it.

WRITER – Do you?

EDITOR – Yes, but the reader won't.

PROOFREADER – My God, how you do dangle a participle. Turn to page so and so.

There you are, Pat. You came in with a box of glory and there you stand with an arm full of damp garbage.

And from this meeting a new character has emerged. He is called The Reader.

THE READER –

He is so stupid you can't trust him with an idea.

He is so clever he will catch you in the least error.

He will not buy short books.

He will not buy long books.

He is part moron, part genius and part ogre.

There is some doubt as to whether he can read.

## ON TITLES

I have never been a title man. I don't give a damn what it is called. I would call it [*East of Eden*] Valley to the Sea, which is a quotation from absolutely nothing but has two great words and a direction. What do you think of that? And I'm not going to think about it anymore.

## ON CRITICS

This morning I looked at the *Saturday Review*, read a few notices of recent books, not mine, and came up with the usual sense of horror. One should be a reviewer or better a critic, these curious sucker fish who live with joyous vicariousness on other men's work and discipline with dreary words the thing which feeds them. I don't say that writers should not be disciplined, but I could wish that the people who appoint themselves to do it were not quite so much of a pattern both physically and mentally.

I've always tried out my material on my dogs first. You know, with Angel, he sits there and listens and I get the feeling he understands everything. But with Charley, I always felt he was just waiting to get a word in edgewise. Years ago, when my red setter chewed up the manuscript of *Of Mice and Men*, I said at the time that the dog must have been an excellent literary critic.

Time is the only critic without ambition.

Give a critic an inch, he'll write a play.

## ON RELAXATION

My greatest fault, at least to me, is my lack of ability for relaxation. I do not remember ever having been relaxed in my whole life. Even in sleep I am tight

and restless and I awaken so quickly at any change or sound. It is not a good thing. It would be fine to relax. I think I got this through my father. I remember his restlessness. It sometimes filled the house to a howling although he did not speak often. He was a singularly silent man— first I suppose because he had few words and second because he had no one to say them to. He was strong rather than profound. Cleverness only confused him—and this is interesting—he had no ear for music whatever. Patterns of music were meaningless to him. I often wonder about him. In my struggle to be a writer, it was he who supported and backed me and explained me—not my mother. She wanted me desperately to be something decent like a banker. She would have liked me to be a successful writer like Tarkington but this she didn't believe I could do. But my father wanted me to be myself. Isn't that odd. He admired anyone who laid down his line and followed it undeflected to the end. I think this was because he abandoned his star in little duties and let his head go under in the swirl of family and money and responsibility. To be anything pure requires an arrogance he did not have, and a selfishness he could not bring himself to assume. He was a man intensely disappointed in himself. And I think he liked the complete ruthlessness of my design to be a writer in spite of mother and hell. Anyway he was the encourager. Mother always thought I would get over it and come to my senses.

## **ON HAVING A WRITER IN THE FAMILY**

This is sad news, but I can't think of a thing you can do about it. I can remember the horror which came over my parents when they became convinced that it was so with me—and properly so. What you have and they had to look forward to is life made intolerable by a mean, cantankerous, opinionated, moody, quarrelsome, unreasonable, nervous, flighty, irresponsible son. You will get no loyalty, little consideration and desperately little attention from him. In fact you will want to kill him. I'm sure my father and mother often must have considered poisoning me. There will be no ease for you or for him. He won't even have the decency to be successful or if he is, he will pick at it as though it were failure for it is one of the traits of this profession that it always fails if the writer is any good. And Dennis [Dennis Murphy] is not only a writer but I am dreadfully afraid a very good one.

I hasten to offer Marie and you my sympathy but I must also warn you that you are helpless. Your function as a father from now on will be to get him out of jail, to nurture him just short of starvation, to watch in despair while he seems to be irrational—and your reward for all this will be to be ignored at best and insulted and vilified at worst. Don't expect to understand him, because he doesn't understand himself. Don't for God's sake, judge him by ordinary rules of human virtue or vice or failings. Every man has his price but

the price of a writer, a real one, is very hard to find and almost impossible to implement. My best advice to you is to stand aside, to roll with the punch and particularly to protect your belly. If you are contemplating killing him, you had better do it soon or it will be too late. I can see no peace for him and little for you. You can deny relationship. There are lots of Murphys.

## ON HONORS

I think of a number of pieces which should be done but that I as a novelist can't or should not do. One would be on the ridiculous preoccupation of my great contemporaries, and I mean Faulkner and Hemingway, with their own immortality. It is almost as though they were fighting for billing on the tombstone.

Another thing I could not write and you can is about the Nobel Prize. I should be scared to death to receive it, I don't care how coveted it is. But I can't say that because I have not received it. But it has seemed to me that the receivers never do a good nor courageous piece of work afterwards. It kind of retires them. I don't know whether this is because their work was over anyway or because they try to live up to the prize and lose their daring or what. But it would be a tough hazard to overcome and most of them don't. Maybe it makes them respectable and a writer can't dare to be respectable. The same thing goes for any kind of honorary degrees and decorations. A man's writing becomes less good with the numbers of his honors. It might be that fear in me that has made me refuse those LL.D.'s that are constantly being put out by colleges. It may also be the reason why I have never been near the Academy even though I was elected to it. It may also be the reason I gave my Pulitzer money away.

## ON HEMINGWAY

The first thing we heard of Ernest Hemingway's death was a call from the *London Daily Mail*, asking me to comment on it. And quite privately, although something of this sort might be expected, I find it shocking. He had only one theme—only one. A man contends with the forces of the world, called fate, and meets them with courage. Surely a man has a right to remove his own life but you'll find no such possibility in any of H's heroes. The sad thing is that I think he would have hated accident much more than suicide. He was an incredibly vain man. An accident while cleaning a gun would have violated everything he was vain about. To shoot yourself with a shotgun in the head is almost impossible unless it is planned. Most such deaths happen when a gun

falls, and then the wound is usually in the abdomen. A practiced man does not load a gun while cleaning it. Indeed a hunting man would never have a loaded gun in the house. There are shotguns over my mantle but the shells are standing on the shelf below. The guns are cleaned when they are brought in and you have to unload a gun to clean it. He had a contempt for mugs. And only a mug would have such an accident. On the other hand, from what I've read, he seems to have undergone a personality change in the last year or so. Certainly his last summer in Spain and the resulting reporting in *Life* were not in his old manner. Perhaps, as Paul de Kruif told me, he had had a series of strokes. That would account for the change.

But apart from all that—he has had the most profound effect on writing—more than anyone I can think of. He has not a vestige of humor. It's a strange life. Always he tried to prove something. And you only try to prove what you aren't sure of. He was the critics' darling because he never changed style, theme nor story. He made no experiments in thinking nor in emotion. A little like Capa, he created an ideal image of himself and then tried to live it. I am saddened at his death. I never knew him well, met him a very few times and he was always pleasant and kind to me although I am told that privately he spoke very disparagingly of my efforts. But then he thought of other living writers not as contemporaries but as antagonists. He really cared about his immortality as though he weren't sure of it. And there's little doubt that he has it.

One thing interests me very much. For a number of years he has talked about a big book he was writing and then about several books written and put away for future publication. I have never believed these books exist and will be astonished if they do. A writer's first impulse is to let someone read it. Of course I may be wrong and he may be the exception. For the *London Daily Express*, I have two lines by a better writer than either of us. They go, "He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again."

And since he was called Papa—the lines are doubly applicable.

## ON FAME

It's nice over here because every place you look is a view. Most of them ruins—you can't find who built them or when or why. It makes ambition seem a little ridiculous. I've written a lot of books and some are very nice or have some nice things in them. And it's nice to be asked how it felt to write *God's Little Acre* and *Farewell to Arms*.

Little presses write to me for manuscripts and when I write back that I haven't any, they write to ask if they can print the letter saying I haven't any.

## LAST LETTER

Dear Elizabeth:

I have owed you this letter for a very long time—but my fingers have avoided the pencil as though it were an old and poisoned tool.

- \* From a letter to Pascal Covici, Jr., 13 April 1956
- \* From a letter to Robert Wallsten, February 1962
- \*\* Mr. Benchley believes this is probably Stevenson.
- \* From a letter to Robert Wallsten, 19 February 1960
- \*\* From a letter to Professor William Herbert Carruth, early 1920s
- \* From a letter to Edith Mirrielees, 8 March 1962
- \* From a letter to Amasa Miller, December 1930
- \* From a letter to John O'Hara, 8 June 1949
- \* From a letter to Pascal Covici, 1952
- \* From a letter to John Murphy, 21 February 1957
- \* Six years after this extract from a 1956 letter to Pascal Covici, Jr., Steinbeck himself won the Nobel Prize.
- \* Robert Capa, the famous *Life* photographer.
- \*\* From a letter to Pascal Covici, 1 July 1961
- \* From a letter to Elia Kazan, Nice, France, 22 November 1961
- \*\* From a letter to Elizabeth Otis, July 1939
- \*\* To Elizabeth Otis, his agent—found long after his death under the blotter on his work table by his wife, Elaine Steinbeck.

