

“a great black book”

east of eden

and *gunn’s*

new family physician

robert demott

“. . . Dr. Gunn’s Family Medicine . . . told you all about what to do if a body was sick or dead.”

(Mark Twain, Chapter XVII of *Huckleberry Finn*)

Twain’s comic dismissal aside, Dr. John Gunn’s book had yet another appearance to make in an American novel. In *East of Eden* (1952), John Steinbeck substantively employed a later version — *Gunn’s New Family Physician* — as a means of deepening the artistic portrait and creative legacy of his maternal grandfather Samuel Hamilton (who owned a copy of Gunn’s book), as a source for several kinds of information, and as a model for certain aspects of human behavior which he hoped to preserve for his own children.

i

Although Steinbeck has traditionally been considered an heir to the empirical strain of Realism and Naturalism in American Literature, he commonly depended on a variety of documents to augment his direct immersion in experience, and he frequently relied on written sources to supply his impression of reality. His reputation as the impersonal, objective reporter of striking farm workers and dispossessed migrants—one critic calls him “Naturalism’s Priest”—or as the “escapist” popularizer of primitive folk has unfortunately obscured the deeper roots of his intellectual background, literary interests and artistic method.¹ He was an author who read to write far more often than

has generally been realized, and he was one who understood the reciprocal benefits of Emerson's dictum (in "The American Scholar") that there is "creative reading as well as creative writing." From Steinbeck's first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), based on the life of Henry Morgan, to his modern rendition of Malory, *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), published eight years after his death, Steinbeck's more than two dozen books are marked by the impact of his reading and preparatory research. Nearly all of them contain references or allusions to books or authors whose work he had encountered during his career which helped shape his attitude toward experience and even his execution of form. Indeed, his appreciation for the world figured forth in books was so great that he once told Carlton Sheffield, "I have lost all sense of home, having moved about so much. It means to me now — only that place where the books are kept."²

What differs, of course, in each of Steinbeck's books is the visible emphasis he placed on his sources and the degree of inspiration and guidance he acknowledged from them. Generally, the critical (and at times, rigorously objective) tone, contemporary social/economic content and omniscient point of view which — together or in part — characterize his writing through the early 1940s, conspired to constrict, camouflage or otherwise minimize the *apparent* efficacy of his borrowings.³ However, in Steinbeck's later writings (for example, *Cannery Row*, *East of Eden*, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, *Travels with Charley* and *The Acts of King Arthur*) there are several explicit testimonies of literary indebtedness, symbolically climaxed in the last book published during his lifetime, *America and Americans* (1966), in which he devotes nearly an entire chapter to the positive effects of reading.

Beginning, then, with his reflexive tonal use of the Sanskrit poem *Black Marigolds* in *Cannery Row* (1945), Steinbeck's attitude toward the importance of reading as a way of apprehending the world and as a means of framing experience not only became more assertive, but took on an almost numinous cast. In 1951, while he was writing *East of Eden*, he published a brief essay in which he concluded that a book is "somehow sacred" — "one of the few authentic magics our species has created."⁴ The sacrosanct nature of books and the creative tradition of reading formed a strong impulse in Steinbeck's imagination during the *East of Eden* period and provided him with various direct sources to sustain his resurrection of an earlier era, as well as the inspiration to conceive the novel in a self-conscious fictive tradition that he saw extending from Cervantes through Melville, Sherwood Anderson and himself.⁵ His excursions into reading produced a heightened sense of purpose in *East of Eden* which complemented his desire to continue the survival of his family's intellectual legacy, and helps to explain why he wrote the novel as though it were his "last book," a synthesis of everything he was capable of achieving — "all styles, all techniques, all poetry . . ." (*JN*, 8).

Because of its autobiographical nature, *East of Eden* announced a marked change in Steinbeck's fictional vision, technique and temperament. His notion of fictional propriety evolved toward a more open, expressive form as a vehicle to address a new range of personal convictions. He refused to bow any longer to what he considered the prevailing "technique" of Realism—"the squeamishness of not appearing in one's own book," and insisted that in *East of Eden*, "I am in it and I don't for a moment pretend not to be" (*JN*, 24). For Steinbeck, being "in" his book meant that a whole vista of artistic freedoms had opened up.⁶ By entering the distant world of his own ancestors, Steinbeck granted himself license to explore the psychological and moral implications of individual actions and personal destinies (dramatized in the contiguous lives of the Hamiltons and the Trasks), to experiment with modulations of first and third person points of view (incorporating numerous subjective statements on personal, ethical and cultural values) and to trace the historical course (history serving the imaginative and mythical purposes of fiction) of his native area—California's Salinas Valley—from fabled Eden in the mid-nineteenth century to its emergence at the end of World War I on the brink of a less glamorous but more realistic age. The novel would be, he said, "the story of my country and the story of me" (*JN*, 3). The freedom implicit in this bold departure also included his right to appropriate suitable materials from his readings.⁷ In his effort to fulfill the demanding obligations of *East of Eden's* epical design and subject, Steinbeck drew on several literary and documentary sources for structural and thematic corroboration, for details which added ballast to his fictive speculations, and for authenticity to correct otherwise impressionistic accounts of Salinas Valley life. Gunn's book was one of Steinbeck's chief resources.

ii

Steinbeck always had a penchant for medical and psuedo-scientific texts. Gray's *Anatomy of the Human Body* was part of his working library. But at other times in his life he was intrigued by Mark Graubard's *Man the Slave and Master*, George Hall's *Plain Points on Personal Purity* and Albert Hayes' *The Science of Life; or Self-Preservation*.⁸ In its inimitable commingling of text and discourse, Gunn's book suits this persuasion.

The popularity and wide distribution of Gunn's treatise rested as much on its explicit and practical self-help medical text ("Arranged on a new and simple plan by which the practice of Medicine is reduced to principles of Common Sense," according to the "12th edition" of 1838), as on its patently moralistic prefatory material.⁹ The encyclopedic "Medical Part" comprises approximately three-quarters of Gunn's book (later editions were over a thousand pages long). Written in "plain language," the text covers causes, symptoms and recom-

mended treatments—preferably herbal or natural—for a host of human diseases, complaints, complications, wounds and illnesses, including everything from Asthma to Ulcers. The prefatory matter (Preface, Introduction, Remarks and a major section, “The Passions”) includes discourses on psychology, morality and ethics (which also punctuate the medical text), frequently interrupted by Gunn’s sermons on the religious temperament and discipline necessary to remain healthy in this life and to insure smooth passage to the next.

Behind Gunn’s zealous fundamentalism, however, Steinbeck found a holistic approach close to his own. Gunn’s insistence on knowledge “*founded upon truth*” (NFP, 635), displays the same bias as Steinbeck’s entry in his *East of Eden* journal: “a book—at least the kind of book I am writing—should contain everything that seems to me to be true. There are few enough true things in the world. It would be a kind of sin to conceal any of them . . .” (JN, 24). Gunn’s rudimentary explanations of the psychological influences on human behavior were precursors of Steinbeck’s contemporary personal and fictional concerns. The *New Family Physician’s* mixture of personal observation, anecdotes, case studies and empirical information also presented an analogue for *East of Eden’s* eclectic and “unorthodox” morphology (JN, 60). “Since this book is about everything,” Steinbeck told Pascal Covici, “it should use every form, every method, every technique” (JN, 43). And, perhaps most importantly, because Gunn’s book was once owned by Samuel Hamilton, it was further distinguished in Steinbeck’s mind by pietistic imperatives.

The difference between Twain’s humorous use of Gunn and Steinbeck’s serious use, then, is a matter of attitude and tone.¹⁰ Twain’s recollection of life in the Mississippi River valley of his youth was compounded by the increasingly critical tone and unrelenting satirical posture which the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* assumed during its long composition. In *East of Eden* Steinbeck’s re-creation of the Salinas Valley of his boyhood (and earlier) is no less socially oriented in its attention to factors which changed American life since the nineteenth century; however, due to the largely positive quality which adhered to those nostalgic memories, Steinbeck’s novel is, at turns, both expository and personal, its tone lyrical and reverent. It is especially reverent in the first half of the book because of Steinbeck’s partly fictive, partly biographical creation of Samuel Hamilton.

Steinbeck emphasizes two linked traits which define Samuel’s stature as a “huge figure of folklore” (JN, 111) in the California landscape.¹¹ First, Samuel’s role as skilled, self-reliant man: he is equally adept creating tools at his forge, locating and drilling for water (except, ironically, on his own dry land), or delivering babies. “The few overworked doctors of the county,” Steinbeck writes, “did not often get to the ranches for a birth unless the joy turned to nightmare and went on for several days. Samuel Hamilton delivered all his own children and tied the cords neatly, spanked the bottoms and cleaned up

the mess.”¹² Second, Samuel’s lyrical sensibility separates him from the run of people in the Salinas Valley. His poetical imagination and personal sensitivity allow him to participate in a world of correspondences and intimations closed to his neighbors and even to Liza, his utterly pragmatic and dour wife. In spite of the anti-intellectual cast of California’s frontier life, part of Samuel’s uniqueness stems from his love of books and his ability to use them—attributes Steinbeck considered memorable: “Then there were his education and his reading, the books he bought and borrowed, his knowledge of things that could not be eaten or worn or cohabited with, his interest in poetry, and his respect for good writing” (*EE*, 44).¹³

Among the books Samuel prizes, Steinbeck refers directly to Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, William James’ *Principles of Psychology* and Dr. Gunn’s *Family Medicine*. In a commanding sense, all three have to do with survival. The first two reflect Samuel’s inquisitive, philosophical temperament, the exceptional accommodation of his mind and his need to see into the springs of human motivation according to the oldest and newest wisdom. The *Meditations* and James’ *Psychology* are kept hidden from Liza, which testifies to their illicit intellectual appeal and increases their personal value. The medical text, too, qualifies as part of the equipment necessary for survival. Its teleology coincided with prevailing religious beliefs and therefore would not have offended Liza, who had a “finely developed sense of sin” (*EE*, 13).¹⁴ In a telling paragraph, Steinbeck establishes the utility of Gunn’s book and suggests reasons for the Hamiltons’ ability to survive on their barren farm:

Samuel had a great black book on an available shelf and it had gold letters on the cover—*Dr. Gunn’s Family Medicine*. Some pages were bent and beat up from use, and others were never opened to the light. To look through *Dr. Gunn* is to know the Hamiltons’ medical history. These are the used sections—broken bones, cuts, bruises, mumps, measles, backache, scarlet fever, diphtheria, rheumatism, female complaints, hernia, and of course everything to do with pregnancy and the birth of children. The Hamiltons had either been lucky or moral for the sections on gonorrhoea and syphilis were never opened. (*EE*, 12)

This description of Gunn’s book was written on 9 May 1951, less than three months after Steinbeck began his novel. In the original manuscript, this passage is more detailed and appears much later in the narrative—at the point where Cathy Trask waits out her pregnancy (pp. 212-213 of the published novel) until she can abandon her husband Adam and her family. (She eventually changes her name to Kate and becomes the proprietor of a brothel in Salinas.) Thus the description was occasioned primarily, but as a kind of aside, by Cathy’s impending delivery, and the dramatic necessity for Samuel to preside over the birth scene.

In establishing his authority for Samuel's obstetrical ability, Steinbeck also said of Gunn's book, "I have it still;" but later deleted that line, as part of his general reworking of the entire section.¹⁵ Sometime in late 1951 or early 1952, during his revision of the enormous manuscript (*SLL*, 431, 432, 434), Steinbeck trimmed the paragraph on Gunn from 151 words to 102 (see quotation above). He then moved it, and the lines, "The few overworked doctors . . . for several days" (quoted earlier), and "When his youngest . . . take over for himself" (quoted below), both of which had also been written on 9 May 1951, forward to Chapter 2 (*EE*, 12). Steinbeck orchestrated this later material with a section written on 20 February 1951, in which he described the necessity for Samuel to deliver his own children, the sureness and gentleness of his hands and the effect of his voice on children (*EE*, *AMS*, p. 6/15). As a result Steinbeck created a symbolic context for Gunn's book rather than a merely referential one. Cathy's birth scene was inherently dramatic enough to warrant Steinbeck's rescuing the Gunn passage and utilizing it earlier. In so doing, the novel's contrapuntal tension between the Hamiltons and the Trasks gained specific focus and increased resonance.

Though the symbolic effect was achieved later, from the outset Steinbeck was aware that Gunn's book constituted an important connection between himself and his family's past. This is attested by an entry in *Journal of a Novel*: "This [*East of Eden*] is a personal book and every now and then I have to yank it back to the personal. . . . And at the same time I want it to be believed as a record of past truth" (p. 80). In the context of the original manuscript (journal entry on the left page; novel on the right page), this otherwise oblique notation refers to Steinbeck's satisfaction at having introduced Gunn's treatise into his novel. He had just finished writing the passage on Gunn when he made this assessment; clearly, he considered Samuel's copy of Gunn a way of sustaining the "personal" integrity of his novel, as well as a means of codifying "past truth."

While Dr. Gunn is the source for medical information, Samuel's ability to use that knowledge properly is brought into a much larger, more meaningful arena. It signifies his innate correspondence with the forces of life, and occasions at least one triumph over death: "When his youngest was born with some small obstruction and began to turn black, Samuel put his mouth against the baby's mouth and blew air in and sucked it out until the baby could take over for himself. Samuel's hands were so good and gentle that neighbors from twenty miles away would call on him to help with a birth" (*EE*, 12). By consciously transposing the Gunn/Hamilton nexus, Steinbeck simultaneously deepened Samuel's mythic personality, and used the Hamiltons' medical history to inform the larger history he had written (see also *JN*, 17). The "bent and beat up" pages of the *Family Medicine* symbolize the vulnerability and resiliency of the Hamiltons. They are a compellingly human and "well-balanced family" (*EE*, 50) against whom the Trasks will be

judged. The Hamiltons' freedom from venereal disease is opposed to Cyrus Trask's clap, Samuel's self-sufficiency is opposed to Adam Trask's dependency, the Hamiltons' acceptance of pregnancy and childbirth (they have nine children) is opposed to Cathy's determined resistance, and their innate morality is opposed to the Tasks' learned ethicality—all of these personal and ontological juxtapositions are initiated in Steinbeck's synecdochical passage on Gunn's book.

iii

Yet, like the buried meteorite in Chapter 17, the full dimensions of Gunn's presence in *East of Eden* remain to be uncovered. This is less a matter of influence than of confluence—Gunn did not effect the sweeping, generative changes in Steinbeck's vision and style which resulted from his lifelong indebtedness to *Morte d'Arthur*, for example.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there are three categories of similarities between *East of Eden* and Gunn's *New Family Physician* which are worth discussing because of the light they shed on Steinbeck's creative process.

At the most elementary level, Steinbeck depended on Gunn for specific contemporary medical information which added verisimilitude to his rendering of nineteenth-century life. In most of these cases Steinbeck followed Gunn's material faithfully. Alice, the young girl who becomes Cyrus Trask's second wife (his first wife and mother of his son, Adam, had committed suicide), "knew perfectly well that she had what was called consumption" (*EE*, 20). Gunn's section on Consumption provided Steinbeck with the symptomatic deep cough, perspiration and flushed cheeks he used to describe Alice's disease (*EE*, 20, 37): "Consumption often begins with a dry, hoarse cough, which gradually increases, and continues for months. . . ." It is accompanied by "Hectic Fever" which comes and goes during the day, but "returns again in the evening or at night, and goes off with what are known as Night Sweats. Upon each cheek of the Consumptive person there will be, during the fever, a bright red spot" (*NFP*, 271).

Steinbeck used Gunn's information on pregnancy and midwifery, especially for medical lore and common sense knowledge current during the last century. For details to substantiate his account of Cathy Trask's delivery (*EE*, Chapter 17), Steinbeck followed the Fifth Division of Gunn's treatise—"Diseases of Women." Steinbeck's comment that a "woman gave a tooth for a child" (*EE*, 212), was suggested by Gunn's description of "the Toothache, so often complained of by pregnant women," and his recommendation that the tooth "ought not to be drawn during Pregnancy, unless urgently required" (*NFP*, 542). Cathy's "strange taste" for the carpenter's chalk (*EE*, 212-213) is indebted to Gunn's statement about "Green Sickness" which causes an "unnatural craving" for "clay, chalk, and the like" (*NFP*, 546).¹⁷ When Samuel is summoned to attend Cathy's delivery, he cautions

Lee and Adam to be patient (*EE*, 216, 220). Gunn says, "But in every instance, let me impress on your mind *patience*; and let Nature alone, for she will accomplish the labor" (*NFP*, 526). Samuel reflects this latter admonition too in his comment to Adam: "'The birth happened before I was ready. Popped like a seed'" (*EE*, 222). Shortly afterward, Cathy bears a small child. Samuel "worked fast and as with the first the birth was incredibly quick" (*EE*, 223)—a reasonable approximation of Gunn's reminder to midwives: "In most cases of twin children, the second is quickly and easily born . . ." (*NFP*, 534). Despite the ease of Cathy's deliveries, Samuel's presence is necessary to advance the novel's dramatic action. Samuel's celebrated proficiency as a midwife sets up a direct confrontation with Cathy. He comes away literally wounded, forever conscious of her demonic nature. When Samuel returns home with fever and illness brought on by the vicious bite Cathy inflicts on his hand, Steinbeck marshalls a subtly humorous counterweight to the grim scene, as well as an acknowledgement of a folk cure corroborated by Gunn:

Hence, Soups, Broths and nutritious Teas will constitute a large proportion of the proper diet for the sick. Chicken Soup is one of the most common as well as most useful and beneficial kinds of Soup. (*NFP*, 970)

And Tom brought [Samuel] chicken soup until he wanted to kill him. The lore had not died out of the world, and you still find people who believe that soup will cure any hurt or illness. . . . (*EE*, 228)¹⁸

The most numerous borrowings from Gunn are associated with details which amplified characterization, or which set the stage for dramatic episodes. Steinbeck ranged freely through Gunn's book, picking and choosing elements which either enriched his notion of a character's personality, or confirmed his intuition toward that character's role. For example, Dr. Wilde owes certain attributes to Gunn. Steinbeck's deft sketch—"he was a combination doctor, priest, psychiatrist," with true humility and a proper sense of "the mystery of death" (*EE*, 277-278)—agrees with Gunn's qualities for successful ministration set forth in his Preface, Introduction and Remarks. Lee, the Trasks' Chinese servant who becomes the novel's *raisonneur*, was intended to be a "philosopher" (*JN*, 73), which is to say, he was supposed to be detached, forbearing and compassionate. In the ten years since Cathy abandoned Adam and the twins, the responsibility for taking care of Aron and Caleb, running the Trask household and looking after the ineffectual Adam fell to Lee (*EE*, 350). Indeed, while Steinbeck might have conceived Adam's decade of self-pity from Gunn's remark that in "comparison with the loss of a wife, all other earthly bereavements are trifling" (*NFP*, 91-92), the qualities which distinguish Lee were at least partly indebted to Gunn's belief that "the highest attainable virtue" lies in possessing "a mind which will not lose its

tranquility in the severest adversity . . . a mind that is capable of enjoying the blessings of wealth and favor, or of being happy without them" (*NFP*, 91-29).¹⁹

Gunn's account of the tranquil mind certainly parallels Steinbeck's conception of Samuel's temperament as well, though Samuel is less consistent in this regard than Lee. However, Gunn's book offered Steinbeck other clues for his characterization of Samuel. The following quotations were written on 20 February 1951, shortly after Steinbeck began *East of Eden*. The borrowing indicates that Steinbeck was already employing Gunn's book to augment his own admittedly "hazy" recollections (*EE*, 9) of the Hamiltons (see also *JN*, 63). Samuel is one of Steinbeck's purest heroes, "one of those pillars of fire by whom little and frightened men are guided through the darkness" (*JN*, 115). It is fitting, then, that his noble attributes are consistently supported with material from Gunn which manifest innate efficacy. Gunn's operative belief in the vital conjunction between "virtuous regulation of the moral feelings, and the health of the body" (*NFP*, 98), found expression in Steinbeck's appraisal of Samuel: "And just as there was a cleanness about his body, so there was a cleanness in his thinking. Men coming to his blacksmith shop to talk and to listen dropped their cursing for a while, not from any kind of restraint but automatically, as though this were not the place for it" (*EE*, 12). Again, from a section on Management of Children, Steinbeck employed Gunn's observations to symbolize the effects of Samuel's voice—a distinctive feature of his appeal and his uniqueness:

This is one other means [of governing children] seldom regarded. I refer to the human voice. . . . We are by no means aware of the power of the voice in swaying the feelings of the soul. . . . Blessed is that parent who is endowed with a pleasing utterance. What is that which lulls the infant to repose? It is no array of mere words. . . . It is the sound that strikes its little ear that soothes and composes. . . . A few notes, however, skillfully arranged, if uttered in a soft tone, are found to possess a magic influence. Think ye that this influence is confined to the cradle? No, it is diffused over every age. . . . (*NFP*, 630)

Samuel had no equal for soothing hysteria and bringing quiet to a frightened child. It was the sweetness of his tongue and the tenderness of his soul. (*EE*, 12)

Samuel always kept a foreignness. Perhaps it was in the cadence of his speech, and this had the effect of making men, and women too, tell him things they would not tell to relatives or close friends. (*EE*, 12)

With nearly everything he appropriated from Gunn, Steinbeck reshaped the original (by compression or expansion), avoided Gunn's sentimental language and rhetorical flourishes and extracted the spirit of Gunn's passage to fit his conception of characterization. The limberness of Steinbeck's fictive imagination, his need to seek out the implications otherwise buried in declarative details, is evident in his transformation of Gunn's pedestrian account on Melancholy. Steinbeck's covenant is with the language of fiction, and toward that end he re-ordered Gunn's material into the imagistic diction and crisp vernacular associated with his best writing. In Gunn's catalogue of mental disaffection, Steinbeck saw the potential for a devastating portrait of Cyrus Trask's first wife, whose psychological quirks and aberrant religiosity eventually destroy her:

Melancholy is a purely mental disease. . . . The patient shuns society and seeks to be alone; is low-spirited, fretful, suspicious and inquisitive; has a distaste for everything. . . . Indeed, the disease can often be traced to some sudden misfortune as the cause, such as the death of a friend, or member of the family, disappointed affection, matrimonial difficulty. . . . So tormenting are these imaginary fears sometimes, that the unfortunate sufferer seeks every opportunity to end his troubles by self-destruction, or suicide. (*NFP*, 383-384)

Mrs. Trask was a pale, inside-herself woman. No heat of the sun ever reddened her cheeks, and no open laughter raised the corners of her mouth. She used religion as a therapy for the ills of the world and of herself, and she changed the religion to fit the ill. . . . Her search was quickly rewarded by the infection [gonorrhoea] Cyrus brought home from the war. . . . Her god of communication became a god of vengeance. . . . It was quite easy for her to attribute her condition to certain dreams she had experienced while her husband was away. But the disease was not punishment enough for her nocturnal philandering. Her new god . . . demanded of her a sacrifice. She searched her mind for some proper egotistical humility and almost happily arrived at the sacrifice—herself. (*EE*, 16-17)²⁰

Some of the interior motivation for Steinbeck's characters originated in Gunn's book. The melancholic mind Gunn describes above was, with some transmutation, brought into play for Steinbeck's treatment of Adam's reaction to Cathy's desertion. Adam's traumatic response (this from a man who had earlier escaped a prison chain gang) also owes some of its conception to Gunn's remarks on the "bitter con-

sciousness" which results "when we are wakened from our long-cherished confidence in that being whom we devotedly loved, and know that from henceforth it may never be indulged again" (*NFP*, 79). Cathy is important because she embodies evil.²¹ But simply making her a "monster," Steinbeck said, was not sufficient justification for her appearance in the novel (*JN*, 42). He was equally interested in her effect on others: "since she had the most powerful impact on Adam and transmitted his blood to her sons and influenced the generations—she certainly belongs in this book . . ." (*JN*, 42). In fact, the transmission of familial traits is one of Steinbeck's preeminent subjects in *East of Eden*, and is symbolized by the thematic refrain that the sins of the parents will be visited upon their children. It is also among Gunn's favorite subjects (*NFP*, 586). In its purest form, of course, this is a Biblical injunction. But Steinbeck was not promulgating theological doctrine, he was writing a novel (*JN*, 104-105). Gunn's notions concerning the influence of the mother ("How all-powerful, for good or evil, is the influence of the mother" [*NFP*, 113]), and his observations about the "hereditary descent of intellectual and moral qualities" (*NFP*, 586), helped fill out the "psychological sign language" (*JN*, 27) necessary to sustain the Trasks' dilemma through three generations.

Similarly, a paragraph on Anger (from "Of the Passions") supplied some working attributes to particularize another generative mythos—the Cain-Abel story. In Chapter 3 Steinbeck initiates the breach between Charles and Adam Trask when the enraged, irrational Charles nearly murders his brother (*EE*, 33-35). This powerful scene, instigated by Charles' jealousy over Cyrus' preference for Adam, is saliently represented in Gunn's assertion that "Anger is a violent emotion of the mind, arising from an injury whether real or imaginary, which openly vents itself against the offending party" (*NFP*, 61). That Steinbeck had Gunn at hand when he described the effects of Charles' rage seems more than merely coincidental in light of Gunn's remarks:

The passionate man under its influence becomes incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. As an idiot or a madman, he is carried away by the impulse of the moment, a caprice of the imagination; as violent as a gust of wind, he rashly determines his conduct, and hurries to the perpetration of actions. . . . Behold that countenance under the influence of passion; it wears the strongest and most visible marks of uncontrollable power. . . . (*NFP*, 61)

Given this heritage of psychological abnormality, most of the Trask family is damned in the process (Mrs. Trask, Cyrus, Cathy/Kate, Charles, Aron), one is saved (Caleb) and Adam wins a belated reprieve. He does so by overcoming the paralyzing effects of Cathy's abandonment, then later in the novel, by tacitly forgiving Caleb for his transgressions. The first of these breakthroughs occurs when Adam finally confronts his estranged wife. For years he has wallowed in self-

pity and inactivity, but upon the death of Samuel Hamilton he realizes he must overcome his lethargy. In Chapter 25 Adam visits Kate's notorious Salinas whorehouse to test his cherished and wholly invented memory of her against the reality she presents. After a shocking exchange, Adam acknowledges Kate's arrogance and hatred, and is able to walk away with his dignity intact. In the opening section of Chapter 26, Steinbeck begins to lay the foundation for the new Adam, apparently aided by a suggestion from Gunn. This borrowing once again demonstrates the alchemical quality of Steinbeck's imagination. In his discourse on Joy, Gunn confines himself to its salutary physiological effects, while Steinbeck wants a stronger emotion—ecstasy—to signify the depth and degree of Adam's rebirth:

This emotion is founded on delightful occurrences and causes a universal expansion of vital action. The blood, under its animating influence, flows more liberally through the whole system, the countenance becomes expanded, its expression brightens, and the whole surface acquires the ruddy tint and genial warmth of health. The body feels bouyant and lively. There is a consequent disposition to quick and cheerful muscular motions . . . In short, every function would seem to be gladdened by the happy moral condition. (*NFP*, 79)

And again there are mornings when ecstasy bubbles in the blood, and the stomach and chest are tight and electric with joy. . . . Out of the gray throbbing an ecstasy arose. He [Adam] felt young and free and filled with hungry gaiety. He got off the train at King City, and, instead of going directly to the livery stable to claim his horse and buggy, he walked to Will Hamilton's new garage. (*EE*, 376)

Thematic and conceptual parallels comprise the third category of similarities between *East of Eden* and the *New Family Physician*. Steinbeck's borrowings in this sphere can be attributed to an awareness of kindred elements in Gunn. It is not overstating this connection to say that the usefulness of Gunn's book was heightened by its encompassing example. In Gunn's comprehensive system of knowledge—which addressed man's temporal condition and prepared him for spiritual salvation—Steinbeck recognized affinities with his own cosmogonical intentions. Gunn's holistic ministrations to the physical and metaphysical ailments of mankind arises from his belief that humans are capable of action based on right reason, enlightened judgment and faith (*NFP*, 506). Furthermore, Gunn's use of plain language (generally free from Latin phrases and erudite explanations) became the vehicle for expressing simple and basic truths (*NFP*, 5).

Both this instructional quality and urgent tone are evident in *East*

of Eden. A compelling convergence of symbolic antecedents and personal experiences occurred in Steinbeck's mind when he wrote the novel. It was originally conceived and written for his young boys, Tom and John (by his second wife Gwyn), who no longer lived permanently with him. He proposed to tell them who they were by explaining their genealogy and geographical background (*SLL*, 590) and to prepare them for future life by relating "perhaps the greatest story of all—the story of good and evil . . ." (*JN*, 4). *East of Eden* was many things to Steinbeck, among them a way of accommodating his absentee parenthood by creating a paradigm of universal human behavior. Because it was written in plain language ("it will be necessary to speak very straight and clearly and simply," he told Pascal Covici [*JN*, 4]), the book would be accessible to his children when they grew older, and provide a "background in the world of literature" (*JN*, 4). In this way, *East of Eden* is a kind of "manner book," a guide to ethical and moral deportment passed on from elders to children (*JN*, 40). Just as Gunn's book was "passed down" to Steinbeck, so *East of Eden* completed the pietistic continuity and imaginative legacy of the Hamilton line.

Eventually, numerous direct passages addressed to the boys were excised from the published version. However, the extent expository sections and the manifold emphasis on parent-child relationships remained intact to carry the weight of Steinbeck's preoccupations. The frequently pernicious effects of Trask parents on their children (Cyrus and his wives on Charles and Adam; Adam, Charles and Cathy on Aron and Caleb), are balanced by the essentially fortuitous example of the Hamiltons. The differences between the way the Trasks and the Hamiltons treat their children was illuminated by Gunn's recommendations for parental governance, a condition much in Steinbeck's mind during the composition of *East of Eden* (*JN*, 11, 12, 25-26, 40, 41, 49, 50, 87, 114):

The laws which govern children from the commencement should be simple, plain, reasonable, and firm. To govern properly, you must always govern yourself. Let your own example enforce the precepts you inculcate. To train up a child in the right way, you must walk in the right way yourself. Children are close observers. Beware of partiality; it has been the ruin of hundreds of children; they quickly perceive it, and become envious, which eventually destroys all the finer feelings of affection and respect (*NFP*, 604)²²

Walking in the right way, that is, exercising the freedom and ability to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, is the predominant theme and the motivating intellectual purpose of *East of Eden*. It is linked, of course, to Christian concepts. The Cain-Abel antithesis, and the central importance of the *timshel* doctrine (freedom of choice over sin) constitute the symbolic Biblical archetypes Steinbeck invested with psychological vitality and realism. While he certainly gained his major impetus from a fresh reading of Genesis (*JN*, 104), he also saw

these concepts mirrored in Gunn's book.²³ The range of human emotions have a common source in the "probability of good and evil" (*NFP*, 39), an idea that is echoed in Steinbeck's "net of good and evil" (*EE*, 475) which snares all humans. The *timshel* doctrine, finally uttered by the dying Adam Trask as a means of forgiving his wayward son (*EE*, 691), has a parallel in Gunn's section on Forgiveness, which "is not to be practiced by God alone, [but] is enjoined upon man by Divine precept as well as Divine example" (*NFP*, 82).

iv

Beside these related elements, there is a shared spiritual positivism between Steinbeck's belief in the writer's "duty" to "lift up, to extend, to encourage . . ." (*JN*, 115) and Gunn's declamation that "Progress in moral and intellectual excellence is our duty, our honor, and our interest" (*NFP*, 12). However, where Gunn looks to God as the final solution of man's dilemma, Steinbeck considers the field of human activity, especially the nature of good and evil, to be the province of the writer:

Thanks be unto God, where good is brought into operation, the evil must wear out, but the good never. If goodness, that is, the obedience of faith, working by love, were not omnipotent, society would never be improved—for propensity to sin, or to act from selfish impulse alone, is psychologically proved to be unavoidable and irresistible, unless the spirit of holiness be imparted. But experience also demonstrates that immorality does not necessarily continue; the entrance of true light, through the mercy and goodness of God, gives new power and direction to the soul. . . . (*NFP*, 589-590)

We have only one story. All novels, all poetry, are built on the never-ending contest in ourselves of good and evil. And it occurs to me that evil must constantly respawn, while good, while virtue, is immortal. Vice has always a new fresh young face, while virtue is venerable as nothing else in this world is. (*EE*, 477)

This is the point where Gunn and Steinbeck part company, one returning to "the gem Religion!" (*NFP*, 13), the other embracing the infinitely more meaningful "miracle of creation"—"the preciousness" in "the lonely mind of man" (*EE*, 151). Steinbeck's mind was receptive and alive to the nuances of experience, even those already recorded in other places. Appropriately, in a novel which was supposed to be "about everything," there are resonances from a lifetime of reading

and personal experiences. As part of his preparation for his writing—his “culling of all books plus my own invention” (*JN*, 31)—Gunn’s *New Family Physician* was among the works which helped complete the complex allusive circuit of *East of Eden*.

notes

This essay would not have been possible without the generosity of Adam Marsh, Director of Ohio University’s Research Institute, for a Baker Fund Award which supported a larger project, *Steinbeck’s Reading* (New York: Garland Press, 1982). I am also indebted to the staff of the Yale Medical School Library for providing editions of Gunn’s book; the Directors and their staffs at the Pierpont Morgan Library (New York City), Humanities Research Center (University of Texas, Austin), and Bancroft Library (University of California, Berkeley) for making Steinbeck’s manuscripts available; and especially Elaine Steinbeck and the late Elizabeth Otis Kiser for permission to quote from Steinbeck’s works. Finally, I want to dedicate this essay to the memory of my colleague, Frank B. Fieler, whose advice during the early stages of research I consider invaluable.

1. See Woodburn O. Ross, “John Steinbeck: Naturalism’s Priest,” in *Steinbeck and His Critics: A Record of Twenty-Five Years*, ed. E. W. Tedlock and C. V. Wicker (Albuquerque, 1957), 206-215; and Maxwell Geismar, *Writers in Crisis: The American Novel, 1925-1940* (1947; rptd., New York, 1971), 266. For more enlightened considerations of Steinbeck’s place in literary tradition, see Jackson Benson’s excellent “John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist,” *Novel*, 10 (Spring, 1977), 248-264, and Warren French’s pioneering “John Steinbeck and Modernism,” in *Steinbeck’s Prophetic Vision of America*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi and Kenneth Swan (Upland, Indiana, 1976), 35-55.

2. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York, 1975), 797-798. Hereafter *SLL*.

3. Steinbeck’s use of sources in his earlier work is too complex to demonstrate here. Briefly, he used original works for humorous effects (*Morte d’Arthur* as the basis for *Tortilla Flat*), transformed influences with little or no comment (Jung, Frazer, Jeffers in *To a God Unknown*), used sources in a referential capacity (Jim Nolan’s reading list in *In Dubious Battle*) or employed his own preferences as ironic indicators of a character’s personality (the reading habits of Junius Maltby in *The Pastures of Heaven*). Except for Arthurian influences and Biblical parallels (especially in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*), the study of Steinbeck’s sources lags far behind that of such contemporaries as Hemingway and Faulkner. Recently, there have been important corrections of that trend: see the first four chapters of Richard Astro’s *John Steinbeck and Edward R. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (Minneapolis, 1973), Peter Lisca, “Cannery Row and the *Tao Teh Ching*,” *San Jose Studies*, 1 (November, 1975), 21-27, Jackson Benson, “‘To Tom Who Lived It’: John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 5 (April, 1976), 151-194, and Tetsumaro Hayashi, “Steinbeck’s *Winter* as Shakespearean Fiction,” *Steinbeck Quarterly*, 12 (Summer-Fall, 1979), 107-115.

4. “Some Random and Randy Thoughts on Books,” in *The Author Looks at Format*, ed. Ray Friedman (New York, 1951), 32,34.

5. *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (New York, 1975), 29, 124, 179-182. Hereafter *JN*. Steinbeck was not a sophisticated literary theorist, but his sense of participating in a self-conscious mode is evident in this entry (17 April 1951): “. . . I said the teller would be opinionated . . . And as for my comments on the story, I find it or rather I feel that it is more direct and honest to set it down straight than to sneak it in so that the reader will not know or suspect it as opinion. As you [Pascal Covici, his editor at Viking Press] will have discovered . . . the technique of this book is an apparent lack of technique . . .” (*JN*, 60).

6. Until recently, with few exceptions, the critical appraisal of *East of Eden* has been unenthusiastic and uninspired. But with the increased tolerance toward all phases of experimental fiction—as Robert Scholes has tellingly surveyed in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, 1979)—Steinbeck’s novel is beginning to receive the attention it deserves. See John Ditsky’s chapter “Towards a Narrational Self,” in his *Essays on East of Eden*, Steinbeck Monograph Series, No. 7 (Muncie, Indiana, 1977), 1-14; Paul McCarthy, *John Steinbeck* (New York, 1980), 116-124; and Daniel Buerger, “‘History’ and Fiction in *East of Eden* Criticism,” *Steinbeck Quarterly*, 14 (Winter-Spring, 1981), 6-14.

7. *East of Eden* profited from Steinbeck’s reading and research in material as diverse as Salinas newspapers (*JN*, 53), classical history, notably Herodotus (*EE*, 475), and classical bi-

ography, notably Plutarch (*JN*, 7), as well as modern and traditional fiction, and non-fiction. See my essay, "'Culling All Books': Steinbeck's Reading and *East of Eden*," *Steinbeck Quarterly*, 14 (Winter-Spring, 1981), 40-51.

8. On 22 January 1949 Steinbeck wrote to Pascal Covici requesting a copy of *Gray's Anatomy* "to fill out my library" (*SLL*, 346). In the same letter he also asked for a "pharmacopeia" and "the best standard volume in Toxicology." In a note to Covici postmarked 8 March 1949 Steinbeck acknowledged their receipt. See Thomas Fensch, *Steinbeck and Covici: The Story of a Friendship* (Middlebury, Vermont, 1979), 113. Graubard's book was published in 1938, Hayes' in 1868. Through the graciousness of Harry Valentine, their former owner, I have examined Steinbeck's personal copies (neither is annotated). Hall's book was published in 1892. A friend of Steinbeck's during the 1930s and 1940s said he was fond of reading it aloud (Virginia Scardigli/Robert DeMott, Personal Interview, 28 February 1979).

9. Gunn's book, first published in 1830, was originally called *Gunn's Domestic Medicine; or, Poor Man's Friend, in the House of Affliction, Pain, and Sickness*. Steinbeck used a later version, first entitled *Gunn's New Domestic Physician*, then, from about 1865 on, entitled *Gunn's New Family Physician*. In his preface to *New Domestic Physician* (Cincinnati, 1860), Gunn asked patrons to "bear in mind that this is not a new edition of the old work, 'Gunn's Domestic Medicine,' which was published thirty years ago, but an entirely new work, first published in 1857, and now enlarged and perfected." Samuel Hamilton arrived in California around 1870, so it is reasonable to assume he had a version of the 1865 edition. In a passage from *East of Eden* quoted later in my article, Steinbeck refers to *Dr. Gunn's Family Medicine* and notes specifically that it was a black book with gold letters—characteristic binding for *Gunn's New Family Physician*. All direct references will be to John C. Gunn, *Gunn's New Family Physician*, 100th ed., rev. and enl. (Cincinnati, 1865). Hereafter *NFP*.

10. Perhaps Steinbeck's use of Gunn was a covert answer to Twain. Steinbeck apparently knew Twain's work quite well, at least *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, and *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. References to all of them appear in his published and unpublished writings and correspondence. A brief paragraph in the holograph version of *Travels with Charley* (1962) indicates he had once memorized sections of *Huck Finn*. (AMS, p. 164; Pierpont Morgan Library).

11. See Richard Peterson's essay on *East of Eden in A Study Guide to Steinbeck, Part II*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi (Metuchen, New Jersey, 1979), 76-78, for a helpful explanation of Samuel's mythical dimension.

12. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952; rptd. New York, 1979), 12. Hereafter *EE*.

13. Cf. Steinbeck's account in *Travels with Charley* (New York, 1962): "I seem to have had a fortunate childhood for a writer. My grandfather Sam'l Hamilton, loved good writing, and he knew it too, and he had some bluestocking daughters, among them my mother. Thus it was that in Salinas, in the great dark walnut bookcase with the glass doors, there were strange and wonderful things to be found" (35).

14. In the original manuscript of *East of Eden* Steinbeck was explicit about the differences in Liza's and Samuel's reading habits: "In all her active life she read only two books: The Bible and Pilgrim's Progress. But when she was very old and alone she read one other—a novel named Mother, by Kathleen Norris. And whereas all his life Samuel read starvingly every book he could buy or borrow, his wife never raised her small bright eyes from his Bible and his Pilgrim's Progress" (AMS, p. 5/13; Humanities Research Center).

15. *East of Eden*, AMS, p. 106/216 (Humanities Research Center). Except in the sense of imaginative possession, Steinbeck did not have his grandfather's copy of Gunn. Steinbeck's sister recalled the "big and thick black" book, but she remembers having given it to her own son, after whose death the book disappeared (Beth Ainsworth/Robert DeMott, Letter, 30 November 1979). Gunn's book is not among Steinbeck's personal library, which includes several medical texts (Elaine Steinbeck/Robert DeMott, Letter, 31 January 1979). As Steinbeck's references to Gunn and his borrowings from Gunn are generally accurate (the sections listed in the passage on page 12 of *East of Eden* occur primarily in the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Divisions of Gunn's book [*NFP*, 522-698]), Steinbeck either had another, similar copy at his disposal in 1951, or sometime earlier had taken careful notes. Given Steinbeck's occasional insouciance for detail it is doubtful that he would have recalled so much of Gunn's book without prompting.

16. See his Introduction to *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, ed. Chase Horton (New York, 1976), xi, and essays by Warren French, Arthur Kinney and Roy Simmonds, in *Steinbeck and the Arthurian Theme*, ed. Tetsumaro Hayashi. Steinbeck Monograph Series, No. 5 (Muncie, Indiana, 1975), 4-11; 12-24; 30-43.

17. Steinbeck used another of the symptoms for Green Sickness—"feet and ankles often become swollen" (*NFP*, 546)—to describe Kate's "thickened" legs and feet (*EE*, 364). The entire episode about Kate's gradual dominance and eventual murder of Faye (Chapters 20-22) necessitated research by Steinbeck (*JN*, 92). In conjunction with other books, he might also have consulted Gunn's section on medical flora for information on poison (nux vomica, or strychnine—*EE*, 284; *NFP*, 837) and purgative (Croton Oil—*EE*, 265; *NFP*, 837) which Kate gives Faye. See also *SLL*, 346-347.

18. Elaine Steinbeck confirmed Gunn's usefulness as a source for medical information in *East of Eden*, but indicated that the chicken soup cure was also a longstanding family joke (Elaine Steinbeck/Robert DeMott, Letter, 3 December 1979).

19. Lee's equanimity and poise bear striking resemblances to a character in Rauol Faure's novel *Lady Godiva and Master Tom* (New York, 1948) which Steinbeck read (*SLL*, 334). Ezra, Sir Leofric's adviser and treasurer, has a similar predilection for philosophy and management (see pp. 156-169).

20. The condition of Tom Hamilton's mind in the final moments before his suicide (*EE*, 468-469) suggests an affinity with Gunn's observations on Hypochondria: "As in Melancholy, the mind is greatly disturbed, and the person is troubled often with imaginary evils . . ." These symptoms are accompanied by "absurd and ridiculous fancies and apprehensions" (*NFP*, 384).

21. Cathy/Kate's characterization has some basis in Gwyn, Steinbeck's wife from 1943 to 1948. Adam's subjection to and eventual release from Kate's power were also distilled from Steinbeck's reaction to his divorce from Gwyn. See *JN*, 112, and Fensch, *Steinbeck and Covici*, pp. 165-166. The portrait of Kate was also aided by Steinbeck's reading, *Madame Bovary* and *Sister Carrie*, which Steinbeck knew first hand, are obvious fictional antecedents for the calculating aspects of her character. More immediately, Faure's novel was instrumental in shaping Kate. She exhibits several physical and psychological traits of Faure's Lady Godiva, whom Steinbeck considered a "blistering study of a woman" (*SLL*, 334). See my essay, "Cathy Ames and Lady Godiva: A Contribution to *East of Eden's* Background," *Steinbeck Quarterly* 14 (Summer-Fall, 1981), 72-83. Kate's evil nature was corroborated by a New York newspaper story (4 April 1951) about "a grown boy who killed both his parents because they would not let him use the car" (*JN*, 48). The original manuscript of *East of Eden* shows Steinbeck intended to use that grisly incident as a gloss for Kate's monstrousness. See Mark Govoni, "'Symbols For the Wordlessness': A Study of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*," Diss., Ohio University, 1978, 77.

22. This quotation has direct bearing on young Adam Trask's discovery of his father's tyranny, ironically exercised through Cyrus' partiality for Adam over Charles: "When a child first catches adults out—when it first walks into his grave little head that adults do not have divine intelligence, that their judgments are not always wise, their thinking true, their sentences just—his world falls into panic desolation. The gods are fallen and all safety gone" (*EE*, 21).

23. Steinbeck's use of the Bible in *East of Eden* has been documented, especially by Peter Lisca in *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1958), 261-263; and Joseph Fontenrose, *John Steinbeck: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York, 1963), 120-124. Beside the Bible and Gunn, Steinbeck was also indebted to Erich Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven, 1950). On 19 December [1950] Steinbeck told George Albee that he considered Fromm's book "a brilliant piece of analysis" (Bancroft Library). Cf. Fromm's statement: "Man must know the difference between good and evil, he must learn to listen to the voice of his conscience and be able to follow it" (76).