

A COMPARATIVE READING OF JOHN STEINBECK'S AND FRANK HARDY'S WORKS

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Abstract

Although belonging to literatures spatially and traditionally very remote from each other, John Steinbeck, an American Nobel Prize winner, and Frank Hardy, an Australian novelist and story-teller, share a number of common grounds. The fact that by the time Hardy wrote his first novel, in 1950, Steinbeck was already a popular writer with a long list of masterpieces does not justify the assumption that Hardy had Steinbeck at hand when writing his best-sellers, but it does exclude the opposite direction of inheritance. Hardy's creative impulses and appropriations may have been the unconscious results of his omnivorous reading after he realized that "the transition from short stories [in which he excelled] to the novel was an obstacle not easily surmounted" as he confessed in *The Hard Way: The Story Behind "Power Without Glory"* (109).¹ Furthermore, since both were highly regarded proletarian writers in communist Russia, Hardy might have become acquainted with Steinbeck's novels on one of his frequent visits to that country between 1951 and 1969.² Upon closer reading, inter-textual entanglements with Steinbeck's prose can be detected in several of his books, including *But the Dead Are Many* (1975), the Billy Borker material collected in *The Yarns of Billy Borker* (1965) and in *The Great Australian Lover and Other Stories* (1967), and in *Power Without Glory* (1950). My purpose in this essay is to briefly illuminate the most striking similarities between the two authors' narrative strategies in terms of their writing style, narrative technique, and subject matter, and link these textual affinities to the larger social and cultural milieu of each author. In the second part I will focus on the parallels between their central works, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Hardy's *Power Without Glory*.

Contemporary critics have succinctly discussed the value of studying literary parallels between different literatures either of the same or different epochs. Such study, Marian Galik asserts in 1999, not only "supplies us with new knowledge and leads to a deeper understanding in various areas of literature, its history, theory, and criticism," but it also means a "deeper penetration into the study of inter-literary process" (99). In light of Galik's view that it is "new knowledge within the frame-

¹ In continuation *The Hard Way*.

² In 1969, Hardy wrote a series of hard-hitting newspaper articles "Stalin's Heirs," which were published in *The Bulletin* from January 11 through February 1, 1969, and regarded as "the most devastating reports on Stalinism yet written." As a result, Hardy lost substantial royalties from the Soviet Union and its satellites, and was proclaimed an anti-Soviet element.

work of literature outside the Euro-American cultural area [that] is needed now," this essay offers a comparative analysis of John Steinbeck's and Frank Hardy's literary worlds (ibid.).

When Frank Hardy burst onto the literary scene in 1950 with *Power Without Glory*, a political novel of dramatic sweep and great narrative strength, he differed in one important aspect from most Australian novelists of his generation: he was a declared communist. For this reason, in addition to his almost anarchic disrespect for manners and conventions and his contempt for bureaucracy, he is believed to be one of the most controversial voices in Australian literature. Even the episode in the late 1980s, when forty policemen were sent to arrest him for unpaid parking fines, and his brief spell in prison as a result, gave him further stature as a rebel against authority and a popular hero. Easy-going, laconic and unaffected by fame and media attention, a battler and punter who died with "racing form guides by his side," as he was depicted in numerous obituaries and articles about him written since his death in 1994, Frank Hardy at first glance seems to have had very little in common with John Steinbeck (Gray 12). For the latter was - in his biographer's words - "shy and very private," reluctant to be interviewed, and "steadfastly refusing to answer personal questions" (Benson ix). And although Steinbeck once was a believer in collective political struggle and equally put his pen at the service of a political cause, he was never a member of a communist party. Hardy, on the other hand, remained an official supporter of the system much longer than many other intellectuals. Yet, and putting aside Hardy's enduring political allegiance, a close examination of his personal and literary life suggests that many parallels may be drawn between the two writers. For example, they resemble each other in their sincere concern for the common man, desire for reform and readiness to take up causes. Just as Steinbeck denounced economic and social injustice and remained an artist with a refined sense for human rights and freedom, so Hardy engaged himself in the fight for an egalitarian society. In the 1960s, for example, he turned his attention to the labor struggles of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory and was the first to raise the issue of Aboriginal land rights. The miseries of unemployment and poverty in the Great Depression became the subject of both writers' first efforts at fiction and colored much of their later writing. Their hard-won knowledge of workers' lives (both were born into working-class families and grew up close to the grindstone of harsh economic realities) enabled them to write more tellingly, perhaps, than any other American or Australian writers, of the miseries and evils of the depressed 1930s. Hardy's description of himself in *The Hard Way*, which he wrote immediately after the publication of his controversial novel *Power Without Glory* (but published as late as 1961), as "a battler from the bush, who knew little about artistic history, literature or aesthetics, but understood working-class life, philosophy and politics" is in some respects reminiscent of Steinbeck's experience and of his emotional immersion in the migrant farm worker situation in California (36). In his accompanying *Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath"* about the novel's making, Steinbeck writes: "For the first time I am working on a real book that [...] will take every bit of experience and thought and feeling that I have" (26). Clearly, such a passionate involvement with the subject matter gave them a great advantage as writers: for both are at their best when portraying ordinary

people grappling with their environment, and in this process revealing unselfconsciously an abiding sense of humor, a philosophical acceptance of adversity, and the consolation of fellowship.

Nowhere is the writers' involvement with their fellow strugglers more sharply observed than in their use of dialogue, in their infallible knowledge of the working-class idiom, in their unerring ear for the nuances of the demotic speech. They have meticulously preserved its picturesque exaggerations and humorous tone. Their humor is rooted in character and dialogue, rather than in situation. "We don't want to keep the bookmakers waiting," says one of Hardy's racecourse characters, "they're all down to their last hundred thousand and need our money to feed their starving children;" whereas Steinbeck's sense of humor is perhaps the most efficient in his sharp remarks about women: "My wife is a wonderful woman. [...] Ought to of been a man. If she was a man, I wouldn't of married her" (*Cannery Row* 94). And although they are both best known for their proletarian narratives with progressive social thought, they did not remain limited only within the modes and methods of this literary tradition, but started to search for new kinds of discourse and turned to a complex modern structure.

Another line of comparison between the two writers could be drawn with respect to their conception of characters. Although Peter Lisca's opinion that Steinbeck's women were "overshadowed" by the more visible men has been succinctly argued, one can not overlook that in some of his works they indeed function merely as catalysts for male behavior and that the writer was often preoccupied mainly with their physical appearance (Lisca 206). Like Steinbeck's novels of the 1930s, Hardy's fiction is mainly peopled with male characters. This is hardly surprising, considering that their stories take place in typically male places or concern the world of men. But we may reasonably ask why Hardy's female protagonists (when he finds it necessary to write about women), contrary to Steinbeck's are limited to physical descriptions and never allowed "a life of their own" (*The Hard Way* 110).³

The discussion of the affinities with Steinbeck's characterization is perhaps most pertinent to Billy Borker's archetypal stories about typical representatives of the Australian "battler." Published in the mid-1960s, the two unusual collections (*The Yarns of Billy Borker* and *The Great Australian Lover and Other Stories*) reveal the side of Hardy who abandoned his commitment in favor of a literary form which allows him to relax from the restriction of social realism. The stories are narrated by an authentic Australian (Billy Borker), who can be found in any Australian pub, always ready to spin a yarn for a glass of beer. They are about gamblers, racecourse tipsters, urgers, bagmen, taxi-drivers, seamen, boozers, and others who live by their wits. Just like Steinbeck's *paisanos* in *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954) they are rather specific characters, the outsiders, not hampered by the contrived restraints of "civilization," but true to their own interior laws. On a socio-economic level, they do not share in the construction of the state nor do they contribute to a market economy. Hardy's treatment of their foibles with gentle humor is comparable to Steinbeck's warm approach to his primitives, whereas the asperity is

³ In *The Hard Way*, Hardy quotes the entire list of requirements Elizabeth Bowen highlights in her *Notes on Writing a Novel*, which presumably helped him "master the technical difficulties" he encountered at writing his *Power Without Glory*.

in both cases kept for “them” – the Establishment and the acquisitive world around them. The exaggerated, mock-epic, satiric style, which achieves its major effect by contrasting the simplicity and authenticity of the non-conformist vagabonds with the materialism and alienation of the modern, utilitarian society, is another important element linking the prose of Hardy to that of Steinbeck. So is the writer’s motif: this is not the glorification of primitivism, but a response to the perceived bankruptcy of moral values within modern, capitalist reality. Very often, as in “tall-tale” tradition, the reader of Hardy’s stories is brought into areas of fantasy, which is again reminiscent of Steinbeck’s stance. Although no evidence suggests that Hardy read the novels about *paisanos*, several other characteristics of Hardy’s writing allude to his esteem for Steinbeck. For example, the battlers’ unique and colorful names (such as Parrot, Not Guilty, Crooked Bed, What Do You Reckon, Don’t Tell a Soul, Slice Simpson, and others), and unusual, parodic, moralizing, or educational titles of his stories (“Democracy Has to Work Both Ways,” “A Friend of Today Is an Enemy of Tomorrow,” “One Man’s Damper Is Another Man’s Soup,” “Punishment Is Not the Way to Stop the Crime,” “Golf Is Not a Game, It’s a Disease,” etc.), to say the least. Much more can be said about the links between the two writers’ fiction, but let us turn instead to the similarities between their most well-known novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Power Without Glory*.

“If one has to name the ten most significant books about the Australian community, one would invariably nominate *Power Without Glory* among the foremost,” claims Rohan Rivett in his 1969 *Writing about Australia* (89). Written from the angle of the forces behind the scenes, *Power Without Glory* covers the period from the early 1890s to the late 1940s. While tracing the career of John West, a young man of great ambition, who ruthlessly rises from his poverty-stricken working-class origins to become a despotic capitalist, estranging friends and family in his brutal egotistic drive for wealth and political power, Hardy mercilessly exposes the widespread corruption and gangsterism within the Australian Labor Party from the early 1890s to the late 1940s. Following West into the boxing and wrestling worlds, and then into political scandals, Hardy uncovers the double-dealing role of social democrats, and pillories the hypocrisy with which the Roman Catholic Church attempted to conceal its political aims. Through the very expansion of West’s interest Hardy deals with the feelings aroused by World War I and the great battle over the Conscription Bill, the emergence of the Communist Party and its confrontation with the Catholic Church, the onset of the Depression, and the growing faith of the working class in reformism. Aspects of West’s personal life which occasionally interrupt the course of the novel and picture his split with his wife Nellie and difficulties with his growing daughters, Marjorie and Mary, are a preparation for the final disillusionment of the main character and the decline of his influence.

At first glance, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Power Without Glory* seem to offer an excellent test case for the differences rather than similarities between the two texts. For the former delineates the American dispossessed migrant labor’s desperate pilgrimage to the promised land in the 1930s, exposing the workers’ deplorable living conditions and the inhuman capitalist practices of agribusiness, while the latter depicts the urban Australian scene, unveiling, in Hardy’s own words, “the livid face of

corruption behind the so-called democratic State” (Morphett 17). One portrays the Oklahoma farming family, the Joads, in their struggle for survival; the other depicts a notoriously wealthy and powerful Melbourne entrepreneur, John West, in his insatiable lust for power. One has been assimilated into the canon of modern narrative, the other has only just begun to conquer its place in the literary history as “a work of striking originality, force and depth,” as Jack Lindsay notes in 1991 “Introduction” to *Power Without Glory* (xxi). Rather than from the political commitment that gives narrative drive to *Power Without Glory*, the strength of *The Grapes of Wrath* derives from the author’s humane sensitivity and his feeling of anger “at people who were doing injustices to other people” (*Working Days* xxxviii). Nonetheless, despite their apparent disparity, the two novels share a wide array of common traits. In addition to such easily recognizable parallels as the books’ imposing volume (one 619 and the other 671 pages), their tripartite division, the writers’ awareness of workers’ language, their sympathetic understanding of the psychology of the downtrodden and the deprived, as well as the fact that they both follow a straightforward chronological track, the two novels are similar in their evocative power and the turmoil they provoked.

As Jack Lindsay, among other Australian critics, has recognized, many novelists have caused scandals or uproars by exposing various aspects of life which strong vested interests want to keep hidden, but hardly any other novel has had such a violent and tempestuous career at its writing, printing and initial publication as Hardy’s *Power Without Glory*. The story of how the book was written and of the legal process which followed its publication is an epic in itself. This is hardly surprising, given that the main character is allegedly based on a notoriously wealthy and powerful political and business figure of that time, John Wren. It is the contention of this paper that in terms of the sensational uproar which erupted over Hardy’s novel, it has a parallel in the reception of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Both books were highly acclaimed by the left for their documentary integrity and social necessity, and at the same time fiercely attacked by right-wing politicians as immoral and deceptive. “One source of courage is to belong, to be committed, to have friends and supporters. Much is made in modern literature of the courage of the solitary man [...] overcoming his inner fear. But this is the courage of primitive, non-social man, or of the isolated man in individualist society. Social man can find courage within himself only if he unites with other men to recognize and overcome the tyranny of social necessity and compulsion,” Hardy writes in *The Hard Way* (81). Little wonder that letters of support streamed in to join forces with the local campaign. Howard Fast, who wrote from New York, may have had Steinbeck’s novel in mind when he wrote: “How familiar the whole story sounds in terms of our own scene! [...] How they fear books in these times! How eager they are to destroy the few voices that still speak up with courage and integrity!” (*The Hard Way* 160). It should be noted that Steinbeck writes in *The Grapes of Wrath* “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lif’ up his fellow, but woe to him that is alone when he falleth, for he hath not another to help him up. [...] if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? [...] An’ I been wonderin’ if all our folks got together an’ yelled, like them fellas yelled [...]” (570-1).

Among academic readers with a clear preference for aesthetic criteria in textual analysis, both books have been considered sentimental and unconvincing. Both have been repeatedly banned in schools and libraries, but widely read. "From the moment it was published, it has been less judged as a novel than as a sociological event, a celebrated political cause, or a factual case study," Robert DeMott asserts about Steinbeck's novel in his 1989 "Introduction" to the *Working Days* (xxiv). In *The Hard Way*, Frank Hardy observes "Politicians in the Victorian Parliament began to call their opponents by names in *Power Without Glory* instead of their real names, the Collingwood Football team was dubbed Carringbush by barrackers of the opposing teams. In public bars, cafés, trains and homes up and down the country, people began to speak of *the book* or *that book* according to the point of view" (141). "The story has become something of a legend," he comments further (144). Later in the book, he reveals that "Copies of the novel were smuggled into jails up and down the country and read illegally [...]. Libraries had waiting lists months long. Stories, bawdy and unprintable, like those that appear mysteriously about all famous occurrences began to spread. Glossaries were issued purporting to equate real names with the fictitious ones in the book [...]. The whole population seems to be talking about *Power Without Glory*" (172). The full force of the book's dramatic proportions is seen in this observation: "Of all possible consequences of writing *Power Without Glory* this was the strangest, to be the centre of an argument around what constitutes criminal libel" (182). One remembers, of course, that Steinbeck's book, too, passed out of the writer's possession: "*Grapes* got really out of hand, became a public hysteria and I became a public domain," Steinbeck complains in October 1939 (*Working Days* 105).

Interestingly, both writers conducted lengthy, in-depth research. As Hardy confessed in *The Hard Way*, after four years of gathering the background material, he could no longer master the numerous copies of documents, unsorted press cuttings, and plethora of notes from countless hours of talking to people connected to Wren and his family. With his wife, he worked day and night, fighting off sleep with coffee or wine and cigarettes, and transferring thousands of details on to six-by-four-inch cards to make his material readily available. There is no need to remind readers of this paper that Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in one hundred days, but nearly four years of research preceded them. It is also worth mentioning that both writers received invaluable assistance from their wives: among many other things, they typed the manuscripts.⁴

Similarities between the two writers do not cease to amaze. Both Steinbeck and Hardy provided a fascinating first-hand account of their own work drive, aspirations, fears, self-doubts, and obstacles at the conception and after the launch of the novel. "There was no risk he wouldn't take, no hardship he wouldn't endure. The job became a thing in itself," reveals Hardy's third person narrator in *The Hard Way* (45), while in October 1938 Steinbeck reflects as follows: "Funny where the energy comes from. Now to work, only now it isn't work anymore" (*Working Days* 91). Despite his increased immersion in the intricacies of the Australian labor scene and a strong determination to accomplish his project - "He was obsessed with *Power Without Glory*,

⁴ There was even the rumor that Hardy had married his wife because she owned the typewriter.

gave no thought to anything else, even to how it could be published” - Hardy was becoming more and more aware of his lack of training as a writer (*The Hard Way* 121). On more occasions he laments “No one will want to read the book [...] it is a queer mixture of biography, history and novel, and will appeal to no one” (*The Hard Way* 135). And when the book was eventually published, it was “the final proof that I was not a writer,” Hardy confesses to Bruce Molloy in his 1973 *Australian Literary Studies* interview (371). Steinbeck, too, was inflamed by his topics, and fully dedicated to writing. In September 1938, for example, he wrote in his journal: “This book is my life. When it is done, then will be the time for another life” (*Working Days* 77). At the same time, he struggled with continuing doubts about his writing talent. “For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time,” he reveals in mid-June 1938 (*Working Days* 30). And about two months later that year: “I’m not a writer. I’ve been fooling myself and other people.” [] “I hope this book is some good, but I have less and less hope of it” (*Working Days* 56, 63).

Perhaps it was because of the writers’ own doubts in their talent that many critics questioned the artistry of their texts and denied that they could be read from a geographical, historical, or cultural distance. Others quoted at length from both in order to suggest that they are unreliable historians. In the epigraph to his novel *Who Shot George Kirkland?* (1981), Hardy, for example, writes that “the truth resides in memory, and the memory is clouded with repression and the desire to embellish [...]”. To recall an event is to interpret,” he continues, “so the truth is altered by the very act of remembering.” This bears resemblance to Steinbeck’s confession in *Travels with Charley* that he “was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir” (11); or to the following observation: “I feel there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style” (70). Although they admitted their own fallibility, both writers created a genuine twentieth century epic of what was then recent history, a myth which encouraged a nation’s self-reflection and helped create a meaningful existence for deprived human beings. As such, each novel became an indispensable phase in the cultural and social formatting of the country; since both contain seeds for many new areas of investigation, they will continue to challenge and delight readers’ imaginations.

The contemporary Australian writer Thomas Keneally is fond of saying that we learn the part of our history which becomes mythic to us from our soaps. He may be right, but neither Steinbeck nor Hardy, although makers of myths which comforted the masses, was a provider of material.

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