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Title	Naturalism and Steinbeck's "curious compromise" in The Grapes of Wrath
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Publication date	2009
Original Citation	Gibbs, A. (2009) 'Naturalism and Steinbeck's "curious compromise" in The Grapes of Wrath', in Meyer, M. J. (ed) The Grapes of Wrath: A Re-Consideration. Amsterdam, Brill - Rodopi, pp. 687-704. doi: 10.1163/9789042026834_031
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	10.1163/9789042026834_031
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Download date	2026-10-30 12:27:04
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/10017

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Naturalism and Steinbeck's "Curious Compromise" in *The Grapes of Wrath*

In the seventy years since the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the extent of the influence of naturalism upon the work and the quality of Steinbeck's naturalistic discourse has been frequently debated. Only ten years after its publication, Woodburn O. Ross noted Steinbeck's "partial affiliation" with naturalism, concluding that he is, "up to a certain point, the complete naturalist" (433). Prior to this, as David Wyatt observes in the introduction to his collection on the novel, Edmund Wilson "set the terms of the initial critical debate…by casting Steinbeck as the crudest sort of naturalist" (5). More recently, critics have noted a considerable sophistication in Steinbeck's naturalistic-biological themes, in particular with regard to the ways in which naturalism is synthesized with numerous other discourses.

Given that this issue has been rehearsed at length throughout the novel's existence, the starting point for this essay is to assume that there are a number of naturalistic attributes detectable in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In what follows, naturalism is treated as just one of this novel's discursive formulations amongst many other literary, philosophical and sociological theoretical bases. This complex blending and clashing of discourses—to paraphrase Barthes' oft-quoted axiom—has previously been noted by a number of critics. Donald Pizer, for example, identifies "primitivist, Marxist, Christian, and scientific discourses in *The Grapes of Wrath*" (Bloom 86), while Ralph Willett and John White suggest that the novel embraces "nostalgia for the agrarian past, a documentary desire to record contemporary fact (soil erosion, foreclosures, industrialized farming, Hoovervilles), a populist faith in 'the people', and an indignation against man-made suffering" (229).

Besides these potential emphases, one might mention not only Steinbeck's heavy employment of symbolism and allegory, but also his modeling of the novel on certain specifically American literary traditions, with particular attention paid both to Whitman's espousal of mass democracy and to Emersonian concepts such as the over-soul and self-reliance. Even this complex mesh of discourses was noticed at an early stage, with Ross arguing that "the significance of Steinbeck's work may prove to lie in the curious compromise which it effects" (438). Yet critical opinion over the years has veered between extremes, perceiving *The Grapes of Wrath* at one end of the spectrum as an unholy mess engendered by the woolly thinking of a crude dilettante, or at the other as an evasively rich combination of discourses, something in the manner of a Bakhtinian dialogical novel. More recently, for example, Louis Owens and Hector Torres approve of the way in which, in this novel, "no single voice speaks with final authority" (77).

This essay therefore traces certain naturalistic tendencies of *The Grapes of Wrath* and places them alongside other discourses, focusing in particular on the separate strains of Emersonian and radical political thought. The purpose of this is twofold. Firstly, it is an attempt to foreground the complex results of Steinbeck's blending of seemingly incompatible discourses, while at the same time assessing the effects of this intersection of such varied dialogue—successful or otherwise—upon the novel. The intention here is to concentrate less on whether or not *The Grapes of Wrath* is a naturalistic novel than to reveal the provocative and unusual characteristics both of Steinbeck's particular brand of naturalism and to assess his employment of naturalistic tendencies in combination with other discourses. Secondly, the essay examines naturalism more generally as a theory and practice, considering it alongside the novel's transcendentalist discourse and, in

particular, questioning the compatibility of naturalism's ideological stance in the light of the radical political dimensions of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck himself believed that naturalism should be broadly defined, which helps to explain why Charles Child Walcutt finds his naturalism to be "neither mechanistic, nor clinical, nor descriptive; rather it is dramatic and exploratory" (259). Instead, Steinbeck's work seems to be in agreement with Pizer's argument that naturalism should not be condemned for introducing "elements of free will and moral responsibility into accounts of a supposedly necessitarian world" (*Theory* 14). For both Pizer and Steinbeck, a plastic, adaptable naturalism, able to combine with other discourses and modes, was preferable to an absolute determinism. More importantly, such a blend was capable of producing far greater complexity within a text. As a consequence of this plasticity, the extent to which Steinbeck uses naturalistic discourse in *The Grapes of Wrath* varies widely; at times it is prominent, at times suppressed, or at times applied in combination with other modes.

One characteristic of naturalism that Steinbeck clearly espouses is its emphasis on Darwinian scientific discourse. This biological strain in Steinbeck's writing, most prominent in certain sections of *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, seems partially a consequence of his long association with Ed Ricketts, a relationship that is well documented.[1] Steinbeck's evident fascination with the 'group organism' in *The Log* arguably re-emerges in the various phalanx episodes of the intercalary chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Satirically addressing the economically privileged, chapter 14 describes how the dispossessed gradually come together in the camps: "Here is the anlage of the

[1] See, for example, Richard Astro, *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1974).

thing you fear. This is the zygote. For here 'I lost my land' is changed; a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate—'We lost *our* land'" (152). The biological trope of the zygote is also repeated in chapter 17, wherein at the roadside camps "the twenty families became one family" (196). This new single organic family begins not only to abide by certain rules of behavior but also to apprehend dire truths about the economic situation in Depression America. This biological strain of discourse is also reiterated by Tom's appreciation of Casy's point-of-view late in the novel: "he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul" (418). Few would argue against these examples as demonstrations of Steinbeck's drawing on a biological discursive model, yet even here other strains can be detected affecting or diluting his naturalistic tendencies.

For instance, the first two quoted examples not only suggest a biological group-organism, but also imply that this organism possesses a palpably raised political consciousness. The novel's reception also supports this reading: despite Steinbeck's downplaying its political aims—at least on a doctrinaire level—it infamously provoked indignation from the right, and was subjected to a concerted campaign to undermine its authenticity.[2] In addition, the political strain of thought, taken by some to be advocating Communism, may be clearly perceived here as co-existent alongside Steinbeck's naturalism, and, similarly, Tom's meditation on Casy not only expresses the group organism idea emerging from Steinbeck's biological enthusiasms, but also echoes both

[2] The Associated Farmers, for example, conducted an ultimately unsuccessful smear campaign to discredit both the novel and its author. See Carey McWilliams' description of how Steinbeck was described at the Associated Farmers' 1939 convention as "the arch-enemy, defamer, and slanderer of migratory farm labor in California" ("California Pastoral", reprinted in the Viking Critical Library edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*, 469-89).

the Biblical story of Christ's period in the wilderness and Emerson's notion of the 'Over-Soul.' It appears that the author has amalgamated several different discourses rather than concentrating on one.

Nonetheless, critics have persisted in their insistence on understanding the intercalary chapters as one of the primary vehicles for Steinbeck's naturalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In fact, a number of critics have noted how these chapters anticipate the action in the Joad narrative chapters, thus granting an air of inevitability to that section of the text. Although this is scarcely unusual in deterministic works, Stephen Railton asserts that the intercalary chapters' pre-emption of the action results in a lack of suspense in this novel, arguing that the novel is "structured as a series of inevitabilities" (32), and that "Again and again what will happen next is made narratively inescapable" (32).

Similarly, John J. Conder broadly argues that the intercalary chapters are used to outline the deterministic forces, while the main chapters illustrate possible resistance to them. Conder goes on to assert that the intercalary chapters illustrate the naturalistic thread of Steinbeck's conception of humankind, as the mass, 'group being', while the other chapters focus on individuals, sometimes acting contrary to the way a reader might expect, given the seemingly inflexible forces governing their lives. Clearly, he feels that a strain of deterministic naturalism functions as one of the structuring principles of the novel. In addition, the ethical framework of the novel appears to derive from a worldview informed by naturalism, one that denies an empathetic and protective deity. Throughout the text, and especially at the close of the novel, there is little sense that the Joads or the other individual Okies will receive any meaningful justice, nor that a transcendental moral right will prevail.

For every foregrounding of naturalistic principles, however, there are also occasions when Steinbeck's employment of naturalism was perceived as a failure, or where it operates less successfully in combination with other strains of thought. Donald Pizer summarizes early critical consensus, which held that Steinbeck sweetened his

> animal view of human nature with an anomalous mixture of Christian symbolism and scientific philosophy, and…appeals principally on the level of sentimentality and folk humor. *The Grapes of Wrath*, in short, is naturalism suffering from the inevitable consequences of its soft thinking and its blatant catering to popular interests. (qtd. in Bloom 83)

Certainly, the novel's ending is a particular cause of controversy in this respect, with a number of critics asserting that Steinbeck here reneges on his earlier espoused naturalistic concerns. Howard Levant's discussion of the novel's ending was one opinion that helped to perpetuate the view of the novel as an example of flawed naturalism. Levant contends that for the last quarter of the book Steinbeck's allegorical concerns overtake the naturalistic experiment he began earlier in his text. "Scenes are developed almost solely as links in an allegorical pattern" (119), Levant argues, ultimately causing readers to witness "the hand of the author, forcing Rose of Sharon into an unprepared and purely formalistic role," an artifice that forces the novel "to close with an image of optimism and brotherhood, with an audacious upbeat that cries out in the wilderness" (119).

Levant is far from alone in voicing disapproval regarding the novel's ending, but some critics have seen it as actually congruent with Steinbeck's naturalistic principles. Railton, for example, notes Steinbeck's adamant refusal to change the ending, despite pressure from his editor, and perceives it as "a strange but powerful tribute to Steinbeck's

faith in selflessness as the one means by which men and women can transcend their circumstances in a world that is otherwise so harshly and unjustly determined" (44). Here, Rose of Sharon's act is reconceived as another powerful instance of a strategy of resistance to the overriding deterministic forces. Although perhaps still dubious as an element of naturalism, Rose of Sharon's final act is thus read as the beginning of the Okies' collective transcendence of the oppressive economic forces that confront them in California.

On the one hand, it is evident that the numerous discourses and ideas inevitably conflict—to varying degrees—with Steinbeck's naturalism, especially since naturalism, at least theoretically, represents such a thoroughly worked out and inviolable set of principles. On the other, perhaps a more valuable observation is that part of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s fascination lies in the fact that, as readers experience it, they observe Steinbeck trying to function as a naturalist alongside these other ideas. Yet it is this uneasy and complex combination of discursive registers that gives the novel its unique flavour. Critics of naturalism from Malcolm Cowley onwards have noted that naturalist writers almost to a man (and they usually were men) exhausted themselves artistically as naturalists, before embracing other forms—chiefly mysticism, symbolism or Communism—in their later careers. What is perhaps most interesting about *The Grapes of Wrath* is that readers can experience the unusual spectacle of a writer, in one text, *simultaneously* embracing these (and other) discursive and philosophical modes, alongside naturalism.

The implications of Steinbeck's combination of naturalism with other discourses—and its resultant "curious compromises" noted by Ross—requires a close

exploration of Steinbeck's various attempts to resolve and/or elide the divided and divisive discourses. Of particular concern is the question of whether Steinbeck's naturalist discourse is either strengthened or weakened by being employed in combination with apparently irreconcilable modes of thought such as transcendentalism and Marxism.

For some critics of American literature, there is no basic incompatibility between naturalism and transcendentalism. Indeed, the major thesis of Walcutt's *American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream* is that they are related to the extent that "naturalism is the offspring of transcendentalism" (vii). Walcutt contends that in the late nineteenth century, transcendentalism split into two streams, one of which produced more intuitive, spiritual, and idealistic texts, while the other, "the approach to Nature through science, plunges into the dark canyon of mechanistic determinism" (vii-viii), and becomes naturalism. Disappointingly, however, Walcutt's book offers little convincing evidence that transcendentalism was either a specific or exclusive progenitor to naturalism. Certainly, it makes no convincing case for transcendentalism being any greater an influence on American naturalism than Zola's European brand.

Indeed, there appear to be inescapable—and perhaps irresolvable—conflicts between a naturalist and a transcendentalist worldview. What, for example, would a deterministic naturalist make of the Emersonian's demand for the exercise of free will and self-reliance in order to develop one's emotional and intellectual life? Moreover, transcendentalism's twin stresses on individuality and on living authentically seem to be at odds with naturalism's convictions regarding the power of external forces over the individual in nature and society.

Yet both these tensions are, to a certain extent, played out in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom and his younger brother Al, for example, exhibit admirable self-reliance in their ability to maintain the dilapidated truck transporting the family to California. Tom, moreover, displays a keen sensitivity towards external circumstances that prompts him to act prudently when it comes to making decisions about the trip. He is one member of the party that advocates burying Granpa Joad, for instance, by significantly arguing, "Maybe we got to learn. We never got booted off no land before" (140). The example of Tom and Al may suggest that Steinbeck believes in a strongly developed quality of self-reliance as the best way for the Joads to deal with the vicissitudes that a deterministic world throws in their path. This may be just one instance of the benefits of reading Steinbeck's apparently clashing discourses as actually in dialogue rather than in opposition.

Ross raises some interesting points in terms of the particular tenor of Steinbeck's perspective on transcendentalism. He claims that Steinbeck's view of humankind's relationship with nature is significantly different from the conventional transcendentalist one, since "unlike Wordsworth," and, by implication, Emerson, "Steinbeck does not see through nature to a God beyond; he hears no intimations of immortality; for him there is no spirit which rolls through all things" (438). For Ross, Steinbeck's interest in nature is an end in itself—as suggested by his enthusiasm for biology—rather than a means to "a God beyond."

While this may be so, Steinbeck's references in this novel not only to a concept of "manself" but also to an unmistakeably Emersonian oversoul, appear inescapably transcendental rather than scientific or detached. Given Ross's designation of Steinbeck as "Naturalism's Priest" in the title of his essay, it is perhaps no wonder that he

downplays the transcendentalist tone of many of the ideas given voice in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In providing such a tendentious reading, however, and in attempting to ignore or diminish the role of transcendental discourse in the novel, he does Steinbeck a disservice.

If much of Steinbeck's writing in this novel is informed by Emersonian thought, the character which has received most attention in this respect is Casy, seen by many critics as the key transcendentalist figure. Even Ross admits that "Casy finds holiness in the unity of nature" (437), and, although he constructs Casy's position as an example only of vague "overtones of a religious character" (437), the passages he quotes to illustrate this vagueness—for example, Casy's feeling that he has joined with the hills during his time in the wilderness—actually sound thoroughly transcendental.

H. Kelly Crockett, by contrast, cites a similar episode—Casy's "There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue. There's just stuff people do," speech—but concludes that Casy's "principles [are] strikingly similar to those of Emerson a century earlier" (195). Walcutt echoes these sentiments, reading Casy as an Emersonian, who "utters thoroughly transcendental statements of the perfection and universality of spirit" (263). Conder goes even further, likening Casy's "revelation in the hills" not only to Emersonian thought, but also observing the similarities with both Thoreau and Whitman. The latter, in particular, may be relevant to some of the narrative strategies of this novel, with the abrupt shifts between a wide and a narrow focus in "Song of Myself," for example, perhaps providing Steinbeck with inspiration for the shifting chapter structure of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a repeating movement from general to specific and back again.

Casy indeed appears to be a highly Emersonian character, but he is also a figure who gives evidence that, in this regard, Steinbeck's combination of transcendental and

naturalistic thought is particularly skilful. *The Grapes of Wrath* may thus be characterized as a compromise, combining a sophisticated and provocative synthesis of the two modes. As an American artist, Steinbeck enjoys something of an advantage, since transcendental thought is so imbued in the American writerly consciousness that it becomes impossible to ignore for post-Emersonian writers. This is particularly the case for those concerned with humankind's relationship with the natural world which, after all, is another major preoccupation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this respect, it is a tribute to Steinbeck's skill that he possessed an ability to combine the two modes in such an effective way.

Perhaps more problematic, however, is his attempt to combine naturalism with a mode of political discourse. Steinbeck's non-teleological ('is') thinking is a crucial element of his naturalism that must be considered alongside his outrage regarding the obscene economics of Depression America. According to this mode of thought—again a product of Steinbeck's biological interests in collaboration with Ricketts—the focus of a naturalist writer must be on the observable facts of a society, the way things "are" rather than what could or "should be." This position, which eschews any notion of exploring or advocating change, in many ways restores the naturalist writer to Zola's conception, one who proceeds from the "true facts" of a society in order to construct their experiment in narrative.

There may be a particular incompatibility, however, between Steinbeck's non-teleological naturalism and his novel's clear political rationale. While Steinbeck was in no way a committed Marxist, *The Grapes of Wrath*, as both his correspondence and the novel's reception demonstrate, had considerable political goals and engendered even

more political effects.[3] Yet *The Grapes of Wrath* has none of the crude didacticism of the programmatic Marxist literature produced in the 1930s by Michael Gold et al; Steinbeck deliberately rejected this approach when he decided to discard a "first draft" of *Grapes, L'Affaire Lettuceberg*.[4] *Grapes* nevertheless possesses a keen political edge, and it is valid to question the extent to which Steinbeck's naturalism, in particular his non-teleological thinking, blunts that edge. One must especially ponder whether this mode of thought, focusing by definition on the "way things are," accepts the status quo and therefore fails as radical literature by not advocating "change."

Such a question implicates more than just Steinbeck's novel and can be broadened out to consider the possibility that naturalist writing is required to be apolitical. In particular, it is worth questioning whether naturalism's construction of the existing world as natural rather than ideological and/or cultural deadens apprehension of the political. Perhaps 'is' thinking is valid and fruitful so long as it is what *is* that is being correctly perceived and described. More serious problems arise, however, if this observed state of society is then justified and validated as a natural state of being. If that were to be the case, then naturalism would inevitably become an ideological apparatus of the hegemony, positioning capitalist culture and society as nature, whilst disavowing the constructedness of poverty and social inequality.

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[3] *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's posthumously published journals and correspondence from this period, illustrates his political convictions while writing the novel. In July 1938, for example, he wrote to *San Francisco News* columnist, John Barry, "I am actively opposed to any man or group who, through financial or political control of means of production and distribution, is able to control and dominate the lives of workers" (*Working Days*, New York: Viking Press, 1989, 151-52). Some of the political effects of Steinbeck's novel may be traced by consulting contemporary articles debating the accuracy of representation of both California and Oklahoma and the states' inhabitants. See, for example, the reprints of articles by Frank J. Taylor, Carey McWilliams, and Martin Shockley in the Viking Critical edition (457-501).

[4] Steinbeck finished *L'Affaire* in 1938, but on completion he believed the work was too overtly focused on the social and political rather than the philosophical, and he burned the manuscript.

There are arguably episodes in *The Grapes of Wrath* that sail close to this ideological function. For example, Chapter five details the banks' repossession of the farms and the employment of certain men in the community to use tractors to destroy farmhouses belonging to evicted tenant farmers. One tenant is persuaded not to shoot the tractor driver by the latter, and in their subsequent conversation progresses up the line of blame until he is left befuddled: "But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's starving me." The tractor driver replies, "I don't know. Maybe there's nobody to shoot. Maybe the thing isn't men at all" (41).

The ensuing conversation between Muley Graves, Tom and Casy in the following chapter concludes in similarly impotent fashion: "Got a fella crazy. There wasn't nobody you could lay for. Lot a the folks jus' got tired out lookin' for somepin to be mad at" (51). In these particular cases of 'is' thinking, blame is ultimately dissipated, lying not with the capitalist bankers or landowners, but meekly vanishing towards some transcendental signifier. Such mystification seems in direct contradiction with the more overtly political undertones that attach blame specifically to the banks or the California grower conglomerates elsewhere in the novel. This inability to focus blame can be read, moreover, as decisively diminishing any challenge to the status quo.

Yet the two discourses, while seemingly at odds may not be so oppositional as they initially appear. There are, on the contrary, other instances wherein non-teleological thinking in *The Grapes of Wrath* is arguably less damaging to Steinbeck's political critique. Sylvia Jenkins Cook, for example, claims that although Steinbeck indeed incorporates ideas associated with the concept of 'is' thinking advocated in the philosophical sections of *The Log*, the novel also "questions the social consequences and

dangers" of such a belief in the status quo (74). The journeys taken by Casy, Tom, and Ma Joad strikingly exemplify this process, as they are converted from a non-teleological perspective, and begin to ponder causes and, more tentatively, solutions. Of course, the very fact that Steinbeck moves his principal characters away from non-teleological thinking, from observation towards diagnosis, suggests a likely dissatisfaction with the apolitical characteristics of naturalist thought.

As an advocate of Roosevelt's New Deal—as evidenced in the almost utopian Weedpatch camp and Jim Rawley, its Roosevelt-like manager—Steinbeck's dominant instinct is to call for action and solutions rather than merely to observe. Again, this suggests significant tensions between Steinbeck's intellectual enthusiasm for naturalism and his more instinctive political convictions. Significantly, he is able to construct a balance that allows both tenets to exist simultaneously.

The tensions between deterministic non-teleological thinking and the possibility of political action and change are also illustrated by the notion of agency. Any appearance of individual agency in a naturalistic work may indicate that the author has abandoned notions of determinism, instead embracing a contradictory concept of free will. Similarly, if a strictly deterministic naturalism disables the individual's ability to exercise agency, then this sits uneasily with a politically committed novel calling upon its characters (and, by implication, its readers) to act. These precise tensions may be identified in *The Grapes of Wrath*, most obviously in the gradual political awakening of its central protagonist, Tom Joad. Following the precepts of the preacher, Casy, Tom gradually adopts something approaching a revolutionary spirit, an action that sits

awkwardly alongside the novel's preoccupation with the observation of ineluctable forces.

Several critics reacted to this apparent contradiction. For example, Stephen Railton locates the conflict between the naturalist and political discourse in this novel in precisely this area of individual agency. He argues that Steinbeck actively attempts to enact, through his prose, the revolution that he ostensibly merely observes or predicts, stating, "his assumption of change is part of his strategy for creating it" (29). In particular, Railton points to the general failure of joint action, such as the men's ineffective attempts and ultimate lack of success in diverting the flood waters from their railroad shelters at the end of the novel.[5] His suggestion that the only successful revolutions in the novel are within individual consciousness (predominantly Casy, Tom and Ma Joad) is intended to foreground Steinbeck's uneasy reconciliation of naturalism with political discourse. For Railton, the novel, as a result, "ultimately points to what its own representation excludes, to an inward 'act' of consciousness or spirit, as the only place the revolution can begin" (42). Whether it is an externally represented revolution, however, or a "revolution in consciousness," the possibility of any kind of individual or group change suggests the possibility of agency, of free will and resistance to deterministic forces. Revolutions in consciousness and acts of resistance (most notably those of Casy and Tom in their violent reprisals against the forces of reaction) would certainly appear to contravene naturalistic notions of determinism. As such, they reveal

[5] Conspicuously, Railton does not mention successful group action, such as the Weedpatch community's prevention of agitators' attempts to cause a riot at their dance, or the incident reported to have happened in Akron, Ohio, where a group of workers brandishing rifles marches through a town, thus dissuading the local citezens' committee from further victimizing them.

much about the political situation of the 1930s, against which naturalist writers attempted to further their craft.

In attempting to combine politically committed writing with realist or naturalist prose, Steinbeck has more than a little in common with other prominent writers of the 1930s, such as Michael Gold, James T. Farrell, and Daniel Fuchs. In fact, Pizer asserts a definite affiliation between naturalism and left-wing political writing in the 1930s. In asserting a demarcation between specific "waves" of naturalism in American literature, Pizer distinguishes between that of the 1890s, which was "largely apolitical," whereas "in the 1930s the movement was aligned with the left in American politics and often specifically with the Communist Party" (*Theory* 28). Clearly Pizer has in mind several of the writers mentioned above, and also, albeit to a lesser extent, Steinbeck. While this suggests a potential answer to the question of compatibility—precisely because political writers looked to naturalistic thought as a means of diagnosis—naturalism's diminished view of agency, and therefore of the free will necessary to foster a revolution, remains problematic.

Despite the advocacy of a deterministic social realism by radicals such as Gold, clear theoretical tensions remain between naturalism and social change. Maybe, then, the crude didacticism of, for example, *Jews without Money*, derives not entirely from Gold's deficiencies as a writer, but equally from the tensions inherent in his naturalistic mode of writing, his concern to demonstrate the necessity of political action arising to challenge the deterministic forces of social inequality. Seen from this perspective, perhaps Gold provides a more extreme example—of a naturalist writer with strong Communist principles—who actually illuminates a natural tension between politics and naturalism in

Steinbeck's work. And perhaps what provokes such massive flaws in Gold's work produces in a more gifted writer such as Steinbeck hugely interesting tensions, tensions that create and even foster the multi-voiced discourse of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Indeed, I believe Steinbeck possesses the vision to look beyond his own text—to its reader—in order partially to resolve this tension. While the characters in his naturalistically driven work remain largely confined by external forces, the reader, by contrast, is persuaded towards political action. What remains unresolved, if one conceives this as a hermetically sealed text, is easier to reconcile once one takes account of the role of the reader.

The precise characteristics of the deterministic forces in *The Grapes of Wrath* are worth considering here, in terms of this question of compatibility between naturalism and political discourse and the extent to which they focus on conventional naturalist issues of heredity and environment. What, in short, are the predominant forces against which the Okies and the Joads struggle? One might initially conceive the principal deterministic force as the harsh natural environment of the Oklahoma dustbowl. According to this reading, it is the sudden inability of the land to produce crops, and therefore a living, that forces the Joads and the other tenant farmers from their land. But it is pertinent to consider the degree to which this situation is also a man-made and economically motivated disaster, since economic rather than ecological systems prompted the kind of over-intensive farming that contributed towards the ruination of the Oklahoma land. Consequently, the struggle of the displaced Okies is a struggle against human forces at least as much as it is against natural ones. As a result, it may be misleading to read the text purely as a typically naturalistic struggle, as opposed to one motivated by economics and politics.

The more important question here is whether the crushing vicissitudes of the Joads' journey should be conceived of as part of a naturalistic or a political discourse, that is, assuming the two are mutually exclusive. If it is, indeed, predominantly a struggle against man-made forces of economic exploitation and politically repressive forces, rather than natural disaster, then it becomes more difficult to read this as a conventionally naturalistic text. Some critics have noted this tension, and—with various degrees of success—attempted to resolve it. C. Hugh Holman, for example, suggests that in *The Grapes of Wrath* we encounter "a socio-economic determinism, portraying man as the victim of environmental forces and the product of social and economic factors beyond his control or his full understanding" (quoted in Nakayama 120).

An extension of this argument is that the predominant deterministic forces of heredity and environment in earlier naturalist fiction—both of the European Zolaesque variety and that of Americans such as Dreiser—are transformed by time we reach the 1930s. Amongst other works, *The Grapes of Wrath* indicates that amidst the harsh realities of the Depression, political consciousness had been elevated to the extent that the oppressive and ideological forces of mass consumer-capitalist society are included within the scope of determinism in American naturalism. As noted above, Pizer suggests that this second wave of American naturalism was considerably more politically committed than that of the 1890s. The addition of economic pressures, ideological apparatuses and repressive structures to the conventional forces of determinism provides a clear signal of this change. This tentative—and at this stage provisional—synthesis of naturalism and Marxian thought offers a convincing reason for the adoption of naturalism as a vehicle by

radical American writers of the 1930s. It also provides a strikingly apposite description of many of the strategies and perspectives adopted by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

While the above suggests a potential for reconciling the politically radical and the naturalistic in *The Grapes of Wrath*, other complementary perspectives on this problem have been suggested. Railton, for example, finds some resolution of the political and the naturalistic in Steinbeck's formal devices. As explained previously, he argues that the intercalary chapters anticipate the novel's action and thus demolish any suspense. Rather than diminish the novel's effect, however, the intercalary chapters may be envisioned as enhancing its political dimension since, as Railton concedes, "The narrative enacts its own kind of oppression" (32). According to this reading, the intercalary chapters effectively close off any possibility of escape from deterministic forces. If the novel's dimension of political protest is thus made more potent, this is a significant claim, since the intercalary chapters are conventionally read as one of the most significant vehicles for Steinbeck's determinism in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Once again, the politically radical can be seen actually working in tandem with the novel's naturalism.

Perhaps more convincingly, Jackson J. Benson re-envisions the perspective of naturalism in order to suggest one possible way of not conceiving it as inherently conservative. He suggests that humans customarily bring old-fashioned mythic—that is, ideologically shaped—responses to new problems. For Benson, it is these responses (generally deriving from an outdated religious worldview) that doom the protagonists of naturalist fiction, as "the old values of a man-centred universe are revealed through experience to be false" (251). This perspective may be a powerful tool in resolving certain aspects of determinism and radical politics in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and in

the naturalist movement as a whole. Implicit in Benson's argument is the suggestion that since responses based on a religious worldview are otiose, more radical political solutions are required. Crucially, for Benson, the "non-teleological observer" is precisely the figure who sees through ideological mystification, unlike "the characters around him who are caught up in illusion" (257).

In other words, Steinbeck's non-teleological thinking is conceived here as a markedly radical rather than conservative response to societal ills. His non-teleological responses produce, amongst other things, a firm rejection of sentimentality. Not for Steinbeck the romantic nostalgia of other novelists (including naturalists); instead he celebrates dis-illusion (in a literal sense) through a new, accurate perception of reality. Both Tom and Casy undergo this transformation within the realm of the novel, and Steinbeck may have wished for the reader to experience a similar epiphany. Even the novel's ending may be reclaimed according to this reading. Rather than the disastrously misplaced optimism perceived by Levant, Benson notes a fulfilment of the novel's deterministic framework, an unswerving rejection of sentiment, and an "anti-poetry" in the image of "the starving old man at Rose of Sharon's breast" (258). Rejecting ideological reassurance, mysticism and "good taste," Steinbeck's ending offers muted hope in collective action. In doing so, it underlines one way in which non-teleological, deterministic thinking may in fact be used as a politically powerful diagnostic tool.

Regardless of the novel's huge political impact, Steinbeck's aim in writing *The Grapes of Wrath* was evidently both broader and deeper than producing a work of didactic Marxism. The above argument overwhelmingly suggests that a Manichean insistence that this novel either is or isn't an example of naturalism is pointless. Instead, a

more valuable position is that a key characteristic (either positive or negative) of *The Grapes of Wrath* is precisely its peculiar dialogical synthesis of discourses, transcendentalism and naturalism, for example, or naturalism and political critique. As the above suggests, these apparently clashing discourses are not entirely as incompatible as they may at first appear and as has previously been argued. Ultimately, Steinbeck is too sophisticated as an artist and insufficiently hard-nosed as a human being to be fully committed to a single mode or discourse as a writer. While writings such as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* indicate his wish to pursue a naturalistic-biological vein according to intellectual conviction, his moral and political instincts seem to preclude this, leaving *The Grapes of Wrath* only partially realized if one doggedly insists on reading it as a work of naturalism.

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