

Koji Kotani. "Rhetoric and Autobiography: Harriet A. Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl." Lecture. 40th Annual Kyushu Seminar in American Literature. May 8, 1994.

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.... "News in Brief." *Newsletter of the John Steinbeck Society of Japan* 17 May 1994: 26-28.

William C. Spengemann. *A Mirror for Americanists: Reflections on the Idea of American Literature*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989.

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I should say, in "Steinbeck Country." A stage show has been put on, for instance, "John Steinbeck A Quest for Genius," which reveals "eight different facets of Steinbeck's character." There are plans for a "heroic-sized" statue of Steinbeck outside the Plaza Hotel in Cannery Row, and hopes that a "personal collection of Steinbeck possessions" will be available for viewing soon. T-shirts and other Steinbeck souvenirs are abundantly available, and one can take a tour of the Red Pony Ranch or sail to the Sea of Cortez with two experts on Steinbeck. The director of the Steinbeck Center Foundation has announced a \$5 million fund-raising campaign, and she suggests that the longtime animosity between Salinas and Steinbeck will be forgotten since "there are very few individuals who don't see the economic benefits to the community."

It seems evident from these examples that my initial suggestion that a study of biographical and autobiographical literature should concentrate on the functional analysis of discourse constraints is inadequate. Formal analysis must take place beside research into the institutionalization of literature; autobiography and literary biography are intimately interlocked genres, both socially situated in interpretive communities which go far beyond our scholarly societies, and a broad-ranging semiotic study is called for. Like it or not, "Steinbeck" is now a construct that includes T-shirts and coffee cups, posters and guided tours, operas and children's books, memorabilia behind glass cases and multi-million dollar auditoriums. However well we may study the codes by which writers attempt the impossible task of writing themselves, we must survey the codes by which others project them as well.

Selected References

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ican" (Benson 1984, 884). The preempting of journalistic or novelistic or scientific detachment by nationalistic and increasingly moralistic prejudgment rings false in the work of an artist best-known for promulgating non-teleological thinking. The saving grace note in *Travels with Charley* may well be another well-known aspect of Steinbeck's work, his sense of humor and steadfast refusal to take his public poses seriously. On the face of it, a "search for America" is pointless when the journey begins in America, and in the conclusion of *Travels with Charley* Steinbeck the intrepid voyager gets himself lost when he returns to familiar New York City. As disappointing as it may be in some ways, *Travels with Charley* does convey from time to time a humor largely detached from the particular self, the Quixotic nature of the trip undercutting any pretensions to transcendent knowledge.

A number of other texts by John Steinbeck are relevant to a consideration of biographical and autobiographical aspects of literature, works like *Viva Zapata!* or *A Russian Journal* or his autobiographical sketch of Ed Ricketts, for instance. However, rather than considering such materials and trying to fit them to my thesis, I would like to conclude by tendering some contemporary examples of how the self of John Steinbeck is being capitalized upon. *Variety* magazine has reported recently that Thom Steinbeck, son of the famous man, is at work on a film adaptation of *The Pearl*. Though he is quoted as saying the film will be "based entirely on the novel," he also says he wants to do a "project that captures Steinbeck." He even suggests that "If the audience doesn't see Steinbeck, it fails." The use of the word "Steinbeck" here is very curious, to say the least, and the ambiguity of the pronoun "it" is interesting as well. Underlying these quotations, which are typical of many readers' beliefs I would imagine, is the assumption that the expression of and intuition of an author's inner being are the essence of literary art. So it seems we are faced with the paradox of an audience idolizing a figure whose dominant principles they diametrically oppose.

Judging only from this and other reports in the "News in Brief" section of the most recent *Newsletter of The John Steinbeck Society of Japan*, the glorification of the individual called "Steinbeck" can be seen to be progressing quite steadily these days, particularly in California, or

ing of a difficult novel which was presumably to be his greatest work was unselfish in the extreme, a sign of respect for his fellow dedicated craftsmen, and implicitly a rejection of mystificatory Romantic theories of divine inspiration.

The final particular work I will consider is perhaps the most famous example of Steinbeckian autobiography, *Travels with Charley*, and it may be the most difficult case to fit into my brief against personal revelation being a textual motive for this author. Undeniably, *Travels with Charley* is filled with personal revelations attributable to a public figure travelling only intermittently incognito; we find out about his dog's prostate troubles or the narrator's aversion to house trailers or a hundred other foibles, and there is a steady tone of confidence that readers will be intrigued by these tidbits and attentive to whatever prejudices and predilections are produced. As indeed they were: the book was a best seller from the beginning and even the book reviewers were charmed, at least at first (Benson 913).

Once again, however, Steinbeck's title may prove instructive; the book is not merely *Travels with Charley* but *Travels with Charley in Search of America*. The second half of the title, which we so often conveniently elide, indicates that the book had in principle been a voyage of discovery. It seems that Steinbeck in packing up his truck quite literally thought in these terms; Benson remarks that "He thought of his trip as something like a sea voyage—he had even packed the camper as he would a boat..." (Benson 884). But even if we accept that this journey was focused on learning something about American society through direct observation, the results prove disappointing. On the eve of space exploration, the computer age, a great civil rights movement, massive democratic protest against corrupt politicians and unjust wars, and, of course, the golden era of rock and roll, the narrator offers tales of America's moral disintegration. If there is an autobiographical self revealed in this work, it is not that of a man in tune with his times. Part of the problem may well be that any political and sociological analysis that one might anticipate from such a journey of exploration was transplanted into the work *America and Americans*. His wife had suggested that he not "go as J.S. novelist or journalist but as J.S. Amer-

sionals or conversion experiences or gossip tales for the would-be cognoscenti; they are not tales of tragic victimization miraculously overcome or phenomenal economic success gained without the loss of traditional values. *Sea of Cortez* is quite clearly a record of a voyage of discovery along the lines of Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*. It may contain numerous anecdotes about life on board or in the coastal villages of Mexico, but it seems indisputable that this autobiographical work is not primarily motivated toward revealing a unique self. Rather, it portrays the self as a rather unfortunate byproduct of one species, the human; natural selection, group dynamics, environmental economy, and other impersonal forces play much bigger roles in this narrative, and the individual, self-absorbed and therefore largely unaware, is little more than comic relief. Data collection, classification on sound taxonomic principles, insightful experiments, clear argument on verifiable and comparatively objective grounds, these are transpersonal ideals that are offered in this scientific textbook/autobiography. If for no other reason, *Sea of Cortez* is a fascinating variant of the genre of autobiography because it so forcefully rejects the pervasive American philosophy of individualism.

Journal of a Novel is in many ways a deeply personal book, one that projects a personality readers will certainly want to identify with a personage named "John Steinbeck." Surely this is an example of the revelation of self that I have claimed Steinbeck had nothing to do with. With unflagging consistency, I will maintain that in fact this work too is not autobiographical in the sense that it is primarily aimed at revealing an individual psyche. Rather, *Journal of a Novel* is, like *Sea of Cortez*, the record of a project rather than that of a man, and the title tells us so if we pay attention to it. Steinbeck was remarkably reticent with critics about what he wanted to accomplish in his fiction and how he did it, but when he addressed writers or appreciative readers he was quite open about his methods and principles. *Journal of a Novel* is addressed in the first case to perhaps Steinbeck's most attentive reader, his editor and friend Pat Covici, and in the second and broader case it is addressed to those who might learn something about the psychology of artistic creation and the techniques of crafting stories. To document the writ-

novelists with naturalistic and/or leftist inclinations, Steinbeck conscientiously placed a priority on accuracy in reflecting broad social and economic realities, not just the depiction of incidents he may have been privy to as an individual. Also, Steinbeck quite clearly valued a scientific view of man which led him to convey widely applicable biological and sociological and psychological themes in his stories and novels, no matter how eccentric the particular individuals who are portrayed, no matter how much they might resemble persons known by Steinbeck himself. It is quite surprising how Steinbeck's most famous "philosophical" notions, the phalanx theory or group-man theory and teleological thinking, seem quite compatible with expressive theories of artistic genius and casual acceptance of bourgeois individualism in many critical commentaries. John Steinbeck was a writer first, but an accomplished journalist and an aspiring scientist as well, and those roles of necessity shaped what might be viewed as biographical or autobiographical in his work. Once, after reading a biography of himself, Steinbeck remarked that "This book doesn't seem to be about me, but it's pretty interesting about somebody" (Benson 911); all too often perhaps we are content with what is "interesting" rather than what is relevant.

Thus far in my argument I have offered a rather free-wheeling presentation of what I hope is persuasive evidence and logic aimed at certain common methodological problems plaguing the study of biographical or autobiographical aspects of art in general and of Steinbeck's art in particular. But I suppose I can no longer ignore the fact that John Steinbeck wrote much quite explicitly autobiographical material, some of it planned for publication, so it will be necessary to consider what rationales can be given for autobiographical books like *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez," Journal of a Novel*, or *Travels with Charley*. I think it can be shown briefly that the world views of these works are generally quite different from the mainstream tradition of Western literary autobiography. The stated and the implicit aims of these autobiographical works are on the whole compatible with the scientific, journalistic, and sociological orientations found in our earlier examination of the fiction.

Steinbeck's ventures into autobiography do not present confes-

biographical relevance: Benson calls "St. Katy the Virgin" "the key" to Steinbeck's "secret heart" (354). It is puzzling what a great sense of satisfaction arises when we hear the announcement of the so-called "source" of a character or setting or plot. I have pointed out earlier that such transplants from the "real" world could never be moved wholehog into the fictional realm, and at any rate it is not our role as readers to be continually attempting the impossible task of verifying how closely personal details from half a century ago correspond to specifics of the text. Do we need to know if Steinbeck's own pony died because of his childish irresponsibility or if its eye was plucked from its head by vultures, as was the case with Jody's pony?

At this point, perhaps you may be asking, "Did vultures pluck an eye from Jill's head?" I don't know, but it is perhaps important to speculate a bit about why the concern with literary gossip retains its force, even among readers who understand the methodological reasons for ignoring such purportedly autobiographical matters. First of all, I believe there is widespread tendency to misappropriate the tenets of realism and in the name of "accuracy" offer applause to authors of works which palpably present details from "life." In the potentially embarrassing situation when an author we want to praise becomes unlikable in his depictions, we need only praise the "power of his imagination." Secondly, there is still a strong tendency to accept a form of hero-worship in which we assume that "great works" are the product of "great men" (and, rarely, "great women"). Interestingly, even the most trivial details of the lives of such "larger than life" figures are taken to be worthy of our concern. Thirdly, the romantic myth of the artist as a madman, or at least a wild man beyond the constraints of society, encourages us in constructing schoolrooms for scandal.

In examining the works of Steinbeck's prime, we can, however, find evidence for rejecting an overemphasis on minute autobiographical concerns, beyond Steinbeck's stated desire for privacy and his insistence upon artistic integrity. For one thing, Steinbeck was quite emphatically adopting a journalistic perspective and methodology in developing materials for many of the works of the 30s and 40s, most notably *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *East of Eden*. Like many American

picture to be taken, even by friends.... He would not cooperate with publishers by providing photographs or biographical sketches. Biographical reference books, reporters, and graduate students could get nothing or nothing of consequence from him.... And he never, except late in life and under very special circumstances, granted a full-scale or formal interview. (Benson 129)

As described here, Steinbeck is in a battle for “integrity”—or we might simply say “privacy”—with hordes of media hounds hungry for biographical “background,” the more scandalous the better. In the same section of *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* Benson also regales readers with incidents such as Steinbeck dangling a woman by the ankles from an upper-story window because she rejected his sexual advances, pulling a pistol on a dance floor in hopes of shooting a man whose cigarette had set Steinbeck’s jacket on fire, attacking a man dressed in a gorilla costume, and manufacturing his own condoms from fish skins. These incidents occurred separately, of course, but taken together and in concert with other such anecdotes create an organic unity of their own which goes a long way toward explaining the relationship between literary biography and literary analysis. Suffice it to say that there have probably been others who behaved equally “outrageously” (Benson 129) but who did not become accomplished writers of fiction.

During the twenty-year period from 1932 to 1952 Steinbeck published what most readers consider his best works of fiction, the majority of them placed in California and filled with what are usually called “autobiographical elements.” We can, by searching the literature on Steinbeck’s middle period, discover what actual town was the basis for the Pastures of Heaven, how many characters were based on Steinbeck’s mother or his friend Ed Ricketts or his first wife Carol, what barroom incident was the impetus for Johnny Bear, that the red pony John rode as a child was named Jill, and a host of other “facts.” There are exceptions, naturally, works like “St. Katy the Virgin,” which is a mock-hagiographic account of the salacious life of a medieval pig, but even in such an extreme case there seems to be a powerful insistence on auto-

shifts its setting to a locale much closer to home, the “familiar territory near the Salinas Valley” in Benson’s words (140). In addition, the patriarchal hero Joe Wayne was “modeled in part after Steinbeck’s own father” and his second wife Beth was modeled “in part after Steinbeck’s mother” (140). Benson and numerous other commentators claim that the change of focus to the California world he knew personally was what enabled Steinbeck to achieve a lasting art.

His characters, rather than being imaginative extensions of figures from history and myth, would be patterned after relatives, friends, and the people he had observed when growing up. His subjects would be farm families, farm workers, drifters, subcultures within farm communities or small towns; loneliness, alienation, oppression, and man in harmony with or in conflict with other men and nature. (Benson 140)

Yet it hardly seems disputable that thematically *To a God Unknown* stresses transpersonal existence, mythic thought and gender roles beyond consideration of the particular individuals who might be involved. Benson’s phrase “modeled in part,” like the latterday counterpart “composite figure,” gives I believe a deceptively satisfying sense of knowing the origin of these literary creations. Unless we know which parts go into the composite we are not working with an adequate knowledge base; and even if we happened to learn with a degree of certainty some “significant” parallel, say, that Steinbeck’s father had a psychosexual obsession with trees like Joseph Wayne’s, it would seem clear in principle that the origin of an artist’s inspiration is not relevant to the aesthetic value of the executed work.

Steinbeck’s own view of the artist/artwork relationship is summarized by Benson:

...if a writer is an artist, he stays in the background and lets his work speak for itself. From this point on [ca. 1928] throughout the remainder of his life, he struggled to preserve his integrity according to this vision of his proper role. He seldom allowed his

between that (fictional) world and the real world" can be left in abeyance (81). Dennett hardly has the last word on these complex problems, but it may well be that an interdisciplinary approach will offer some new insights to the semantics of fiction, and to the semantics of biography in particular.

Suffice it to say that there is an extremely strong need for even sophisticated readers to posit a particularized intention behind works of literary discourse; merely implied authors will not do, it seems, so we gain sufficient satisfaction only when we insist that the emotions raised before us in this text are replications of those felt by a longgone apprentice writer. *Cup of Gold* includes in its pages numerous thematic considerations of such topics as the inseparability of fact and fiction, the delusive influences of texts in our lives, and the impossibility of a narrative adequately conveying the dynamic complexity of a person's existence.

At one point Henry Morgan says, "Nothing is as good or as bad as the telling of it," and he shows himself in this work to be an extremely awkward teller of tales. As I have said elsewhere,

...the book purports to be a life, not the authoritative one, and in fact within the work itself a reiterated implicit theme suggests that only versions of a person's time on earth are possible, that so-called definitive accounts are illusory, not to say ideological, especially when it comes to a figure who was both knight and outlaw, romantic dreamer and self-serving manipulator. Henry Morgan, as far as one can know him, led a storybook existence, so why shouldn't the text develop as a work in which life and literature become indistinguishable? (Pugh 37)

Given such thematic concerns, as well as the evidence from Steinbeck's letters and work discussed by Benson, one might be justified in claiming that *Cup of Gold*, in addition to being a fictionalized biography with autobiographical elements, may be read as an antibiography with antiautobiographical elements.

Steinbeck's second long apprentice work, *To a God Unknown*,

cal methodology. But no matter how tasty the omelets Benson and other biographers have dished up, wholesale attributions of emotions and attitudes to an author and the implicit claim for their relevance to literary texts can be toxic.

Linguists tell us that even the most elementary utterances of everyday discourse can only be interpreted in light of the listener's consideration of the speaker's purpose in speaking. Recently cognitive scientists, artificial intelligence researchers, and philosophers also have been actively pursuing this line of inquiry, and often they come up with insights and observations applicable to the interpretation of literary discourse. One particularly provocative and interesting thinker is Daniel Dennett, who in his recent work *Consciousness Explained*, considers the breach between a text and the creator of that text. In this typically exorbitant passage he considers some of the possible routes of production of a spoken text:

It is always possible that the speaker also had no idea what the words mean. The subject, after all, just might be a zombie, or a parrot dressed up in a people suit, or a computer driving a speech synthesizer program. Or, less extravagantly, the subject may have been confused, or in the grip of some ill-understood theory, or trying to play a trick ... by spouting a lot of nonsense. (76)

But then Dennett quite sensibly points out that we must interpret texts as the products of rational agents with purposes we must reconstruct from ambiguous evidence. In his words, "we must treat the noise-emitter as agent, indeed a rational agent, who harbors beliefs and desires and other mental states that exhibit intentionality or 'aboutness'" (76), a painfully obvious claim it might seem, but Dennet goes on to say that in dealing with fictions we end up "canceling or postponing difficult questions about sincerity, truth, and reference" (79). "We don't ask how Conan Doyle came to know the color of Holmes's easy chair, and we don't raise the possibility that he might have got it wrong" (81). Rather, "The reader of a novel lets the text constitute a (fictional) world," and "knotty problems about what the relation might be

feelings—during these years he nearly always had at least one friend nearby—would seem irrelevant. He had them nevertheless. He felt very, very alone.
(Benson 115)

Some thought-provoking issues are raised by these observations. First of all, it might be pointed out that Morgan's overblown dreams, efficient violence, and consistent selfishness are presented as the source of his worldly success, and such cynical ambition and manipulateness are hardly attractive motifs in an autobiographical text, unless perhaps it is confessional in nature. Furthermore, Benson's insistence that the young Steinbeck, like his pirate hero, was "very, very alone" is curious to say the least, given the concomitant claim that there seemed to be "no real reason for his feelings."

Compounding the conundrum is the following passage which occurs a few pages later:

Steinbeck was prone to exaggeration and liked to make up fictions about himself. He sought to give his life drama. At Stanford and during the years that followed, he enjoyed playing various roles that would attract attention. As it sometimes the case with writers, he occasionally got the fictions he read, the fictions he wrote, and the fictions he "lived " mixed up. Later in life, he said on several occasions that in looking back he could no longer distinguish those things he had made up about time himself from those things that had actually happened. And he wished any future biographer luck in trying to unscramble one from the other. (Benson 118)

Benson is generally a conscientious biographer and an insightful critic, and remarkably forthright about the perils of biographical research in his book of personal essays, *Looking for Steinbeck's Ghost*. Other biographers and commentators have not been as "lucky" as he in unscrambling fact and fiction, and Jay Parini's fat recent study certainly has not advanced the state of our knowledge nor the precision of criti-

is "A life" of the well-known pirate Henry Morgan, though, as the subtitle also indicates, there are only "occasional" considerations of history in the work. However, a close reading of the work reveals numerous competing genre conventions which are operative: saga, adventure story, juvenile fantasy, potboiler novel, historical romance, these are all candidates for a classifying phrase with which to label *Cup of Gold*. It seems clear that the young Steinbeck had consulted various compendiums of pirate lore such as Esquemeling's and had been influenced by certain popular presentations of dashing buccaneer heroes, such as *Captain Blood* (Benson 1984, 114). Fusing his sources and his genre conventions rather clumsily, Steinbeck produced a work which could hardly have been a success, but it is of relevance perhaps to our object of inquiry if we consider it an example of fictionalized biography.

Most readers would, I imagine, hardly be tempted to call *Cup of Gold* an autobiographical work. After all, Steinbeck was not Welsh, did not live in the 17th century, never ran amuck as a pirate, or conquered cities at the head of great armies, never murdered dwarves or visited Merlin the Magician. He did, I suppose, later in life sail off on an expedition to Central America and end his life tormented by wealth and fame, but these and other parallels, since they occurred after the "fact," could hardly induce us to call the work autobiographical.

Even so, the foremost biographer of Steinbeck, Jackson J. Benson, makes as strong a case as anyone could wish for autobiographical elements. Citing Steinbeck's own claim that the work was "autobiographical," Benson comments that there are some "remote and generalized" connections.

Possibly the novel tells the story of Steinbeck's own growing up, moving from the grandiose dreams of youth to the disillusionment of experience. Perhaps in Morgan's self-centeredness and violence there is a rough parallel to Steinbeck's own excesses and rebellions. But it is Morgan's condition, which throughout the novel becomes more and more solitary, that would seem to best match Steinbeck's view of himself in his mid-twenties. That there appears, from the outside, to have been no real reason for his

call the “facts” of authors’ lives, conveniently forgetting that those incidents also have been selected, transformed, aestheticized by the authors of the biographies or autobiographies. We read numerous and often massive studies in that subsubgenre called “literary biography” which probe the psyches of writers and expose their most trivial and scandalous behavior; we collect amusing and shocking examples of that subsubsubgenre, the “literary anecdote,” so that we can prod student audiences into a more sublime appreciation of literary art, assuming that the mapping of elements from a text to a life is both possible and profitable.

But will such commonplace uses of the lives of American writers actually generate more effective literary study? I think not, and perhaps further supporting evidence can be found in currently appearing critical studies. For the time being, let me just note that countless theorists in the 20th century have shown the inadequacies of the naive view that the life of an individual can be unambiguously linked to conscious intentions, which in turn can be a sufficient determinant of the features generated by a literary text. From T.S. Eliot’s observations on the impersonality of the individual talent to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s elucidation of the intentional fallacy, from Foucault’s dismantling of authorial authority to the deconstructionists’ presiding over the death of the author, literary analysts have undermined our monuments to great authors by showing them to have been built on the receding shoreline of textuality.

The generic designation “autobiography,” whether or not it is a subgenre of biography, is equally liable to structural constraints, and the functional analysis of those constraints should be our primary focus. Such a technical project is beyond reach for now, however. Instead, within my own constraints of time and space and ability I will attempt in this exploratory essay to offer some easy answers to the following complex question: what do Steinbeck and the Steinbeck industry reveal about the relationships between biography, autobiography, and other texts?

It so happened that Steinbeck’s first published book was a biography. Sort of. As the subtitle of *Cup of Gold* (1929) indicates, the work

John Steinbeck: Antibiography, Autobiography, and the Stuff Legends Are Made Of

Scott Pugh

There is, I believe, a still-living academic tradition among us of beginning one's remarks by apologizing for appalling ignorance and an inexcusable lack of preparation. In my own case the apology is sincere enough, though my present topic, as part of an investigation of autobiographical elements of US literature,¹ seems to me, however, to be one peculiarly likely to foreground the scholarly and theoretical shortcomings of us all.

On the one hand, as provocateurs such as William Spengemann in his collection of essays *A Mirror for Americanists* have pointed out, the earliest periods of New World colonization produced a massive textual accumulation in numerous languages, much of it autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts such as diaries, letters, captivity narratives, sermons, conversions, and antislavery tracts. Out of necessity or preoccupation with finer arts perhaps, most of us shy away from the archives and libraries holding these treasures which might elucidate and substantiate our conception of autobiographical texts. Reprint editions are steadily appearing, however, and the process of recanonization is moving ahead fast enough to be easily visible. Along these lines, it is encouraging to notice that Professor Koji Kotani, among other scholars, has dealt with Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a work and indeed a type of work that in some circles might simply be relegated to exile among the merely historical.

In contrast to the widespread tendency of downplaying the significance of such so-called "minor literature," there is an equally ubiquitous move of asserting that all literature is autobiographical and taking this as justification for speculating on the mental states of authors at the time of creation. Many of us are familiar too with what we blithely