

WHERE IS 'EAST OF EDEN'?

The Politics of Steinbeck's Literary Reputation in Slovenia

Danica Čerče

University of Ljubljana

Danica.Cerce@ff.uni-lj.si

Abstract

Katherine Arens maintains that literary texts or authors can function as prototypes for their speech genres within literary history and in a cultural community. Until very recently, in Slovenia, John Steinbeck has been regarded primarily as an objective social chronicler of the Great Depression. This popular critical view, earned with his "labor trilogy," *The Grapes of Wrath*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Of Mice and Men*, is needlessly limiting, given that Steinbeck's literary achievements extend well beyond the modes and methods of traditional realism or documentary representation. Written against the background of the critical discourse regarding the political implications of literary works and the ways in which readers are involved in creating the texts they read, this essay analyzes the indicators of and the plausible reasons for the unprecedented popularity of Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*. It shows that in past decades, when Slovenia was in the grip of communist rule, even this book, concerned with moral dilemmas and personal traumas, rather than dealing with the workers' struggle for social change, could not escape a political reading and served to promote an ideology it does not formally articulate.

Keywords

Communism, literary criticism, politicization of literature, popular appeal, social realism, Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*

About the Author

Danica Čerče is an Associate Professor of Literatures in English, teaching at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana. In addition to the 20th century American literature, with the focus on John Steinbeck, her research interests include contemporary Black and Native American playwriting, Indigenous Australian poetry, and translation studies. Čerče is the author of three monograph publications and several book chapters in edited collections and conference proceedings, including *A Companion to Aboriginal Literature* (2013), *Transculturation and Aesthetics: Ambivalence, Power, and Literature* (2014), *Symphony and Song: The Intersection of*

Words and Music (2016), *Critical Insights: Of Mice and Men* (2017), *Comparative Literature as a Critical Approach* (2017). She has contributed articles to several Slovene and foreign academic journals and serves on the editorial board of *Coolabah*, and *Steinbeck Review*. She is also the Vice President of the International Society of Steinbeck Scholars.

In 1962, when American writer John Steinbeck (1902–1964) received the Nobel Prize for Literature, his critical acclaim in the United States had long been on a steady decline. Since then, his reputation has been boosted by a number of studies mapping the life and work of the author. However, given the US-oriented nature of most Steinbeck scholarship, the reading of Steinbeck's works beyond the US borders was largely unexplored, as Petr Kopecký observes in his review of my 2011 monograph, *Reading Steinbeck in Eastern Europe* ("Review" 341). In his view, this book, in addition to several other studies I had published since Steinbeck's Centennial Conference in 2002, "broke the critical silence surrounding the author in the ex-communist countries" (Kopecký, "Review" 341). Similarly, in his "Introduction" to my recently published *John Steinbeck in East European Translation: A Bibliographical and Descriptive Overview* (2017), Luchen Li writes that the book "closes a gap which was historically created because of political impasses and because there had been too little interaction between the intellectual communities of Eastern Europe and the West in Steinbeck scholarship" (1).

Given my comprehensive and years-long engagement with the critical history of Steinbeck's works in Eastern Europe, it would be inconceivable to deny that the current article at least to some extent relies on work conducted for some of my previous publications. I am also aware that my own stance in this article is affected by my "identity politics," that is, in David Richter's words, "the body I inhabit, the race and class from which I come, and the personal history of my own involvement with literature" ("Preface" xi). However, unlike my previous studies, this one presents the topic of Steinbeck's reputation from the perspective of a single novel and with a great deal of new material referring to several theoretical questions that are currently under debate in the humanities, and on some of which no consensus has been formed yet. These include the relation of aesthetics to ideology, the discussions about the literary canon and the role of literature, as well as the questions of interpretation, such as the reader's involvement in creating a literary text and the politics of reading.

Due to the politicking connected with the publication of works by American authors in the world east of the Iron Curtain, as Winston Churchill dubbed the line of demarcation between Western Europe and the Soviet zone of influence in 1946, Steinbeck appealed to many readers there (Kopecký, "The Literary" 204). Such was Steinbeck's popularity in Eastern Europe¹ that it arguably surpassed that in his native California. With his international reputation as a writer who denounced economic injustice and engaged in the struggle for the workers' cause, earned on the basis of his Depression-era novels and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), in particular, Steinbeck met the criteria of political correctness and inadvertently served the communist regimes as a political propagandist against the social order of capitalism. This study, focused on the popularity of Steinbeck's novel *East of*

Eden (1952) in Slovenia and grounded in the belief that the “development and the promotion of the arts, humanities and culture through the study of literature and the aesthetic are the fundamental constituents of any progress in society” (Gonzales and Agostini xi), will address the issues of how ideological forces fueled literary discourses and affected the critical reception of literary works.

Contemporary critics tend to agree that, just as it is impossible to concur with Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the aesthetic is the only justification for the world, so it is wrong to believe, with philosophers such as Constantin Noica and Lucian Blaga among others, that “all things are political” and that, on the basis of this, theory replace literary assessments with political or cultural imperatives (Guran 96). In contrast, in communist Eastern Europe, a work of art was worth “at least as much as any major political act” (Guran 100). For this reason, the few critical voices defending the relevance of aesthetics in interpreting literature were outnumbered by those who embraced the need for politically and ideologically committed reading. It has to be remembered that, in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the period after World War II was characterized by the all-permeating ideologies of Marxism and Leninism. Its dominant role was also seen in the production and critical reception of literature.

Indeed, in their struggle for working-class uniformity, these countries constituted an eager market for class-conscious works. In line with the views of Hungarian literary theorist György Lukács that “it is the intellectual and moral work” of the writer to reflect the lives of people in ways that might lead to a greater awareness of how historical relations produce a social environment of a given time and place, East European literary critics and book reviewers expected writers to penetrate social “essence” and depict the inner motivating forces of society (*Essays* 178). That Marxism-Leninism and the political regimes which were enacted in its name considered “literature seriously” (Steiner 323) and regarded it as the actual moving force of social change (Lukács, *History* 164) is discernible in their fierce critique of literary works devoid of the historical substance of class struggle, scientific inquiry, and philosophical debate.

The history of the discipline has shown that literature and literary discourses can either reinforce the structures of domination and suppression or “disrupt the exercise of power” (Levine 384). The communist part of divided post-war Europe is a good example. Rather than taking into account various potentialities of literary texts, criticism became a radical ideological revision of the canon, and, consequently, many important classical works disappeared from academic curricula (Bloom) because of their potentially dangerous implications for the oppressive political regime. The tendency to assign a special role to discourses that empowered the idealistic prejudices of popular Marxism and Leninism led

critics to pursue the social aspects and progressive elements in literary works. Of course, read simplistically and tendentially, almost any text can serve political interests, but such reading could hardly offer valuable insights into literary texts (Guran 97). For example, it is a gross simplification to read Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1935)—a novel about the amusing adventures of a group of misfits living on the margins of society—as a “hymn to chivalric ideals such as friendship, loyalty and simplicity” as opposed to the distorted values of the materialistic bourgeoisie (Mevlja 17). Nor is it correct to evaluate *East of Eden* (1952)—a work with thematic and philosophical bearings that testify to the writer's departure from the engaged novel toward a self-revealing modern art—in the light of communist ideals, as Juš Turk does (“Steinbeck”). Similarly, *In Dubious Battle* (1936) can hardly be seen as a “social solution capable of subverting capitalism” (Šuklje, “John Steinbeck's *Negotova*” 173), considering that it deconstructs several myths connected to the norms of proletarian literature.

These examples, all representative of Slovene critical thought, indicate that in communist Slovenia, hardly any critical discourse was free of ideological engagement; even the discourses accompanying Steinbeck's writing after 1941, showing a conspicuous change in his fictional method, were not an exception. Like in other countries of the Eastern bloc, where the aesthetic qualities of literary works were subordinate to their political ramifications and artists were in the first place “meant to serve the communist state as political propagandists” (Kopecký, “The Literary” 207), Slovene critics assessed Steinbeck's writing primarily through an ideological lens and valued it for its social input. This is by no means to say that criticism can be or should be entirely free of political and moral bases, for “evading the politics of literature is only another political way of reading it” (Richter, “How” 247). Rather, drawing on George Levine, there should be the movement toward a “climate of opinion that will not identify deference to the text and admiration of it with political complicity,” as was the case in the communist part of divided post-war Europe (379).

Yugoslavia, and Slovenia as one of its republics, experienced harsh economic conditions following the economic blockade imposed by the Cominform countries.² Having abandoned the Soviet model of collectivism and planned economy and developing its own model of Socialism, Yugoslavia felt threatened not only by the Soviet Union and its allies but also by Western capitalist countries with strong post-war economic growth (Divjak 22). The United States, in particular, in its ascent to economic and military superpower and promoting the American style of capitalism, individualism, and free-market economy, represented a menace to the Yugoslav model (Divjak 22). In such a situation, it is no wonder that Steinbeck's work came to serve as an important source of information about American society.

Steinbeck was introduced to the Slovene reading public in 1943 with the translation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). "Spring[ing] from the depth and richness" of the writer's "experience of reality" (Lukács, *The Meaning* 134) in exposing Californian's tyrannical social conditions, the novel was praised by the American left for what Lukács defines as a realistic "portray[al] of the contradictions, struggles and conflicts of social life" as well as the "connections between these collisions" as opposed to "illustration" (Lukács, *Essays* 143). On the other hand, the novel was forcefully attacked by Californian agribusinesses and right-wing politicians as communist-inspired and deceptive. On the basis of this novel, generally regarded as one of the strongest fictional indictments of the unconscionable dynamics of the corporate farming in the United States (DeMott 193), Steinbeck was received as a politically progressive writer, whose works provided an invaluable insight into the multifaceted variety of the real America. The actual achievements in his works were often neglected or adapted to serve political purposes.

Given that Steinbeck's critique in *The Grapes of Wrath* targeted the American socio-political scene, which Slovene publishers and critics perceived as an attack on the corruption and evils of capitalism, his writing appealed to the literary tastes of Slovene critics and served the utopian Yugoslav model of social improvement.³ What is intriguing, considering the Marxists' "contempt for moral 'imperatives'" (Lukács, *Goethe* 57), is that no other work by Steinbeck has attracted as much public attention as *East of Eden*, a novel in which Steinbeck reflects on moral dilemmas and depicts the struggle of the self, rather than the struggle of the working class. Asked to name a book by Steinbeck, most Slovene readers would almost invariably think of this title, although the list of Slovene publications of Steinbeck's works includes fourteen other titles: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Pearl*, *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row*, *The Red Pony*, *Sweet Thursday*, *Travels with Charley*, *Winter of Our Discontent*, *To a God Unknown*, *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Moon Is Down* and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*. This is even more curious given that, until very recently, most critics worldwide have had a rather unappreciative, or at best had lukewarm attitude to this particular novel. With seven separate publications, compared with two for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1943, 1983) and *Of Mice and Men* (1952, 2007), and a single publication of *In Dubious Battle* (1952), taking into account only Steinbeck's major writings from the Great Depression, which have traditionally been the basis of the writer's international reputation, *East of Eden* has also sparked the greatest interest among Slovene publishers.

Interestingly, in all other Yugoslav republics, with which Slovenia was closely connected before obtaining independence in 1991, there have been altogether only eight publications of this novel to date, including the most recent Croatian and Serbian publications in 2010 and 2015, respectively. Even if there were no other indicators, the frequency of the book's publication is by itself suggestive of Slovenes'

esteem for this book. So is the fact that the latest Slovene edition of *East of Eden* (in 2004), known to Slovene readers under Juš Turk's title *Vzhodno od raja*, was published in the collection of world masterpieces with the indicative title *Vrhunci stoletja*, meaning "the best of the century." The aim of this discussion is to provide further evidence to support my premise that *East of Eden* has had a very strong standing among Slovenes. The reputation to which I refer is not exclusively a result of Steinbeck's privileged status among the state-controlled critics, since the same social and ideological forces at work in Slovenia also fueled literary discourses in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Rather, its strong standing in Slovene letters seems to be largely due to the novel's popular appeal.

Before presenting the indicators of the novel's popularity with Slovene readers and offering some possible reasons for its special status, it seems relevant to briefly illuminate the novel's critical fortunes in the United States. Since its first publication in 1952, *East of Eden* has been a critically controversial book. Steinbeck himself feared that critics might not like the novel on account of the fact that the story, grounded in the framework of the Biblical myth, was either too long, too obvious, or would not be understood properly, as he observes in the journal he recorded while writing the novel (Steinbeck, *A Journal* 166). His fears proved prophetic: the novel has received plenty of negative criticism not only for the "lack of action" and "too obvious plot," but also with regard to its structure, writing style, and characterization (Bayley 145). However, despite lukewarm if not altogether unappreciative critical response, the book sold well (Benson 732). According to Robert DeMott, its popular appeal suggests that critical evaluations of *East of Eden* were not always "responsible and responsive," and that the definitive word on many topics on this work has yet to be written (215).

Contemporary critics generally attribute the novel's popular appeal to its allegorical connections with "one of the oldest stories of humankind"—the story of the relationship between good and evil, depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures as a struggle between Cain and Abel, something Steinbeck himself pointed out as a possible reason for its popularity (*A Journal* 132). The proposed mythic framework can be adapted to various contexts. Yuji Kami, for example, reads the novel as a manifestation of free will, which makes a person responsible for his or her course of life. Barbara Heavilin emphasizes the writer's faith in the human capacity to make right choices. Luchen Li reads the novel as a "story of a rise of Man" pointing out the "release of human possibilities" as one of Steinbeck's objectives in having the story rooted in the Old Testament ("John" 7). In Jeremy S. Leatham's allegorical reading, the novel conveys an appeal to reject the notion of "absolute division" into purely good or purely evil and calls for tolerance between binary oppositions (127). This reading seems particularly fitting for the 1950s, characterized by political and military tensions between the powers of the Western and the Eastern Bloc, and

for those who dismissed *East of Eden* as a novel of its time. It goes without saying that today the resistance to the idea of a “single interpretation” (Leatham 139) may prove even more important than in the 1950s, which is a compelling rationale for the novel’s widest possible distribution and circulation.

It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that in Slovenia, *East of Eden* has infiltrated almost every nook and cranny of society. It constantly engages people’s imagination, as it is mentioned or alluded to in many discussions on a wide array of issues. The puns on the title continue almost *ad nauseam* on news and sports pages, in music videos and artistic performances, and in other forums. For example, the journalist and former war reporter from Bosnia, Vili Einspieler, entitles his 15 July 2009 *Delo* newspaper article on the contemporary political situation in Serbia “Vzhodno od raja (East of Eden),”⁴ and begins by explicitly mentioning the writer and the novel’s main themes so as to create the background for his reflections on a strictly political matter. Similarly, Branko Šoban uses the novel’s title for his 26 March 2006 *Delo* article, in which he discusses recent changes in the former Soviet Union and the eastward expansion of NATO. Unlike Einspieler, Šoban mentions neither Steinbeck nor the novel, but alludes to the latter on several occasions.⁵ The occurrence of examples containing the word combination from the novel’s title does not cease to surprise. Among others, “Vzhodno od raja” is the title of a painting by a contemporary Slovene artist Uroš Weinberger, first exhibited in the Maribor Ars Sacra Gallery in November 2008. Mojca Grmek’s critical review that accompanied the exhibition was entitled “Kje je ‘Vzhodno od raja’? (Where is ‘East of Eden’?).”

While, according to Randy Checketts, the question of whether Steinbeck’s title “implies a *good* place or a *bad* place” remains one of the topics that demand further discussion, in Slovenia and other East European countries, the word combination ‘vzhodno od raja’ (East of Eden) has invariably taken on negative connotations (142). In a figurative sense, true to Hillary Bool and Ronald Carter’s view that most “word combinations are always to a degree linguistic and cultural units,” the expression means “east of happiness and welfare” (173). Readers of this essay may need to be reminded that the countries of Eastern Europe faced adverse historical circumstances and experienced cultural and economic backwardness in relation to the West, not only during the communist era but also after the liberation from it (Guran 99). It was probably for this reason that they started to regard themselves as deprived of the privileges of the Biblical garden, symbolized in their view of the West. This perception is best illustrated in Tomaž Mastnak’s 1992 book *Vzhodno od raja: civilna družba pod komunizmom in po njem* (East of Eden: Civil society under Communism and after), since it addresses issues that emphasize problematic relationships under politically oppressive regimes, and the questionable efficacy of democratization in formerly communist countries.

Overall, it seems safe to claim, then, that the examples utilizing the novel's title are found in almost every sphere of public life. This may result from the long and consistent presence of both the book and the film version in the Slovene cultural arena—the former since 1958 and the latter since 1957. Until the mid-1980s, there were five successive publications of the book (in 1964, 1977, 1980, 1982 and 1987), each of them impressive in volume. An average of ten thousand copies per edition might appear negligible (4,500 in 1958, 24,000 in 1964, 9,600 in 1977, 10,900 in 1980, and 5,950 in 1987)⁶ without taking into consideration that Slovenia's population is less than two million. Under these circumstances, even such a quantity is much more an exception than the rule, and most print runs today are significantly smaller. The latest publication in 2004 was limited to 1,500 copies, whereas each of the recently published translations of Steinbeck's books, *To a God Unknown* (2009), *The Moon Is Down* (2011), *The Pastures of Heaven* (2012), and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* (2014), was printed in 500 copies.

The same criterion should apply when judging the volume of film screenings and viewers. The art-house cinema Kinoteka (Cinematheque) in Ljubljana, with its standard repertoire of classic films, featured Elia Kazan's adaptation at almost regular intervals between 1966 and 1983. As documented by Igor Kernel, from 1963 to 1993, there were thirty-two showings altogether, with a total audience of 5,528, which ranks the film a respectable third among all the films shown by Ljubljana Cinematheque.

Whereas in the 1990s the novel failed to find its way onto the desks of Slovene publishers, the new millennium seems to have brought a revival of interest not only in *East of Eden*, but also in other Steinbeck novels, particularly those that failed to withstand the rigorous demands of state publishers, either because of their potentially subversive nature and instigating ideological doubts, or because they could not be deemed "products of social necessity and historical integrity" (DeMott 295). Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the novel's acclaim in Slovenia dates from 2004. Following the 2004 publication of the novel, which was accompanied by my newspaper article "Neuresničljivost rajskega vrta (The illusion of Eden)," the National University Library list of the top one hundred books borrowed by Slovene readers ranked *East of Eden* a respectable eighth and twenty-fifth in two Slovene towns, Metlika and Maribor, respectively. This is of no small significance, given that the novel was not compulsory school reading like the majority of the books on that list.

Considering their shared history of literary and ideological imperatives, it would be reasonable to expect that the novel would attract similar attention from publishers in the rest of the former Yugoslavia, but it has not. In Croatia, since its first publication in 1956, *Istočno od raja*, as *East of Eden* is entitled in Stjepan

Kresić's translation, has been reprinted four times, most recently in 2010. The first Serbian version in Veljko Nikitović's translation appeared as late as 2001, followed by reprints in 2006 and 2015. Meanwhile, the novel has not been published in Macedonia or Bosnia. Among other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, only Poland boasts more translations. *Na wschód od Edenu*, as the book was entitled by the Polish translator Bronislaw Zielinski, has been published ten times, first in 1958 and most recently in 2011. However, considering that altogether there have been sixty-one Polish publications of Steinbeck's works, compared to only twenty-eight in Slovenia, the numbers speak for themselves.⁷

Speculating on the reasons for the strong standing of *East of Eden* among Slovenes, it is important to note that neither Slovenia nor any other republic of the former Yugoslavia boasts an extensive track record of critical response to the novel. However, with its pragmatic concepts regarding the creative potential of fictional worlds, literary criticism undoubtedly contributed to the book's success in the Slovene cultural and social environment. Although in terms of serious critical writing, reference to popular magazines might be considered unreliable; in the past, it was mainly this kind of media that formed public opinion. This was particularly true for the first few decades after World War II. Written mainly by book reviewers and journalists and promoted by social and ideological forces, these articles only occasionally managed to go beyond the informative level.

Embracing the need for politically and ideologically committed reading, Rapa Šuklje, one of the most influential voices among what may be called the first generation of Steinbeck reviewers, initiated an overwhelmingly positive critical stance toward the writer and the novel. In the 1958 issue of *Niša žena*, Šuklje refers to Steinbeck as "our dearest acquaintance" and "a friend with a lot to give" ("John Steinbeck's *Vzhodno*" 322), and expresses her belief that his "latest novel [*East of Eden*], just like those we read before [*The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Pearl*, and *Tortilla Flat*], will most certainly not let us down" (322). Clearly, Šuklje regarded Steinbeck mainly as a proletarian writer and based her expectations on his Depression-era novels.

Šuklje's introductory study to the 1964 Cankarjeva založba reprint of the novel is somewhat more complex, but still far from exhaustive. She states that, "judging by purely artistic standards, the book is not among Steinbeck's best achievements, but it is much liked by the readers and this counts, too" ("Jezni" 39). Despite her friendly tone, Šuklje points out some apparent flaws, such as sentimentality and one-dimensional characterization, most noticeable in the writer's conception of Cathy's character. In line with the Marxists' view that "characters need to be shown to develop" (Lukács, *The Meaning* 33), Šuklje is also dissatisfied with the novel's ending, claiming that "Cathy's altruistic suicide is unconvincing and incredible"

("Jezni" 37). In her view, the "imperfection," as she refers to the weaknesses in the novel, has to be attributed to the writer's "deep personal involvement" and his "inability to distance himself from social problems" ("Jezni" 39). By stressing the writer's moral indignation, social anger, and empathy, Šuklje furthered Steinbeck's reputation as a reliable interpreter of the labor scene and a sympathizer of the new ruling ideology. It was thus not only Steinbeck's work that was objectified, i. e. exploited for propaganda purposes, but his personality was also used as an "expedient object [...] in the ideological campaign on the literary front," as Kopecký cogently argues in connection with Steinbeck criticism in Czechoslovakia ("The Literary" 204).

Another critical review that may have contributed to the Slovene popularity of *East of Eden* came from Juš Turk, the translator of the novel. His reading also gives evidence of the "reductive assimilation of literature to ideology," noted by Hillis J. Miller among others (378). Rather than the work and its literary value, it was the writer and his political views that were important to the critic. For example, in *East of Eden*, one would search in vain for textual evidence in support of Turk's claim that "Steinbeck's ideas are often bizarre, if not naïve for European intellectuals, particularly when the writer reflects on topics such as changes in social and political systems" ("Beseda" 765); this assertion is merely indicative of the fact that Steinbeck did not entirely meet the critic's expectations regarding a distinctive political synthesis in his work.

Similarly, it must have been because of the regime's ideological imperative and its control over the production and reading of literature that Turk emphasizes the writer's "struggle against any kind of Puritanism and accompanying social exploitation"—the stance which, according to the critic, "guarantees Steinbeck a secure place in the league of progressive American writers" ("Beseda" 767). In Turk's reading of the novel, one can notice the grip of the state's control and its official policy; the actual achievements in literary texts were subordinate to their political implications and critics were expected to write about politically-correct writers and their works in favorable terms.

It is not hard by now to see that, in Slovenia, critical evaluations of Steinbeck's works involved politics at least as much if not much more than his literary production and to some degree tended to "transcend Steinbeck the person" (Čerče, "The Perception" 65). Appealing to the literary tastes, at least until after he overtly showed his support for American involvement in the Vietnam War, Steinbeck "ceased to be regarded as an individual and became a political tool," serving a higher purpose (Čerče, "The Perception" 65). That in past decades, the value of any literary text depended more on external criteria, i.e., its sociopolitical function than on the influence it exercised on other writers, which Harold Bloom considers the ultimate

test of a book's inclusion in the literary canon (229), is perhaps most evident in Turk's 1980 study in the fourth publication of the novel. He begins by emphasizing Steinbeck's affinity for President Tito, claiming that "in times of international crises Steinbeck, who is a writer of high repute, always attentively listened to President Tito's opinion" ("Steinbeck" 540). No official record has been found to prove Turk's claim regarding Steinbeck's affinity for President Tito; official norm required communist rhetoric, therefore Turk's insertion of such ideological clichés into his interpretation seems to have been more or less a necessity.

Like Šuklje, Turk defends the book against the reactions of those European academics who took an unappreciative stance toward the novel, evaluating it from strict aesthetic angles ("Steinbeck" 541). He believes that it is the consistent public demand for the book which is the test of its greatness. Turk's impassioned reflections on *East of Eden*, which are full of inflated claims and rhetorical flourishes, culminate in his assertion that the novel is "one of the most beautiful literary gifts ever available to Slovene readers" ("Steinbeck" 541). The purpose here is not to argue the critic's opinion; however, Turk surely had a point regarding the printing and binding of the book. This Slovene edition is notable for its fine art work by the distinguished Slovene artist Božidar Grabnar and perfectly represents the *Petdeset najlepših po izboru bralcev* (Readers' fifty most beautiful novels) collection in which it was published.

Until the end of the previous century, Janko Moder's 1983 "Spremna beseda o avtorju (About the author)" was the most elaborate critical study on Steinbeck in Slovenia; nevertheless, it was still considerably burdened with ideological bias. Moder begins his *East of Eden* essay by claiming that the novel represents the writer's return to his native California and partly also to a topical theme, but "not to the evocative power of his previous works, in which he dealt uncompromisingly with social problems" (603). Clearly, rather than discussing the writer's impact on the readers, Moder was still in pursuit of the social aspects in Steinbeck's works. It was not before the most recent studies, including my articles "Neuresničljivost rajskega vrta (An illusion of Eden)" and "Človekova možnost izbire v moraliteti *Vzhodno od raja* (The possibility of choice in *East of Eden*)" that this deeply entrenched view was loosened among Slovene reviewers—a view that situated Steinbeck as merely a traditional proletarian writer, attacking the evils of the capitalist world.

Even on the basis of the narrow range of critical studies mentioned here, I can conclude that Steinbeck's works were almost invariably evaluated in the light of communist ideals; not only because art and culture were interpreted as public property used to propagate Communist values, but also because some critics "consciously compromised their beliefs" to get a book to the readers (Kopecký, "The

Literary” 88). Be that as it may, the ideological ballast accompanying *East of Eden* certainly contributed to its unprecedented success in Slovenia.

Critical material on *East of Eden* in other parts of the former Yugoslavia is not only similarly scarce but also similarly passionate, characterized by inflated, unconvincing claims, or reflecting the reviewers' dissatisfaction with the lack of more explicit communist rhetoric. In this sense, Stjepan Kresić's 1956 afterword "Riječ o djelu (About the novel)" is a good example. Kresić argues that the mere fact that the novel's main characters were "exiled" from Eden "cannot justify their malevolent behavior nor excuse the author from analyzing their actions" (668). He continues his outright disapproval borne of his rigidly sociological position, claiming that "this seems to be the Achilles' heel of other contemporary American novelists, like Faulkner, Dos Passos and Hemingway: they merely raise a plethora of moral and social problems, without advancing any plausible solutions" (668).

Kresić's views regarding the depiction of characters are not only similar to those expressed by Turk in his 1958 introduction to the novel, but they are also reminiscent of ideas shared by those Marxists whose work was most influential in relation to the formation of a Marxist literary canon in Eastern Europe. "In Scott, Balzac or Tolstoy we experience events which are inherently significant because of the direct involvement of the characters in the events and because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives," writes Lukács (*Writer* 116), while the imperative to change the world rather than merely interpret it was also expressed in the eleventh of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*. Here, it is worth mentioning in passing that Steinbeck himself described the *East of Eden* characters as "symbol people" who are clothed "in the trappings of experience so that the symbol is discernible but not overwhelming," and that the novel's structure fulfills his thesis that "man can rule over sin" (*A Journal* 27). Clearly, this description implies that Steinbeck's intentions in this novel were different from those in his proletarian trilogy and demanded by the prevailing literary fashion.

In line with Katherine Arens's view that with the advent of cultural studies, text analyses no longer commence with the formal features of texts, "but rather with their valuation and effect—with a question about which texts 'serve' which parties' objectives, at which particular costs or benefits to the cultures in which they appear" (126), I can probably conclude that Steinbeck and his works served the political regime in communist Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia. Despite some differences which should more appropriately be regarded as a result of intellectual choice rather than of a shared intellectual project, in other East European cultures, too, literary criticism was "assigned the status of a practical and militant philosophy," as noted by Virgil Nemoianu (185). Similarly, because of the utilitarian conception of "what constitutes the literary" (Levine 378), Steinbeck's texts, including *East of*

Eden, were manipulated by communist propaganda. Assessed merely through a narrow ideological lens, their value was in their usefulness to the oppressive social and political mindset, which they undoubtedly served—not only *The Grapes of Wrath* with its agenda of social solutions, but also works that testify to the writer's departure from proletarian themes and his venturing into new subject matters.

This study has also shown that, despite its modest size, Slovenia has been one of the most rewarding markets for *East of Eden*. The most immediately recognizable proof of this assertion is the number of Slovene publications, which compares favorably with the numbers in much larger countries. The next is the fact that the novel has set its stamp on virtually every area of Slovene public life. As for the reasons for the novel's acclaim, it would certainly be a mistake to underestimate the influence of the ideologically burdened critical material, regardless of the fact whether it was written by narrow-minded demagogues or by critics who deliberately made certain concessions in order to meet the regime's requirements and get the book published. However, whereas some readers choose to use all the information provided by the editors or critics, others resist this temptation, preferring to "consume" the story simply for its "narrative pleasure" (Srikanth 148). As Šuklje writes, "readers are allowed to react emotionally and choose their favorite books" ("Jezni" 39). It seems that, in Slovenia, *East of Eden* was so popular mostly because of the second type of readers: these responded to the writer's exploration of new subjective topics, such as the dimensions of individual choice, romantic and domestic relationships and ethical consciousness, and chose *East of Eden* as one of their favorite books.

In doing so, they are similar to Western readers. From the outset, and in contrast to the critics, these have also been challenged by the book itself and found it pleasurable to read: either because of the familiar Biblical framework, which offers a wide array of references and meanings, or because of the novel's open, reflexive form that allowed for autobiographical intrusions and personal editorial digressions. Several other aspects that many readers have found the "most engaging," such as the character of Cathy and the philosophy of the Chinese servant Lee, were "the very things that aroused the most criticism" (Benson 732). *East of Eden* "seems to grip the readers in a special way," further observes Steinbeck's biographer, drawing on the writer's remark to Carlton A. Sheffield in October 1952: "I am getting flocks of letters and oddly enough, most of them have the sense of possession. People write as though it were their book" (cited in Benson 732).

Part of the reason for the novel's popularity in Slovenia may have to do with the state's control over the production and reading of literature: the censorship seems to have heightened rather than suppressed the desirability of literary works that transcend the "confinement of an ideological source and explanation"

(Hoffman 193). Advocating issues of individual choice and freedom rather than ideological clichés, and being informed by personal vision rather than group-psychology and social consciousness, *East of Eden* may have represented a relief from overemphasized ideological stereotypes and myths. This seems to have been particularly relevant for those readers who, in their “desire to have a self that can control knowledge and a world that can be known” (Spivak 104) saw literary texts as opportunities to “constructively question the privileged explanations” (Spivak 117) or, in Barbara Johnson’s words, learning from them “to become conscious of the fact that what one considers knowledge is really an array of received ideas, prejudices, and opinions” (181).

With the establishment of democratic society in Slovenia (in 1991), literary texts, including *East of Eden*, are finally approached from the various angles of contemporary criticism or brought out of “the neglect and secondariness” to which they had previously been condemned for various political and ideological reasons (Said 196). Unlike in the past, and without ignoring social and political implications of literary works, Slovene critics are now mainly concerned with style and its potential to relate the text creatively to the world, rather than with the ideological structures imbedded in literary works. Similarly, Slovene readers are no longer subjected to the questionable nature of politically motivated judgments, but permitted to explore the interpretative possibilities of literary works by themselves.

Notes

1. Steinbeck was also very popular in Francoist Spain. The Spanish readership regarded him as one of the most popular American writers, a master of social realism. See "La recepción crítica de la obra de John Steinbeck en España entre 1940 y 1964" <http://trilcat.upf.edu/wp-content/uploads/Dasca-AT5.pdf>.
2. Cominform stands for the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties, founded in September 1947 and dissolved in 1956. In addition to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, the original members of Cominform were the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, France and Italy.
3. For a detailed overview of Steinbeck criticism in Slovenia see Danica Čerče's "The Perception of John Steinbeck's Work in Slovenia."
4. All Slovene titles of critical material in this essay are translated by myself.
5. *Delo* is the most influential and widely read national newspaper in Slovenia.
6. There is no information available for the 1982 edition.
7. See also Petr Kopecký's article "The Story of John Steinbeck in Communist Czechoslovakia" and Čerče's *Reading Steinbeck in Eastern Europe*.

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