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Jean-Paul Sartre, John Steinbeck and the liability of liberty in the post-war period

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The polarities of the Cold War impelled many intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic to take sides either with capitalism or communism. Both Jean-Paul Sartre and John Steinbeck famously attempted to respond to this ideological choice and would differ in their political leanings: Sartre was an outspoken critic of American capitalist hegemony, whereas Steinbeck became an avid opponent of the communist bloc. They nonetheless shared a dedication to engaging with the social issues of their time, becoming arguably the pre-eminent proletarian writers of the period and eventual Nobel Prize winners. Sartre believed Steinbeck to be 'the most rebellious, perhaps' of American writers, whilst Steinbeck so admired the French intellectual scene typified by Sartre that he spent nearly a year in Paris writing for *Le Figaro*. Their pivotal promotion of individual freedom may have nudged them towards both ends of the political spectrum respectively; yet their emphasis on the changeability of human existence constantly destabilized any position they approached. In this article I argue for a productive return to their writing in order to underline the alternations both encounter when seeking to put the libertarian ideal of individuality into practice. In their novels *L'Âge de raison* (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952), as well as in their journals, we can observe how their mutual emphasis on man's indeterminism as an autonomous subject inevitably dissolves the foundation of any normative political ethos. As such, it is crucial to reiterate that their engagement with the post-war period in fact deeply complicates the drive for totalization and systemization implied in the strict allegiances of the Cold War political terrain.

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As Ronald Aronson (2004) recently demonstrated in his return to the famous quarrel between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the effort to navigate an alternative between the dominant poles of the political spectrum was blocked by the Iron Curtain. Their fallout in the 1950s can be seen as indicative of the wider trend that would unsettle the so-called 'Third Way' across the world – less a matter of personal differences than the pervasive effect of an intensifying Soviet-American conflict. Both became bound up in a distinctly binary mode of thinking that was tailored more to the polarities of the Cold War than it was to their own more intricate philosophies of individual liberty and social responsibility. The pressure to take sides between communism and capitalism quickly closed off any middle way that could acknowledge the greater levels of complication involved in such a choice: a closure which in turn threatened the traditional stomping ground of the Parisian Left Bank. This rigid *either/or* broke Sartre and Camus apart. Sartre embraced revolutionary violence to enable social change, and Camus strongly opposed its aggression; but rather than bring their positions to bear upon one another, as they had strived to do in the past, each assaulted the other. The two most iconic figures of post-war individualism were suddenly at loggerheads, rupturing what had been, until that fateful encounter in the bar of the Hotel Pont-Royal in 1952, a productive cohabitation. The chill of the Cold War had taken hold.

Such a cold snap is once again on the horizon in a post 9/11 age, freezing any fluidity of political movement into a static opposition across the 'Axis of Evil'. American foreign policy, for example, has increasingly exhibited a 'with us or against us' approach. The *either/or* thinking that estranged Sartre and Camus is proving its pertinence in a global community that is more integrated than ever before through technology, but still prone to the culture clashes of old. Unsure of its future, this world continues to crave clear-cut answers. Aronson alerts us to this vulnerability through reference to how scholars today continue to think of the Sartre–Camus rift as a case of who was right and who was wrong:

> If Camus was right, Sartre was wrong, and vice versa; that was the logic of the Cold War, and we have not yet gone beyond it ... We have to see their rupture in its true colours – as the product of a distorted choice. The Cold War confused political thinking, destroyed friendships

> and individuals, and deformed the Left and the entire political universe. As with the rest of the Camus–Sartre story, seeing and engaging both points of view critically as well as sympathetically may allow us to free ourselves from the dualistic thinking of the Cold War. (2004: 118)

Today, we can recognize that the choice for Sartre and Camus was not between violence and non-violence, but between the reactionary violence of the revolutionary effort and the systemic violence of the conservative status quo. The *either/or* imposed a two-dimensional way of thinking that tried to hide this tragic complexity in favour of a self-serving political agenda on both sides.

Indeed, to acknowledge the blind spots as well as the insights of a position that is reflective as it moves forward represents the archetypal attribute of the 'intellectual'.[1] Crucially, this 'Third Way' differs from the standard alternatives in that it emphasizes engagement with a problem, to coin Sartre's term, not closure or conclusion. It forever seeks a definitive end to its dilemmas, but necessarily never attains such certainty, lest it fall prey to the absolutism that flanks it on both sides. To uphold freedom, intellectuals can align themselves with neither one side nor the other; or, more precisely, they must remain free to experiment with both one and the other without strict allegiance to either. They can reflect on each position from an impartial standpoint, as well as test both by investing and involving themselves actively in each approach – be reactive as well as proactive. Rather than justify or accuse, they must explain in order to access a fuller understanding of the situation, buying in to a progressive mindset. Steve Fuller notes how these two contrasting but by no means contradictory images of the intellectual came into focus with ancient Greece, when Socrates and Protagoras animated the philosophical scene as inquisitor and prospector respectively (Fuller, 2005: 17). As such, the middle way has always been as demanding as it has been rewarding, fraught with impasses as well as openings. It is the willingness to tackle this uncertain terrain head-on that best identifies the intellectual:

> The intellectual, like the superhero, lives in a dualistic universe ... the demand for unconditional loyalty is Evil's calling card, which is why superheroes are on no one's payroll and intellectuals adhere to the (Groucho) Marxist maxim that any party that would claim their allegiance is never worth joining ... For intellectuals and superheroes, social structures are disposable sites for the ongoing struggle between Good and Evil: what embodies Good one week may embody Evil the next. The heroic intellectual never gives up on the chase. (Fuller, 2005: 36–7)

On this last point, Aronson would undoubtedly concur. Intellectual engagement stresses the pursuit of answers, never the firm attainment

of one overriding response: the recognition of truths as opposed to one paramount truth. Such intellectual commitment to freedom necessarily challenges the rigid oppositions inherent in the *either/or* mentality.

According to Sartre himself, the concept of liberty philosophically implies a kind of liability – what Francis Jeanson called *le fardeau*, or burden, of freedom (1947: 285). Being free at once dissolves and yet demands a strategy of being for or against a course of action. Freedom is liable to bring man into existence, as Sartre puts it, by allowing him to choose who he is and what he will do for himself. But it is also a liability to that transition, in that it will always keep him free from any unchanging nature or sense of fixity. '[L'homme] *n'est* point (Sartre, 1943: 664), since he is a self-conscious being. His ability to reflect upon himself means that he can never entirely identify himself with a sense of 'thingness'. His consciousness lacks the physical tangibility of his body and world, and is therefore essentially free from concrete absolutes, meaning he can only ever approach an objective or thing-like state. His consciousness thus repeatedly alienates him *from* purely material being, and yet obliges him to conceive a project *of* being in a material world, in a 'fuite vers l'être'. The 'being-for-itself' of subjective consciousness can never attain the 'being-in-itself' of objectivity. Man repeatedly propels himself along an existential cycle of being and nothingness, in which *l'existence précède l'essence*: 'la réalité humaine est dépassement perpétuel vers une coïncidence avec soi qui n'est jamais donnée' (1943: 133). Hence:

> There is no justification for man; he is superfluous. And yet he cannot escape his 'facticity': the very fact that he is and must 'exist' some role. Nor can he escape his contingency: he is not free not to be free; he cannot help but choose and interpret a role to play. (Suhl, 1970: 56)

This is the paradox at the heart of liberty: 'il n'y a de liberté qu'en *situation* et il n'y a de situation que par la liberté' (Sartre, 1943: 569–70) : free to choose a direction, but, in accepting human freedom, compelled to review that direction at all times, or deviate from it.

In this article, I want to suggest that, in spite of present coy stereotypes, American writers and thinkers could be just as sensitive as their French counterparts to the practical complications that follow on from this existential condition, namely: how can the individual remain politically independent whilst embroiled in political problems? I will open up a dialogue between Sartre and a suitable interlocutor across the Atlantic to note that the Cold War caused divisions beyond the frigid contours of the European left that both Sartre and Camus remained within. This dialogue, in displaying the 'liability' of liberty, will help clarify the shifting character of a 'Third Way' that both the Americans

and the French were pursuing.[2] A likely candidate for such a dialogue is undoubtedly John Steinbeck. He became an iconic and outspoken writer both at home and abroad, sharpening 'the little blades of social criticism without which no book is worth a fart in hell' (Steinbeck, 2001 [1969]: 40). 'His passionate resistance to tyranny and his equally heartfelt empathy for the marginalized and lonely, the disillusioned seekers and restless idealists, were wellsprings of his fiction as well as his nonfiction' (Steinbeck, 2003: 65). 'To a generation of liberal artists and intellectuals committed to the notion that art should serve social progress, Steinbeck had emerged as the pre-eminent proletarian novelist of his day' (Coers, 1991: 22). His writing, like that of Sartre, became an inspiration to an international generation coming out of the horrors of war and yearning for a better world.

At first glance, however, placing Steinbeck alongside Sartre in a parallel reading appears to reinforce the very attitude of 'them and us' during the Cold War that I am rethinking. Beyond his Nobel Prize and cultural celebrity, Steinbeck seems to share nothing in common with Sartre. Sartre progressed as an avid critic of capitalist hegemony and an advocate of communist ideals throughout the 1950s and 1960s, whereas Steinbeck positioned himself as a steadfast opponent of the communist bloc and willing patriot of his beloved America. Nowhere is this difference in political sympathies more pronounced than the mid 1960s and the early stages of the Vietnam War. Believing that communism's advantage over capitalism was its privileging of reform as opposed to repetition, Sartre explained that 'les structures de la société américaine reposent sur l'impérialisme, les bombardements ont tout changé ... Aujourd'hui il s'agit d'un acte d'agression net, cynique, caractérisé, sans justification ni même alibi sérieux' (Sartre, 1965: 12–19). He presided over the Russell Tribunal that found the American government guilty of illegal military action in Vietnam and of attacking civil objectives in direct violation of the Geneva Convention. As such, he upheld the right of the Viet Cong rebels to use violence against American forces in the South, since it was the only means of resistance available. Steinbeck, on the other hand, as the Vietnam correspondent for *Newsday* in 1967, was in each dispatch unable to hide his support for the US military effort. In his mind, South Vietnam had to be protected by any means necessary against the communist march stemming from Peking. Following an attack by the Viet Cong on a crowded restaurant in Can Tho, Steinbeck deplores their 'wanton terrorism'. Anticipating much American rhetoric during the Iraq War, he asks:

> Why do they destroy their own people, their own people whose freedom is their verbal concern. That hospital with all its useless pain is like a

> cloud of sorrow. Can anyone believe that the VC, who can do this kind of thing to their own people, would be concerned for their welfare if they had complete control? (Steinbeck, 2003: 305)

However, within a broader consideration of their political interventions, it becomes apparent that neither man's position was as coherent as it may first appear. By passionately believing in the freedom of the individual, the strictures of a political affiliation would often be thrown into dispute. Such commitment made both writers engaged rather than out of sync with the liabilities of their belief. Sartre rarely enjoyed a comfortable relationship with the Communist Party, which itself only started in earnest after the liberation of Paris. He was quick to denounce the Soviet oppression of Budapest in 1956 in spite of his communist sympathies. *Compagnon de route*, by his own admission, 'tout en maintenant fermement les principes et en critiquant l'action si elle s'en éloigne' (Sartre, 1975: 186). In the 1970s, he grew more and more disappointed in communist shortcomings, moving towards Maoism but soon becoming disillusioned with the extremism of that particular movement. By 1980, Sartre had in fact decided that political activism itself needed to be reshaped. In his controversial final interviews, he denounced the current left as *merde* and turned to Judaism as a fresh way of rethinking political struggle as part of a more fraternal effort (Sartre, 1991: 81). Conversely, before Steinbeck became a friend to FDR and then LBJ, he spent much of the so-called 'Red Decade' of the 1930s like many other American writers, inhabiting a literary milieu that was much more Marxist than New Deal. In 1939, just one year after Sartre's *La Nausée* had unleashed its vitriol on the *salauds* of the bourgeoisie, Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*, producing a celebrated indictment of an exploitative and inhuman capitalist society. Moreover, at the end of his *Newsday* correspondence, he would pass through another key turn. Following a dispute with his eldest son John, who had returned from the front line as an adamant peace protester, Steinbeck 'changed his mind totally about Vietnam', as his wife Elaine testifies (Steinbeck, 2003: 281). He tried to rewrite his thoughts to underline the financial and human cost of an unethical military campaign, unfortunately passing away before he could do so.

These numerous alternations in both writers' politics illustrate a key point: that their commitment to freedom did not neatly translate into a consistent praxis, no matter its whereabouts along the political spectrum. The Cold War impelled both thinkers to take sides on the very question of freedom that neither was entirely comfortable

seeing in strictly oppositional terms. By turning to their outlooks on the human condition, as well as how those perspectives were projected in their literary writing, we can observe how neither man truly saw political endeavour as a case of who was right and who was wrong. It is in the wider context of their thought and literature, rather than in the narrower field of their politics, that a productive link can be made between them with regard to the lessons that the Cold War can teach us. Both men were eminently attracted to the act of writing, precisely because it provided a subjective and interrogative voice with which to question the validity of any objective or univocal standpoint. It allowed both writer and reader to access a personal reality in all its colours and shades, rather than just the impersonal politics of black and white being practised in Moscow and Washington. This is not to discount the choices that each made during the Cold War, but to underscore those choices as those of a free thinker searching for some kind of way forward, and not those of an activist pledging unswerving loyalty to a political side.

Sartre himself displays an awareness of this *densité d'être* in Steinbeck's writing, mentioning him in an article for *Atlantic Monthly* during his US visit in 1946. 'The greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck', he argues – subtly implying that his own successful writing of the 1940s and 50s may owe Steinbeck a debt. In his mind, Steinbeck's novels to date heralded 'the most severe critic of the capitalistic form of production in the United States'. Sartre concludes that Steinbeck is 'the most rebellious, perhaps, of your writers', refusing any simplifications of man's complicated existence. Steinbeck, for his part, does not mention Sartre in the extensive Penguin edition of his life's correspondence, and it would appear that the two never actually crossed paths.[3] Nonetheless, in light of Sartre's instant celebrity in American post-war society as a favourite of periodicals like *Time* (Cotkin, 1999), it is reasonable to assume that Steinbeck was up to date with *les années Sartre*. His decision to spend nine months writing in Paris for *Le Figaro* in 1954 implies an admiration for Parisian intellectual life, and the kind of socially committed writing that Sartre had made its cornerstone.[4] Comments in his fourth article are especially telling, since they are written in the very language of individualism and responsibility primarily associated with Sartre's existentialist thought.

> [T]he fabric of man's relation to man was picked apart and rewoven with the new thread of responsibility. [In Paris] the conception of liberty

> was born – not only political liberty but the enormous conception that the individual mind of man had not only the right but the duty to rove the world and dig into the heavens. (Steinbeck, 2003: 247).

This potential but curiously overlooked connection between his work and Sartre's oeuvre is made all the more urgent by Richard E. Hart's discussion of Steinbeck's philosophical leanings.[5] Hart reveals not only how Steinbeck shared Sartre's humanist conception of man as a consciousness or free will, but also how Steinbeck identified the same paradox of being to emerge from that human condition:

> [O]nly man can and does rise up against determinism through an exercise of will and moral consciousness (notably a fundamental insight at the core of Jean-Paul Sartre's magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*) ... For Steinbeck, to be a human person is tantamount to being caught in a paradox, to be engaged, sometimes unwittingly, in living with and working through the dilemma of being at once both a determined unit of nature and a free, value-articulating individual forever called upon to act. In a vivid, existential sense, Steinbeck's fiction articulates through art ... the anguished yet imperative nature of moral choice. (Hart, 1997: 47–50)

For Steinbeck, the character of human life grows out of perplexity and ambiguity (1997: 44), relating opposites to one another rather than eliminating one in favour of the other.

In turn, a parallel reading of both men's writing frees up links between them that can bring depth to the two-dimensional grid imposed by the Iron Curtain. Both Sartre and Steinbeck may have found their politics frozen into the Cold War's inert oppositions, but their thought and literature stubbornly resists the drive of this *either/or* for systemization and totalization. Their mutual emphasis on man as a free-thinking subject, and not a passive object, stresses his ability to choose for himself how he will act, as well as how we are all equal in that independence. However, this equality means that we have no access to a Godlike perspective that can instruct us as to how we should exercise that free will and objectively validate our actions. Sartre and Steinbeck certainly adopt different tones in their philosophy of the individual – one densely technical and analytical, the other more familiar and discursive[6] – but the accent they place on responsibility as the flipside to freedom resonates with equal force. 'Je suis responsable de tout, en effet, sauf de ma responsabilité même car je ne suis pas le fondement de mon être' (Sartre, 1943: 641). As Steinbeck insists, 'one must consult himself because there is no other point of reference' (2003: 383).

For both, man as a conscious subject must therefore engage with this liability of liberty. Each locates an intrinsic ambiguity in their view of freedom as an involving and ongoing condition of being. Their thinking arguably escapes the abstract or sketchy notions of freedom that are sometimes found amongst creative writers by offering a similarly poised approach to a complex political and philosophical problem. In this respect, '[Sartre's] diversity was far from being mastered' in the wake of the Cold War (Howells, 1992: 1). Far from the caricature of a passionate communist, this was a Sartre who succumbed neither to his cynical side nor to his imperative for meaning, but who brought both into a fraught interaction:

> [We may] expand the idea of 'the new Sartre' into one that recasts his popular image from an archetypal and classical modernist thinker to one who shares a complex and multifaceted relationship to the post-modern ethos ... Sartre's philosophy can be situated in a transitional space that straddles the divide and creates a sometimes uneasy tension between a postmodern sense of despair, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy, and a modernist longing for comprehension, meaning, constructivism, and totality. (Fox, 2003: 4)

The English novelist and moral philosopher Iris Murdoch indeed proposed that Sartre's work attended to 'a hopeless dilemma, coloured by a surreptitious romanticism which embraces the hopelessness' (1999: 111).

The echoes with Steinbeck here are in no way faint, since 'a good writer always works at the impossible' (Steinbeck, 2001: 4). Steinbeck likewise incorporates both the raw materialism that reminds man of his alienation from the world, and the artistic imagination that strives to overcome that alienation and find answers to our troubled existence. This 'far-seeing view of things', as Jackie Kennedy described it, emerges in their moving correspondence in 1964. 'I have always been at odds with those who say that reality and dream are separate entities. They are not – they merge and separate and merge again' (Steinbeck, 1976: 799). This was anything but lip service to a bereaved widow: rather an underlying belief 'that two forces are necessary in man before he is man', that 'the world has always been in a process of decay and birth' (1976: 221, 345). To reinforce this sense of dynamism between the objective world and the subjective imagination, he would sometimes sign off his letters with the stamp of 'Pigasus', a winged pig. This stamp reflects Steinbeck's own condition of being 'earth-bound but aspiring' (1976: 293), involving himself in the world but always exercising his right to envision it differently for the future. His writing as such can be seen as 'a project that wishes

to enforce a commitment to storytelling as the entirely contingent activity that keeps us human, indecipherable, and alive' (Steinbeck, 1992 [1952]: xxvi).

What Sartre calls the *va-et-vient* of an absurd existence is articulated by Steinbeck, with a notable injection of existential angst, as the 'meaningless, pointless, endless restlessness' (Steinbeck, 1976: 708). This mobility demonstrates how both men are acutely tuned in to the problem of being free to live as we choose, whilst at the same time being cut loose from any objectification of that life which could validate those choices or give them permanence. Rather than retreat from this challenge, either by surrendering free will to it or claiming to have mastered it through that same autonomy, they enter into its flux and figure their engagement as a perpetual slide between freedom and commitment. Subjectivity and objectivity will meet and compete, but neither fuse with, nor assimilate, the other. Put another way, Self and Other, or even 'us and them', are brought into an ongoing and tacit dialogue that drowns out any hierarchical rhetoric of superior and inferior, right or wrong.

This dynamism finds expression for both men in narrative writing as a powerful element of their personal commitment to human liberty. Requiring a frame for their outlooks that somehow defies the sense of stasis that framing implies, the 1940s and 1950s are marked by a sustained literary output by both in response to the sharpening divisions of the times. It is no coincidence that this output lessened considerably by the 1960s, when both felt an increasing sense of urgency to undertake more direct modes of political action. But before the pressures of the Cold War escalated, both men were using literature as a powerful means of engaging and broadening the individual mind for the challenges ahead. The content and narrative form of *L'Âge de Raison* (1945) and *East of Eden* (1952) bring the reader into a direct contact with the workings of subjectivity. The stories of a group of Parisians struggling to take control of their lives, and the intertwined destinies of two Californian families, both emphasize the complexities of freedom. Mathieu Delarue (literally 'from the street', the Everyman) is almost paralysed by the realization that he must take responsibility for his own life. Only he can decide what choices he will make now that his girlfriend is pregnant.

> "Quoi qu'il arrive, c'est par moi que tout doit arriver." Même s'il se laissait emporter, désemparé, désespéré, même s'il se laissait emporter comme un vieux sac de charbon, il aurait choisi sa perdition: il était libre, libre pour tout, libre de faire la bête ou la machine, libre pour accepter, libre pour refuser ... condamné pour toujours à être libre. (Sartre, 1945: 300)

Steinbeck's Cal Trask is, like Sartre's 'hero', 'the Everyman, the most human of all, the sorry man' (Steinbeck, 1976: 429), in that he also struggles to create a life of his own. He fears that he will become as heartless and conniving as his absent mother Cathy, the woman he has now learned is Kate, *madame* and harbourer of the underworld of the Salinas Valley. The housekeeper Lee reassures him that 'It's too easy to excuse yourself because of your ancestry. Whatever you do, it will be you who do it – not your mother' (1992: 447). Lee's research into translations of the Bible support this distinctly existentialist view:

> The American Standard translation *orders* men to triumph over sin, and you can call sin ignorance. The King James translation makes a promise in 'Thou shalt', meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel* – 'Thou mayest' – that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. (1992: 305)

It is this question of individual responsibility, and how to put its freedom to effect, that both Mathieu and Cal are forced to confront.

Notwithstanding their stories, the reader is himself obliged to come to terms with this freedom. Both Sartre and Steinbeck construct a narrative form intended to liberate the reading process from the totalizing and seemingly all-knowing interventions of classic Realism. In different ways, the reader is emancipated in his encounter with the novels by the very incompleteness of the narratorial perspectives on offer. In *L'Âge de raison*, Sartre climbs into each character's consciousness and shifts the narration between their varied viewpoints, as Bernard-Henri Lévy describes.

> La circulation des points de vue. L'art de la vision plurielle et de la petite perception. Cette multiplication des regards qui fait que le récit des *Chemins* est conduit tantôt par Mathieu, tantôt par Brunet ou Daniel – sans que l'un de ces points de vue soit jamais privilégié et sans qu'un narrateur détienne le fin mot de l'histoire. (Lévy, 2000: 69–71)

Sartre's motivation respects his philosophy of individualism: 'la vérité reste toujours à trouver, parce qu'elle est infinie. Ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'on n'obtienne pas *des* vérités' (Sartre, 1975: 48). Each character has their own story and needs, the individuality of which cannot be gathered into one unifying whole. Meaning is either broken down or inflated, but never correlated. Mathieu's criticism of his brother Jacques's tendency to moralize from a lofty perspective recalls Sartre's dislike of the Realist narrator. A 'passion pour des nids d'aigle' with its 'vues plongeantes sur la conduite des autres' pays no attention to the play of subjectivity (Sartre, 1945: 128), presuming an illusory

objectivity. The reader must in turn read for himself, forming opinions that cannot be confirmed within the text, and which therefore can be reshaped by future rereadings: 'Si la négativité est l'un des aspects de la liberté, la construction est l'autre' (Sartre, 1948: 234). The freedom he has as a reader mirrors the autonomy of his human condition. It is in this sense that Sartre sees the writer as someone who must help his reader to *apprendre* whilst resisting the urge to *enseigner*: 'nous avons à révéler au lecteur, en chaque cas concret, sa puissance de faire et de défaire, bref, d'agir' (1948: 288).

Steinbeck similarly calls for the writer to allow his reader this same power of invention. 'A writer isn't telling or teaching or ordering. Rather he seeks to establish a relationship of meaning, of feeling, of observing ... The story goes on and leaves the writer behind, for no story is ever done' (1976: 523). Differing from Sartre, Steinbeck designates himself as the distinct narrator for the novel, referring to his Californian upbringing. But this narrator persistently identifies himself as subjective, as anything but all-knowing, and thereby incomplete in his perspective, reliant on hearsay, old photographs, and hazy memories (Steinbeck, 1992: 12). Robert DeMott argues for a critical return to the novel as a result of its often overlooked ambivalence as it resists 'constitutive conventions' and becomes a 'heterogeneous creation, kinetic dance between teller and tale, even if rough-hewn, unsymmetrical, and unfinished' (1997: 222–3).

> As for my comments on the story, I find it or rather I feel that it is more direct and honest to set it down straight than to sneak it in, so that the reader will know or suspect it as opinion. (Steinbeck, 2001: 60)

This undercutting of objective certainty is especially swift during Cathy's pregnancy: 'When I said Cathy was a monster it seemed to me that it was so. Now I have bent close with a glass over the small print of her and reread the footnotes, and I wonder if it was true' (1992: 185). The reader is made aware of what Steinbeck calls the 'personal quality' of his work, in that the personal or fragmentary will always rival the impersonal and its claim to wholeness. 'Every part of [the novel] had pups', he celebrates (2001: 81): ideas about the fading of the characters' moral benchmarks under the sizzle of the Californian sun that the reader could chase up for themselves but never pin down into a conclusion. Like Sartre, he offers his novel not simply as a tale to be told, but an interpretative experience similar to life itself that the reader must actively engage with.

Such readings exemplify that Sartre and Steinbeck stand as a testament to how liberty is immensely attractive and yet endlessly

challenging. This dialogue I have begun reclaims their voice as one not of resignation or resolution, but of *revolution*, in the strictest sense of the word: of circling between a reflective perception of a situation and an active participation in it. Their own political activism uncovers the prerogatives at the heart of their similar outlooks on life: to seek out ways of respecting man's freedom whilst all the time engaging that freedom with objective realities. 'La question était: comment donner à l'homme à la fois son autonomie et sa réalité parmi les objets réels, en évitant l'idéalisme et sans tomber dans un matérialisme mécaniste?' (Sartre, 1970: 104). Action must be taken if we are to exist, decisions seen through, but equally as Steinbeck reiterates: 'No system of policing and conditioning can long survive. And I place myself at the service of this revolutionary cause' (2003: 90). The *either/or* implodes into a turbulent marriage of a *both/and* alongside a *neither/nor*, offering no easy answers but maintaining our crucial humanity.

Following on from his own call for a 'new type of political intellectual' who could illuminate both the insights and blind spots of the Cold War mentality, Aronson himself admits that imagining such a figure may be nothing more than 'imagining an angel' (2004: 234). As Sartre's and Steinbeck's thinking underlines through their narratives, objective ideals will always be tempered by a subjective reality. But, at the very least, such imagination sketches the tantalizing, and vitally ethical, 'Third Way' that the Cold War seemed unwilling to negotiate. As Sartre warns the emerging generations of the post-war: 'Naturellement on n'arrive pas à tout, mais il faut vouloir tout' (Cohen-Solal, 1985: 819). Steinbeck concurs: 'Maybe nothing can be done about it, but I am stupid enough and naïvely hopeful enough to want to try. How about you?' (2003: 109). That a Frenchman *and* an American could both agree on this point may well be the strongest indication of its urgency for our collective futures.

Notes

1. I will apply William Paulson's perceptive definition of what the intellectual represents to my discussion here:

> Dictionaries define the noun *intellectual* as a person devoted by profession or taste to the exercise of intelligence, to the life of the mind. Yet the word – in French and English – has a more specific meaning that, while widely recognized, almost never makes it into these definitions: that of a person of recognized intellectual attainment who speaks out in the public arena, generally in ways that call established society or dominant ideologies to account in the name of principle or on behalf of the oppressed. (Paulson, 2003: 145)

According to such a definition, writers and thinkers of intellect are not necessarily 'intellectuals', although the potential slipperiness of the word itself gives much scope for considerably pointed criticisms. For example, John Carey notoriously targeted literary writers, such as Woolf and Yeats, for creating an intelligentsia divorced from the everyday concerns of the masses. But when praising Arnold Bennett for embracing the newly literate readerships, he actually cites French *écrivains engagés* like Zola as an admirable influence (Carey, 1992: 156). Carey seems on more solid ground when he closes with an assault on French 'theory' for evolving 'an impenetrable jargon' (1992: 215), although thinkers like Jacques Derrida never defined themselves as 'engaged'.

2. Although I will guard both men's gender-specific terminology throughout, I do so in the knowledge that this practice itself troubles a supposedly egalitarian concept of freedom.
3. Annie Cohen-Solal stated at the March 2005 meeting of the UK Society for Sartre Studies that she is trying to publish Sartre's collected writings on America, believing his relationship to the United States to be a growing area of interest for scholars. Whether these papers would reveal anything new with regard to Steinbeck remains to be seen, especially as the major biographies of Sartre, by Cohen-Solal herself, and of Steinbeck by Jackson J. Benson (1984), note no encounter between the two.
4. Steinbeck had interestingly enough attempted to describe the Soviet Union without prejudice in *A Russian Journal* (1948).
5. A link between Steinbeck and existentialist thought has, to date, been tentative at best, although not entirely lacking. See Kocela (1996).
6. Although not a philosopher in the same tradition as Sartre, Steinbeck was attracted to scientific analysis. His fascination with marine biology, exhibited in *The Sea of Cortez* (1941) recounting his expedition to the Gulf of California with Ed Ricketts, informed several of his theories of social community.

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