

The Reception of Steinbeck's *East of Eden* in Slovenia

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Abstract

The article discusses the popularity of John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* in Slovenia, as demonstrated by its presence in virtually every area of public life and the sheer number of Slovene publications. The study also shows that in past decades, when Slovenia was in the grip of communist rule, even this book by Steinbeck, which is characterized by its non-fidelity to the rules imposed by social realism—in contrast to works that largely conformed to the communist regime's ideology—could not escape an ideological burden.

Key words: politicization of literature, communism, Eastern Europe, social realism, popular appeal

From the outset, Steinbeck feared that critics might not like *East of Eden* on account of the fact that the story grounded in the framework of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel was either too long, too obvious, or would not be understood properly (Steinbeck 1969). His fears proved prophetic: since its 1952 publication, the novel has received plenty of negative criticism not only for its “too obvious plot,” but also with regard to its structure, writing style, and stereotyping of different ethnicities (Bayley 2013: 145). However, despite lukewarm if not altogether unappreciative critical response, the novel immediately became a bestseller (Benson 1984: 732) and steadily sold around fifty thousand copies a year since 1970 (Shillinglaw 2004: 137).¹ The book's initial commercial success, the multiple editions of its publication history, its adaptations into cinematic forms, and its adoption by book clubs suggests that critical analyses of *East of Eden* were not always “responsible and responsive” and that the definitive word on many topics is yet to be written (DeMott 1997: 215).

In 1992, Roy Simmonds may have sounded precipitous in his prediction that the “critical and scholarly limelight will slowly but surely shift from *The Grapes of Wrath* toward *East of Eden*,” but there is no denying that in the past decades, increasing critical interest in and sophisticated commentary on the latter has occurred (DeMott 1997: 220). 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

¹ The sales increased dramatically in 2003, when the novel was selected by Oprah's Book Club. With Shillinglaw, Penguin alone published 1,761,000 copies between 3 June and 26 September (2004: 138).

struggle between Cain and Abel, something Steinbeck himself pointed out as a possible reason in the journal he recorded while writing the novel (1969: 132) and in the novel itself (1994: 591). The proposed mythic framework can be adapted to various contexts. Yuji Kami (2013), 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 (2007) emphasizes the writer’s faith in the human capacity to make right choices. Luchen Li (2008: 7) 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. In Jeremy S. Leatham’s (2013: 127) 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. 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 2013: 139) may prove even more important than in the 1950s, which is a compelling rationale for the novel’s widest possible distribution and circulation.

In Slovenia, no other work by Steinbeck has attracted as much public attention as *East of Eden*. Asked to name a book by Steinbeck, most Slovene readers would almost invariably think of this novel, 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*. With seven separate publications, compared with two for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1943, 1983) and *Of Mice and Men* (1952, 2007), and a single edition 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.

This is particularly curious given that the novel clearly shows the writer’s departure from the socially-conscious themes that appealed to the literary tastes of communist critics. It has to be remembered that in Slovenia, until very recently, critical interest in Steinbeck was predominantly political and that it was not before a change in the political system that Steinbeck’s works were approached from the various angles of contemporary criticism. Interestingly, in all other Yugoslav republics, with which Slovenia was closely connected before obtaining independence (in 1992), there have been altogether only six publications of this novel to date. Even if there were no other indicators, the frequency of the book’s

publication is by itself indicative of Slovenes' esteem for it. So is the fact that the latest Slovene publication 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* (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 necessarily 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; its strong standing in Slovene letters is largely due to the novel's popular appeal.

It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that in Slovenia, *East of Eden* has infiltrated 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), 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. These allusions to the novel in *Delo*, the most influential and widely read national newspaper in Slovenia, give credence to its status.

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" has invariably taken on negative connotations (2007: 142). In a figurative sense, true to Bool and Carter's view that most "word combinations are always to a degree linguistic and cultural units," the expression means "east of happiness and welfare" (1989: 173). 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 2003). It was probably for this reason that they started to regard themselves as having been 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.

Browsing the Internet for other Slovene forms of this expression produces an array of examples from politics, music, art, film, sports, tourism and even healthcare. It is not within the scope of this essay to present a complete catalogue of these examples, but it may prove interesting to mention at least a few. In the world of music, *Vzhodno od raja* is the title of the compilation of a popular Slovene band called Pop Design (released in 2002); it is also the name of a Slovene blues band. In 2004, the European Union sponsored a workshop under this name for film producers and directors from the new members of the European Union. In art, *Vzhodno od raja* is the title of a painting by Uroš Weinberger, a contemporary Slovene artist of the younger generation, first exhibited in the Maribor Gallery Ars Sacra Gallery in November 2008. The exhibition was accompanied by Mojca Grmek's critical review, "Kje je 'Vzhodno od raja'?" (Where is "East of Eden"?). The 2000 *Book of Essays* (edited by Barbara Borčič) on video production in Slovenia and Yugoslavia contains Biljana Tomić's essay, "Vzhodno od raja: zgodovina videa v Jugoslaviji" (East of Eden: The history of video in Yugoslavia). The occurrence of examples containing the word combination from the novel's title does not cease to surprise. Referring to the success story of the Polish *Gazeta Wyborca*, the authors of the 19 June 2000 *Medijska preža* (MediaWatch) article entitled "Vzhodno od raja," Jacek Żakowski and Tomaž Gerden, a Polish and a Slovene journalist, respectively, discuss the changed role of media in the two countries in the post-communist era.

Overall then, it seems safe to claim 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)² 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 edition 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*

² There is no information available for the 1982 edition.

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. I was startled to find that 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 in Igor Kernel's *Repertoar kinotečne dvorane 1963-1993*, during that period, 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 (after Richard Thorpe's *Ivanhoe* with 7,818 viewers in forty-seven performances and Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* with 7,145 viewers in forty-five performances.)

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 they seemingly opposed communist ideology, or because they could not be deemed "products of social necessity and historical integrity" (DeMott 1997: 295).³ Perhaps the most convincing evidence of the novel's acclaim in Slovenia dates from 2004. Following the Delo založniško in časopisno podjetje publication of the novel in the spring of that year, which was accompanied by the 9 June *Delo* newspaper article, "Neuresničljivost rajskega vrta" (The illusion of Eden), written by Danica Čerče, 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 most 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.

³ It was as late as 2009 that Slovenes got the translation of *To a God Unknown*, followed by the translation of *The Moon Is Down* in 2011, *The Pastures of Heaven* in 2012, and *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* in 2014. Several of Steinbeck's works have not yet been translated, including *The Wayward Bus*, *America and Americans*, *Cup of Gold*, *The Long Valley* and *Burning Bright*.

To fully assess the novel's fortunes in Slovenia, it is appropriate to mention some additional statistics beyond Yugoslav borders. 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. Hungary, too, has developed a cultural environment conducive to the translation of Steinbeck's works. Of a total of eighty Hungarian publications, seven were of *East of Eden*, which ranks the country, together with Slovenia, close after Poland. Despite a respectable number of publications (seventy-three) in the Czech Republic, *East of Eden* has managed to attract Czech publishers only four times. With five publications to date, the novel seems to have been slightly more fortunate in Slovakia. The first Russian translation was as late as 1989, when it was published by Moscow's Pravda and entitled *Na vostoč ot Edema*. Two subsequent publications under a slightly different title, *K vostoč ot Edema*, saw the light of day in 1992 and 2003. As for other countries of the former Soviet Union, only Estonia and Latvia possess this novel in their own languages: the Estonian edition dates from 2001, the Latvian ones from 1994 and 2003. The Bulgarians have published four translations; the latest dates from 2013. In Albania, *East of Eden* has not yet been translated. The same statistics apply to the former German Democratic Republic: despite the book's premiere on the German market as early as 1953 (under the title *Jenseits von Eden*, published by Diana Verlag Press) and twelve subsequent publications (the latest in 2009), none of these was published in East Germany.

Regarding the critical response to the novel, neither Slovenia nor any other republic of the former Yugoslavia boasts an extensive track record. However, with its pragmatic concepts regarding the creative potential of fictional worlds (Levine 2000), literary criticism contributed significantly 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, it was mainly this kind of media that formed public opinion. This was particularly true for the first few decades after WW II. Written by book reviewers and journalists, these articles only occasionally managed to go beyond the informative level (Čerče 2011: 11). Embracing the need for politically and ideologically committed reading, Rapa Šuklje, one of the strongest and most active voices among what may be called the first generation of Steinbeck critics, initiated a very tolerant 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" (322). After this warm-hearted introduction, she expresses her belief that "Steinbeck's 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). Šuklje provided a far from exhaustive, but slightly more complex presentation of Steinbeck's achievements in *East of Eden* in her introductory study to the 1964 Cankarjeva založba reprint of the novel. 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" (39). Despite her friendly tone, Šuklje does not hesitate to point out some apparent flaws, such as sentimentality and one-dimensional characterization, most noticeable in the writer's conception of Cathy's character. She is also discontent with the novel's ending, claiming that "Cathy's altruistic suicide is unconvincing and incredible," but her sympathies are undoubtedly always on the writer's side (37). In her view, the "imperfection," as she gently 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 (39). The Cankarjeva založba publishing company printed Šuklje's study again in its third and fourth publications of the novel in 1977 and 1987, with hardly any revisions or updated information.

Another critical review came from Juš Turk, the translator of the novel. His reading also gives evidence of the "reductive assimilation of literature to ideology," noted by George Levine among others (2000: 378). In his "Beseda o pisatelju" (About the author), in the first Slovene publication of the novel in 1958, Turk claims 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" (765). Clearly, even books like *East of Eden*, in which Steinbeck reflects on moral dilemmas, served literary criticism as an important locus for advocating political views (Nemoianu 1978: 197). The grip of the regime's control and its ideological imperative are distinctly noticed in the closing paragraph, where Turk emphasizes the writer's "struggle against any kind of Puritanism and accompanying social exploitation" (767). According to the critic, this stance guarantees Steinbeck a secure place in the league of progressive American writers who have provided a "genuine portrayal of America's disturbing times" (767).

That in past decades, the value of any literary text depended more on external criteria and 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 (2000, 229), is perhaps best seen in Turk's four-page afterword in the 1980 edition of the novel by Mladinska knjiga. The study starts with a groundless claim that Steinbeck, together with Saroyan, whom the critic considers "an equally distinguished and influential writer," always "showed appreciation for Yugoslav President Tito's opinion" (540). Turk pillories those European academics who took an

unappreciative stance toward the novel, evaluating it from strict aesthetic angles. Like Šuklje, Turk believes that it is the consistent public demand for the book which is the test of its greatness. His impassioned reflections on *East of Eden* culminate in his assertion that it is “one of the most beautiful literary gifts ever available to Slovene readers” (541). The purpose here is not to argue his opinion; however, Turk surely had a point, at least 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. With twelve black lithograph illustrations on good quality paper in one book and fourteen in another, it perfectly represents the *Petdeset najlepših po izboru bralcev* (Readers’ fifty most beautiful novels) collection in which it was published. As such, this Slovene publication at least would have deserved inclusion in Kenneth H. Holmes’s 2004 database of “beautiful examples” of foreign editions (32).

Until the end of the previous century, Janko Moder’s 1983 “Spremna beseda o avtorju” (An accompanying study about the author) in the second printing of *The Grapes of Wrath* 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* paragraph 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, Moder was still in pursuit of the social aspects in Steinbeck’s works, rather than discussing the writer’s impact on the readers. It was not before the most recent studies by Čerče, the 2004 *Delo* article “Neuresničljivost rajskega vrta” (An illusion of Eden) and *Pripovedništvo Johna Steinbecka* (The narrative prose of John Steinbeck, 2006), 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 in the narrow range of critical studies mentioned here, it is not difficult to see that Steinbeck’s works were almost invariably evaluated in the light of communist ideals; not only because ideological lenses were hardly ever put aside when interpreting literature, but also because—as Petr Kopecký observes in connection with Steinbeck criticism in totalitarian Czechoslovakia—some critics “consciously compromised their beliefs” to get a book to readers (2005: 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. This is

perhaps best seen in Stjepan Kresić's afterword, "Riječ o djelu" (About the novel) in his 1956 translation. Rather than providing a more comprehensive critical insight into the novel, Kresić begins by enthusiastically applauding Steinbeck's achievements, unreservedly using superlatives such as "superb" in connection with the novel's characterization, and "unrivalled" to describe the writer's ability to "penetrate into the psyche of his characters" (665). After a detailed summary of the story and its allegorical quality, Kresić meticulously depicts the main characters, arguing that the mere fact that Cathy, Cyrus, Charles, and Caleb were "exiled" from Eden "cannot justify their malevolent behavior nor excuse the author from analyzing their actions" (668). Kresić continues the 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" (669). These views are reminiscent of those expressed by Turk in his accompanying study to the 1958 Cankarjeva založba edition of the novel. However, the later publication date of Turk's study does not justify the assumption that the Slovene critic necessarily had Kresić's study in mind when writing his text, since the imperative to change the world rather than merely interpret it was also expressed in the eleventh of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach."

The Serbian edition, also entitled *Istočno od raja* (2001), is accompanied by a four-page study, "Proza Džona Štajnbeka: Estetika pređenog puta" (John Steinbeck's fiction: Aesthetics of the road taken), which is essentially a condensed summary of John Timmerman's book of the same title. The volume includes a brief appendix surveying the writer's life and work, "Hronologija života i stvaralaštva Džona Štajnbeka" (A chronology of Steinbeck's personal and literary life). According to the database catalogues of the Croatian and Serbian National Library, the novel has elicited no other critical studies. Nevertheless, in line with Katherine Arens's 2005 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," we can still conclude that even *East of Eden* served the political regime in communist Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia (126).

It is worth mentioning in passing that in other East European cultures, too, literary criticism was "assigned the status of a practical and militant philosophy," so it is probably correct to conclude that Steinbeck's texts, including *East of Eden*, were manipulated by communist propaganda in the whole region (Nemoianu 1978: 185). However, the analysis of the novel's reputation in the other countries that were politically grouped into the communist bloc lies beyond the scope of this essay, so let us return to the introductory premise of the novel's unique standing in Slovenia in terms

of its popular acclaim. If this needs further assurance, a glance at Knjižni molji, a website for “fans of good books,” adds evidence that, despite its modest size, Slovenia has been one of the most rewarding markets for *East of Eden*.⁴ The most immediately recognizable evidence of this assertion is the number of Slovene editions, 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. With Rajini Srikanth, some readers choose to use all the information provided by the editors or critics, whereas others resist this temptation, preferring to “consume” the story simply for its “narrative pleasure” (2010: 148). It seems that, in Slovenia, *East of Eden* was so popular mostly because of the latter. It is this type of the readers that responded to the novel’s exploration of new subjective topics, such as the dimensions of individual choice, romantic and domestic relationships and ethical consciousness.

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⁴ See <http://med.over.net/forum5/read.php?33,1357902> (accessed 2 December 2013).

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POVZETEK

RECEPCIJA STEINBECKOVEGA ROMANA VZHODNO OD RAJA V SLOVENIJI

Pričujoči članek predstavi priljubljenost Steinbeckovega romana East of Eden (Vzhodno od raja) v slovenskem prostoru. Ta se odraža v prisotnosti romana na domala vseh področjih slovenskega javnega življenja in v številčnosti njegovih natisov. Analiza kritiških odmevov razkrije, da je bila zaradi podrejanja kritike vladajoči politični opciji in sprevračanja književnosti v ideološko orodje do nedavnega tudi temu romanu odvzeta možnost objektivnega ovrednotenja in predstavitve.