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Ali Dehdarirad
Sapienza Università di Roma

How "Sincere" Was Steinbeck? Conceptual and Stylistic Arrangements in William T. Vollmann's *The Lucky Star* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Abstract

Concentrating on *The Lucky Star* (2020) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), this paper aims to analyze how William T. Vollmann's writing style might have benefited from and/or bears resemblance to that of John Steinbeck's from conceptual and stylistic points of view. In 2009, Vollmann suggested that "Steinbeck was the most American of us all" (260). Interestingly, what seems to fascinate him about Steinbeck is "his sincerity" (Ibid.: 259) – a concept that brings together the novelists' ideas about America with a kind of empathetic knowledge that aspires to truth and resistance to abusive power. Considering Vollmann's laudatory observations regarding Steinbeck's writing, it is worth scrutinizing the linguistic and stylistic strategies that he employs to highlight the moral qualities in his works. Such an analysis indicates resonances between Vollmann's oeuvre and the "New Sincerity" in American fiction. Furthermore, it helps better understand the affinities between his writing and Steinbeck's "sincerity".

1. *Vollmann and Steinbeck: (New) Sincerity and (Post)Postmodernism*

"Post-postmodernist", "Late-postmodernist", "Post-ironic", "New Sincerity", and a number of other labels are among the most popular terms to describe the condition that putatively characterizes the cultural and aesthetic reality of our world in the last quarter of a century or so. Proposing a label for the best next thing after postmodernism in the realm of fiction, most famously in 2010, Adam Kelly coined the term the "New Sincerity" to refer to a generation of writers that came after the widely recognized first-wave postmodernist mas-

ters such as Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, and Don DeLillo. Enjoying a controversial fame for almost a decade and a half, the "New Sincerity" initially referred to David Foster Wallace's literary peers, notably William T. Vollmann, Susan Daitch, and Jonathan Franzen.[1] As it is well known, Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram" has held a focal, yet problematic, position with regard to questions addressing the possibilities of U.S. fiction, especially in the twenty-first century. One of the main issues that he brings to the fore is that postmodern irony has created an impasse for the successive generation of writers. Wallace (1993, 192-93) observed that these authors "back away from ironic watching" and "treat old untrendy human troubles [...] in U.S. life with reverence" although they would be labeled "Too sincere [...], naive".[2]

Skepticism or rejection of ironic attitudes and a move toward constructive possibility have been a fundamental concern in almost all theorizations, including the "New Sincerity", positing the end of postmodernism and speculating about what it has morphed into in the new millennium. Therefore, it is important to understand what role it plays in (relation to) Vollmann's fiction. Clearly, the idea of literary categorization or periodization is problematic in today's complex global literary atmosphere – all the more so when one considers the still contested issue of what precisely postmodernism refers to as a descriptor for U.S. literature.[3] That said, in light of Vollmann's numerous homages to Steinbeck, a critical understanding of his ideas vis-à-vis the "New Sincerity", and the contentious question of what has supplanted postmodernism, helps

1 As early as 1993, Larry McCaffery had written about the interactive qualities among the works of Vollmann, Wallace, and Daitch. In the successor generation, one might think of others such as Richard Powers and Mark Z. Danielewski.

2 Such a tendency to move away from postmodernist suspicion regarding the possibilities of American society is reflected elsewhere in the next thing after postmodernism or "The Fiction of Image" (Wallace 1997, 51), to use Wallace's words. Observing that it has been labeled "post-postmodernism", he suggested that this new kind of fiction is not characterized "just by a certain neo-postmodern technique but by [...] an effort to impose some sort of accountability" on the state of affairs in U.S. society, as opposed to the "entertaining" (Ibid.: 50-51), yet "unuseful" (67), characteristic of postmodernist "irony" (50).

3 The question of what has supplanted postmodernism in the twenty-first century is beyond the purview of this essay. However, there have been two main tendencies: while some critics have interpreted the nature of this shift in terms of a development of postmodernism, rather than an absolute break with it, others have argued for a more radical leave-taking from the works of high postmodernists. See, respectively, Nealon 2012 and Kirby 2009.

situate the concept of sincerity in his work in relation to Steinbeck's writing.

Unlike Wallace and Franzen who have directly explored the concerns related to contemporary U.S. literature, Vollmann has been relatively reticent in providing explicit commentary on that issue, or the works of his contemporaries for that matter.[4] However, one can think of his 1990 statement "American Writing Today", in which he engaged with the shortcomings of recent American fiction and culture. In the section "The Failure of Humanity", Vollmann observes that nowadays, to survive and be happy, we "depend on knowledge", which "can only be obtained through openness" toward "the Other" and "understanding [...]. By empathizing" (Vollmann 1990a, 330).[5] He goes on to suggest that the best way to realize that objective is through art and "Of all the arts, [...] literature articulates best" (Ibid.: 331). So, in "The Prescription", he maintains that "We need writing with a sense of purpose" (Ibid.).

Curiously, in the same critique of the contemporary, "insular" literature of the U.S., Vollmann mentions no other author than Steinbeck as a writer of "works which strive to be useful and fail in proportion to be beautiful" (Ibid.). He considers that a "mistake", which nevertheless "does happen, as in the spots where *The Grapes of Wrath* is mildewed" (Ibid.). Such notions as "a sense of purpose" in writing, or being "useful" rather than "beautiful", reinforce the conclusion of the short critical piece, where Vollmann remarks that "We should believe that truth exists" and "Health is more important than novelty" (Ibid.: 332). As it may be expected, Vollmann's thoughts about empathy, happiness, and truth could strike a jarring note when it comes to postmodernist stalwarts. Nonetheless, his observations are pretty much in tune with the declarations of other writers of his generation such as Wallace and Franzen.[6]

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4 Other than the above-mentioned nonfiction works by Wallace, one can think of his review essay "The Empty Plenum" and the earlier essay "Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young". As for Franzen, see his 2002 essay collection, where he offers considerations about the struggle with "despair about the American novel" (Franzen 2002, 55) and the attempt to understand the best next thing after postmodernism.

5 Elsewhere, in *Rising Up and Rising Down*, he reiterated a similar position: "*We bear an obligation to study and intuit the identity of the other, his rights and his needs*" (Vollmann 2003, 3:286). He further suggested that "empathy [...] is always a good [...] principle of human relations" (Ibid.: 6:8).

6 For a useful discussion of the similarities between Vollmann and several writers of his generation, see Savvas and Coffman 2019.

Bearing that in mind, it is no novelty to associate Vollmann's work with the literature of post-postmodernism and the peculiar relationship that it might have with that fiction's commitment to sincerity, as opposed to the widespread irony of postmodernist literature.[7] In view of Vollmann's ideas that "We should portray important human problems" and "seek solutions" (Ibid.), however, it is enticing to understand how his works interact with Steinbeck's oeuvre. Apart from the above-mentioned consideration regarding *The Grapes of Wrath*, Vollmann has made a host of laudatory comments about Steinbeck's writing. In his 2009 nonfiction book *Imperial*, he suggested that "Steinbeck was the most American of us all" (Vollmann 2009, 260).[8] In a work that addresses the unconscionable conditions surrounding immigrant workers from Mexico to the U.S., it stands to reason that he draws upon Steinbeck's oeuvre.[9] Along the same lines of praise, in 2000, he had stated that "I really, really do admire Steinbeck" (Cooper 2020, 122).

While the afore-mentioned selection of Vollmann's comments concerning Steinbeck could be broadened, this brief assortment probably suffices to propound the significance of his literary production to Vollmann's work. In fact, in one of the appendices to Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson's *Expelled from Eden*, the former suggests reading Vollmann's appreciative essay "Steinbeck: Most American of Us All" for "an account of some of the features of Steinbeck's work that have influenced Vollmann's own writing" (McCaffery and Hemmingson 2004, 410).[10] As such, I have chosen to consider that question, not least because of the aesthetic implications deriving from the "New Sincerity". Indeed, what seems to fascinate Vollmann about Steinbeck is his sincerity: "this is what I love about Steinbeck most of all, his sincerity" (Vollmann 2009, 259). In a 2009 interview, he made a similar remark: "What I admire most about Steinbeck: He had heart. He wasn't afraid to say, 'Look,

7 See, for instance, Coffman 2015.

8 The beginning of his report "Life as a Terrorist" delineates the same thought, in which he considers Steinbeck "the writer I have always considered the most American of us all" (Vollmann 2013).

9 In *The Grapes of Wrath*, he famously dealt with the plight of the desperate Okies to California.

10 McCaffery indicates a further similarity in the works of the two writers by recourse to the story of Cain and Abel: "an event that later resonates throughout Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and Vollmann's *The Royal Family*" (Ibid.: 388).

this is how I see it'" (Berton 2009).[11] Following Vollmann's concern with "sincerity" as well as moral conditions and causes, in this paper, I aim to show how his writing style might have benefited from and/or bears resemblance to that of Steinbeck's from two perspectives: a) conceptual, indicating the importance of empathy, pursuit of truth, resistance to abusive power, and benevolent action, and b) stylistic, including an interest in narrative openness, the use of multiple narrative voices, the choice of certain temporal and spatial indicators, and the repetition of specific words and sentences.

2. *Empathy as "the Golden Rule": Conceptual Engagements*

Although sincerity, "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 1971, 2), in its absolute form is hard to pin down in a work of fiction, a significant way in which Vollmann's writing has helped aesthetically realize the implications of the "New Sincerity" is by depicting the importance of empathy and truth in his works. Reflecting Vollmann's thoughts about violent action, its justifications, and "the Other" (Vollmann 1990, 330) is one of his statements in *Rising Up and Rising Down*: "First respect the inertia of an alien situation. Don't inject yourself into it for your own gain" (Vollmann 2003, 2:461). As a reaction to the irony of hip postmodernists, perceiving the world through the optic of suspicion, such a position seems familiar to Vollmann readers when they think about the representation of the disenchanted in his oeuvre.

In *The Ice-Shirt*, the reader comes across several episodes, in the section "The Hermaphrodite", about the characters Elder Brother and Younger Brother, who "lived on the ice without knowing where they had come from" (Vollmann 1990b, 85). Curiously represented as "Self and Other" (Ibid.), the elder sibling takes care of his brother. Nevertheless, "Younger Brother feared more than loved him" (Ibid.) insofar as his brother is ever more convinced about the "truths that he had learned from ice" (Ibid.: 86). In fact, Elder Brother ignores the insecurities of the younger, who "sometimes thought he was [...]

11 In a 2000 interview, he had offered a similar characterization of Steinbeck's writing: "I think he has such a fine heart. [...] I want to write about people with problems, and [...] make other people understand them [...]. Certainly Steinbeck was interested in that, too" (Cooper 2020, 122).

not human" (Ibid.). Travelling through ice, and on the verge of death, a mysterious "Spirit Woman" (Ibid.: 90) appears to the siblings, providing them with shelter. Bending over Younger Brother, however, something abstruse happens: the enigmatic woman turns him into his brother's wife whereby he is forced to satisfy Elder Brother's sexual needs even though "he could not understand the *otherness* of his wife" (Ibid.: 95). Indeed, he makes fun of her "jokingly": "he knew that she was no woman at all, but just his Younger Brother who had carelessly lost his penis" (97). Meanwhile, Younger Brother mysteriously and secretively develops the ability to transform his arms into wings. Tired of being what "she did not want to be" (Ibid.: 96) and his brother's teasing, eventually "She took her bone-needle; she poked him again and again. […] Elder Brother was dead! She had killed him!" (Ibid.: 99).

This episode brings to mind Vollmann's debate on the issues of empathy and violence. If respecting "the inertia of an alien situation" does not bear fruit, according to Vollmann (2003, 2:461), we should "intervene on the side of the righteous, respecting the most justified version of the Golden Rule" – perhaps the "*Justified* […] Empath's Golden Rule: Do unto others, not only as you would be done by, but also as they would be done by". In line with such positions on moral agency in favor of the dispossessed, Vollmann (2009, 259) is truly appreciative of Steinbeck's "sincerity" – a salient concept that brings together the novelists' ideas about America with a kind of empathetic knowledge that aspires to truth, resistance to abusive power, and benevolent action.

Taking into consideration the entirety of Vollmann's comments on Steinbeck, we might say that, to him, Steinbeck's compassionate and defensive writing of poor and underprivileged Americans was a "sincere" position. Vollmann maintains that "People simplify Steinbeck into a populist, […] a socialist" (Ibid.: 257). Concerning *The Winter of Our Discontent*, he remarks that it is a novel with defects reminiscent of those of socialist realism: "Here lies a book with a message" (Ibid.: 259). With that in mind, Vollmann suggests that precisely because of having messages in his books, Steinbeck "hoped to actually accomplish something in his own time, in which case I love him for that" (Ibid.). The notion of accomplishing something and realizing solutions to the problems of the underclass calls to mind the post-postmodernist tendency in Vollmann's own writing on two accounts: the idea of believing in some sort of "truth" (Vollmann 1997, 332) as well as "empathy", or "the supreme principle of human relations" (Vollmann 2003, 6:8), toward the achievement of that truth.

In *East of Eden*, we come to learn about the Chinese servant Lee who, endowed with such qualities as intelligence and compassion, might be considered an embodiment of "sincerity". Compared to "psychic monsters" (Steinbeck 1952, 79), Cathy Ames (later in the novel, Kate Trask) at some point gives birth to twin boys with the assistance of Samuel Hamilton. During the delivery, however, he feels some unease about the woman as she "tore at his hand [...]. The flesh was torn" (Ibid.: 205). Later, in response to Samuel's invitation to see her newborn children, she says, "I don't want them" (Ibid.: 207). Feeling disconcerted, Samuel tells Lee, "A frightened sorrow has closed down over my heart" (Ibid.).

Interestingly, when Lee stitches Samuel's wound, the servant behaves in such a way as though he himself were going through the pain: "The Chinese bit his lips, feeling the inflicted pain in himself" (Ibid.: 208). Lee's practical and compassionate way of thinking is further confirmed by Samuel's wife, Liza, who "didn't quite believe in him" (Ibid.: 211) at first. Nonetheless, taking on the task of caring for the Trask household, she comes to develop an unexpected affinity for the Chinese servant as she identifies maternal characteristics in him, essential to the growth of the boys. "He learned everything I told him" (Ibid.: 213), she tells her husband. Noticing Lee's "sincerity", Liza approvingly considers him "a Presbyterian" rather than "a heathen" (Ibid.).

But if we think about Lionel Trilling's definition of "sincerity", as "the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self" (Trilling 1971, 5), Lee incarnates that concept more straightforwardly in the conversation after taking care of Samuel. Even though the wounded man is still in pain, Lee feels the need to tell the truth and describes his experience as an unwillingness to be in "a slaughter house" (Steinbeck 1952, 208), emphasizing that "the words came out" of his mouth naturally. When Samuel, in shock, states that he feels "a dreadfulness coming", again Lee says, "I feel it too" (Ibid.). Understanding the significance of this moral conundrum, nevertheless, he repeats the sentence "what do you want to say?" (Ibid.: 208-9) three times to help Samuel overcome his despair: "I want my wife" (Ibid.: 209), he finally replies.

Some critics have argued that Steinbeck's fiction was sentimental in its depiction of the common man's problems.[12] Others have simply lauded the

12 To cite an early critic, in a piece in the *New York Times*, Arthur Mizener argued that in most cases, and sometimes to an "intolerable" (quoted in Souder 2020, 335) extent, Steinbeck insisted upon providing a sentimental moral to each story. Among more contempo-

writer's compassion for his characters.[13] When it comes to the rendition of Lee's character, the reader realizes the predetermined quality of aspiration to truth and empathy. Clearly, to Vollmann (2009, 259), writing in a message, personified by Lee, is "a flaw". Despite that, what mostly matters to him is striving toward compassion and truth as a way of finding solutions to problems, and "Whether or not we find them, the seeking will deepen the portrait" (Vollmann 1990a, 332). To use the words of Peter Monro Jack (1939), Steinbeck wrote "with a sincerity seldom equaled". On that note, Vollmann (2009, 259) remarks, "Do I care that nobody I've met talks like that? He [Lee] is sincere because Steinbeck is sincere".

What can we make of such an attitude? Certainly, it reminds us of Wallace's famous proposal about a "single-entendre" (Wallace 1993, 192) fiction toward constructive moral engagement rather than the generally unproductive tendencies of contemporary critique. Admitting that "Steinbeck occasionally mistook sentimentality for truth", Vollmann (2009, 259) believes that "he was never cynical". In other words, the anger or bitterness in his works were devices to highlight the importance of truth and individual choice in U.S. society. In effect, a novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* "had something to say" and the straightforward expression of the Okies' plight, as a result of a greedy corporate agribusiness, made many raise their eyebrows at Steinbeck – the "un-American" who, "unaffiliated with anything but balance" (Ibid.: 258), was "most American" (Ibid.: 260). In this sense, Vollmann's remark that "I want to be un-American like him" (Ibid.: 258) resonates with his earlier view on the importance of holding an empathetic position regarding "the Other" (Vollmann 1990, 330) so as to ward off abuses of power: "*We should aim to benefit others in addition to ourselves*" (Ibid.: 332).

Significantly, this inclination toward the upholding of truth, fostering empathy to achieve helpful knowledge, and in one word we might say "sincerity", is further evident in both writers' works of nonfiction and personal lives.[14] The

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rary critics is John Seelye who has used terms such as "sentimental novel" (Seelye 2002, 13) and "sentimental fiction" (Ibid.: 14) to refer to Steinbeck's novels.

13 As early as 1939, Charles Poore pointed out Steinbeck's "remarkable sympathy and understanding" for his characters (Poore 1939). Concerning *Travels with Charley*, Edward Weeks (1962) later wrote that it "exposed once more the power of sympathy" in Steinbeck's novels.

14 While the tendency toward sincerity generally applies to these authors' works, in Vollmann's oeuvre it might be best interpreted in relation to the "New Sincerity" as a response

most basic, but seminal, feature of their nonfiction is a common journalistic nature. According to Steinbeck biographer Jay Parini (1995, 274), the writer "came, increasingly, to see himself as a journalist".[15] Albeit Steinbeck did not define himself as a journalist, he was familiar with the complexity, danger, and influence of journalism: "It has the greatest virtue and the greatest evil. [...] But [...] it is perhaps the purest thing we have. Honesty has a way of creeping in" (Ibid.: 391). Nonetheless, the goal of his journalism was "to get it right [...]. He always tried for the human perspective [...] without prejudice" (Steinbeck 2002: xvii). On his experience as a reporter, in a *New York Times Magazine* article, he wrote, "I couldn't learn to steal a picture from a desk when a family refused to be photographed and I invariably got emotionally involved and tried to kill the whole story to save the subject" (Ibid.: 34) – an attitude reminiscent of his comment in a letter that "the hardest thing about writing is simply to tell the truth" (quoted in Marshall 1988, 105).

Such a proclivity to write about truth, while being compassionate toward the other, has been a staple of Vollmann's nonfiction, too. In fact, Steinbeck's refusal to remain emotionally separate from his subjects reminds the reader of one of Vollmann's observations about migrant farmworkers in *Imperial*. He deliberately chooses not "to fictionalize them" because of the empathetic bond that he feels: "The truth is that I do not understand enough about border people to describe them" (Vollmann 2009, 251), which is why "I would never consider changing a word of their stories" (Ibid.: 262). As a writer who has been moving through various genres of writing, Vollmann's journalism is inspired by a search for truth and empathy, so much so that in a 2007 interview he said, "I would like to do something of significant service for my fellow human beings. [...] I don't really want to [...] put myself in harm's way. But I would consider it" (Seaman 2007).

On that score, reflecting upon writing his *Grapes of Wrath* about Imperial, Vollmann (2009, 179-80) observes that it would be crucial to see the difficulties of Mexican farmers firsthand:

to the poetics of postmodernism, whereas for Steinbeck it was more of a (literary) tool to call into question America's national faults and the plight of poor migrant laborers. As Vollmann (2013) himself mentioned, Steinbeck was "a sincere thinker [...], a patriot who loved the idea of freedom".

15 As Gore Vidal observed, "The truth is that Steinbeck was really a journalist at heart" (quoted in Parini 1995, 274).

maybe I'd take my synopsis from Officer Dan Murray of the Border Patrol: *You should see these guys pickin' watermelon* [...]. *They do work most Americans wouldn't* [...]. I could have come every day with my notebook to stand beneath the multitudinous, multipointed canopies of fan-palms [...], writing down their stories.

If a central characteristic of literary journalism is a writer's commitment to live beside their sources, Steinbeck had a personal connection with migrant workers. In Parini's words, the writer was "more like a reporter [...] than a novelist" as he "prowled the region with a notebook in hand" (Parini 1995, 151). While Steinbeck's so-called "moral trilogy"[16] makes this point clearer, in *Travels with Charley,* he associates himself with literary journalism through the stylistic device of point of view. He argues that reporters usually connect the dots to come up with a mirror of reality, but, to him, "there are too many realities [...] and yet each [...] honest" (Steinbeck 1997, 59-60). Speaking to the significance of sincerity in the novelist's writing, Steinbeck's comment is reminiscent of a Shakespearean motto: "This above all – to thine own self be true" (Shakespeare 2016, 1.3.78).

In a Steinbeckesque fashion, Vollmann (2009, 262) concludes, "This is how to write a novel: Gather details and plant them in the pale tan soil of narrative [....] so that they can be potted in the lobby of my *Grapes of Wrath*".

3. *"Something like Participation": Stylistic and Linguistic Mechanisms*

Vollmann has oftentimes expressed his devotion to writing "beautiful sentences" (Laurence 2020, 117). In a 2010 interview, he said, "I long for my sentences to be beautiful" (Carson and Evans 2011) – an idea that he had already expressed elsewhere in 2004: "to me style is very important, and I try to make my sentences as beautiful as I can" (Boratav 2020, 159). While this small number of quotations can be expanded, Vollmann's remark in the interview with David Boratav is suggestive of his concern with stylistic choices. Keeping that in mind, he also mentioned that "When I write my fiction, [...] I try to create something that I think is still true. And so it's very rare that I try to create something that is just beautiful" (Ibid.). In other words, not only are stylistic matters central to his fiction, but they also reflect his ideas about the importance of truth.

16 See Benson 1984, 968.

As such, it is worth scrutinizing the strategies that he employs to highlight the moral qualities in his works, which in turn indicate resonances between Vollmann's oeuvre and the "New Sincerity".[17] In this section, my goal is to analyze Vollmann's linguistic and stylistic decisions, promoting empathy, truth, and resistance to abusive power, in his novel *The Lucky Star* in relation to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Such an analysis helps better understand the affinities between his writing and Steinbeck's sincerity.[18]

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck depicts the alliance of the Dust Bowl and corporate agricultural industry to show the displacement of Oklahoma sharecroppers, or the Okies, from their land to California in the hope of a better life. Yet, on arrival they realize that the Golden State is overrun with other migrant farmers. Significantly, in representing the misfortunes of the Joad family and the reversal of their expectations in California, Steinbeck's text does not lend itself to a teleological narrative stance. Indeed, no single voice in *The Grapes of Wrath* speaks with concluding authority insofar as Steinbeck employs stylistic mechanisms that favor narrative openness and critique. Put otherwise, when considering the alternation of the story of the migrants as part of the Dust Bowl exodus (the intercalary chapters) with that of the Joads' (Joad chapters), neither set of chapters can be considered as ultimate narrative closures.

To show this non-teleological representation, he uses certain stylistic tools. In chapter five, for instance, repetition of specific words is used as a way of emphasizing the widening of the already existing chasm between the tenant farmers and the landowners. The proprietors have the sharecroppers leave the

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17 Some insights have been already provided by Christopher K. Coffman in his 2019 essay "The Sentence Is Most Important" (Coffman 2019).

18 While other works by these writers might be considered for such an examination, it is useful to briefly understand why *The Lucky Star* is a suitable choice to be read in connection with *The Grapes of Wrath*. First, it is inevitable not to think about Vollmann's return to San Francisco's Tenderloin District as a source of inspiration in writing his so-called "prostitute trilogy" (Hemmingson 2009, 105) to depict the problems of anti-heroes seeking love under the guise of prostitutes. As Vollmann (2020, 911) tells us in the afterword to *The Lucky Star*, "The novel completes my 'transgender trilogy'". With that in mind, not only does the scope of *The Lucky Star* encompass the main concerns previously depicted in his oeuvre, but it further resonates with topics that lend themselves to a comparative investigation with *The Grapes of Wrath*. In effect, Vollmann's nonfiction books such as *Poor People* and *Imperial* engage with the troubles of the underprivileged, reminding us of sufferings surrounding prostitution in his de facto trilogy.

land by deflecting blame on "The bank-the monster" (Steinbeck 1939, 86). The sentence "It's the monster" (Ibid.: 88), or some variation of it, keeps repeating throughout this chapter to underscore the desperate situation of the farmers in the wake of a ruthless financial system that has deprived them of their relation to the land. "It's our land. [...] We were born on it, and [...] died on it. [...] That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it" (Ibid.), say the tenant men. Once again, the owners respond, "It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man" (Ibid.), recalling Bartleby's famous words "I would prefer not to" in Herman Melville's eponymous short story, in which the scrivener turns into a dehumanized human being, a "ghost" (Melville 2010, 36). The personification of the bank as a capitalist monster running on the lives of the farmworkers contributes to the cold-hearted quality of the landowners' mechanical answer.

Nevertheless, though this pattern of repetition and personification serves the author to point up the troubles of the sharecroppers, he does not altogether demonize the landlords. The narrator relates that some of the owners were "proud to be slaves to such cold and powerful masters" (Steinbeck 1939, 85). At the same time,

> Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold [...], and some were afraid (Ibid.).

Here Steinbeck's narrator offers an objective description of the proprietors by portraying them as quasi victims of the bank's overreaching power "which had ensnared them" (Ibid.). In effect, we learn that "These last would take no responsibility" because they themselves were "slaves" to the banks, which were "a monster [...] and masters all at the same time" (Ibid.).

Moreover, this objectivity comes at a moment when the reader is feeling deeply for the tenant men's pain. At the height of such empathetic renditions, Steinbeck's narrative remains non-teleological by criticizing the cultivators' ancestors for having ravaged Indians and their lands: "Grampa killed Indians [...] for the land. Maybe we can kill banks – they're worse than Indians [...]. We'll get our guns, like Grampa when the Indians came" (Ibid.: 88). The owners' automatic reply to such objections about the land is that "The bank, the monster owns it" (Ibid.). In such a karmic loop, so to speak, the word "monster" becomes a metaphor for whoever appropriates others' possessions. Heralding

Steinbeck's sincerity, the criticism of the sharecroppers' forefathers, therefore, functions as an ironical interrogation that assures us of the text's balanced delineation of its subjects.

Shifting the focus of attention to *The Lucky Star*, one can describe the novel as the account of the life of a mysterious woman, named Karen Strand, and her unconditional, yet tragic, love for everybody she runs into. Referred to as "the lesbian" (Vollmann 2020, 17) throughout the book, she is the connecting thread that ties together the various storylines of a fictional cast of mostly LGBTQ characters as well as their sufferings and hopes. In the afterword, Vollmann remarks that "The real title of the novel is *The Lesbian*" (Ibid.: 914). Indeed, the rising action of the book is Karen's realization of her love for the character E-beth (Elizabeth Jackson). Karen's childhood up to the teenage years is described as a troublesome period in which she never felt appreciated by her mother. In an atmosphere of familial problems, when Karen as a high schooler met E-beth, "she [Karen] was ecstatic, because she would be loved forever" (Ibid.: 74) and "the girl became a lesbian" (Ibid.: 68).

Yet, when she realizes that E-beth is going out with another girl, her obsessive reaction leads to being dumped, at which point Karen's "experience consisted of *shock without emotion*" (Ibid.: 93). Disappointed, she craves a place where there could be only women who truly love each other. Curiously, the text allows such a possibility through E-beth: "the other woman [...] sent her the address, which referred to an island" (Ibid.: 102). In fact, the section "The Island" can be considered the heart of the text in which Vollmann engages with familiar concerns in his work such as the relation between love and violence.

Through an almost sadistic rite of passage, by an enigmatic "old lesbian" (Ibid.: 109), Karen becomes "a goddess" (Ibid.: 110) labeled Neva. However, in order "to be loved" (Ibid.: 112), she must willingly "suffer as much as possible" (Ibid.: 108). Oddly, the old lady's violent practices are a means for Neva not only to cope with her romantic failure but more importantly to acquire an all-encompassing "bond of empathy" (Ibid.: 101).

Having gone through this mysterious transition, Neva develops the capacity to love everyone "without shame or limit" (Ibid.: 35). The narrator recounts that "playing with her sweet soft breasts" created a pleasure that "did not originate in my fingers [...]; rather, it came out of her [...] like a tingling warmth" (Ibid.: 474). Such empathetic representations of Neva, as a source of solace, abound in the novel and are heightened by the stylistic mechanism of

repetition: Neva frequently uses the sentence "I love everyone" insomuch as it becomes a sort of catchphrase for all the characters. Nonetheless, albeit Neva "became perfectly herself", we are also told that "she lost her freedom forever" (Ibid.: 115). This depiction brings to mind Howard Pickett's revision of Trilling's notion of sincerity as a species of self-congruence. He maintains that the faithful articulation of one's personal thoughts may sometimes be "negative, if not downright vicious" (Pickett 2017, 3).

On that score, contrary to the myriad of selfless love declarations by Neva and those around her, in the end she succumbs to the pressures of her past, dominating her present, and commits suicide. An important factor in her emotional collapse, and relapsing to the initial mental state before the island ritual, is a retired policeman (John Daniel or J.D.) who, described as "a regular private detective" (Vollmann 2020, 455), is morbidly obsessed with her past life. J.D. wants to unravel the mystery around Neva because his girlfriend Judy "the transwoman" (Ibid.: 17) finds comfort in loving Neva, who tells him that "Judy's in trouble" (Ibid.: 460). "Leave her the fuck alone" (Ibid.: 456), answers the retired policeman, who "could compassionate pathetic crimes" (Ibid.: 232) but has no empathy for those in Neva's circle. It is no accident that he is depicted as "a sick old man" (Ibid.: 266) or "a pervert" (Ibid.: 358).

Though Vollmann uses certain linguistic and stylistic devices, such as repetition and the noir-like storyline, or a parody of that genre, to arouse the reader's empathy, he also provides other tools indicating the text's attention to the notion that narrative authority should not block from view its own moral responsibilities. In this regard, the careful choice of Richard as the narrator is very much telling. He is a lonely, alcoholic man who tells us that he "existed [...] for no good reason" with "passivity" as one of his "most distinguishing characteristics" (Ibid.: 151-52). We learn that he miserably failed in his married life due to drug consumption and relationships with other women. Eventually, he is left by his wife at the end of his "glowing career" (Ibid.: 153), as he mockingly mentions. At the same time, he grows to develop a deep emotional and sexual dependence on Neva, so much so that he says, "I think Neva is Jesus" (Ibid.: 639) and "we called the lesbian the bodhisattva" (Ibid.: 213). Choosing Richard as the narrator of the book, therefore, casts doubt on the reliability of the narrative point of view. Elevating the voice of "a nothing" (Ibid.: 151) and "a monster" (Ibid.: 153) to the status of the narrator creates certain uncertainties leading to a sort of narrative openness that turns the text's scrutiny on its own head.

Furthermore, Vollmann's novel provides details that allow for the possibility of resituating the text within the framework of narrative inconclusion. Even though the transition from Karen to Neva on the island endows her with the ability to love everyone and "make almost anybody love her" (Ibid.: 115), the choice of certain temporal indicators runs counter to such a possibility, evinced by the protagonist's fate in the end. "The Island" opens with the following line: "When someone longs for 'the past', what she truly pines for is *return into her vanished self*" (Ibid.: 98). In effect, Neva's trouble before conversion is her relentless longing to go back to her ex-lover, wishing that "the past could be present, forever" (Ibid.: 99). Whether the vanished self is Karen, who has been bestowed "the jewel of happiness now", or a reflection of E-beth, "That treacherous face she still adores" (Ibid.: 98), it clearly belongs to the past. But "she also wishes to be spared this selfsame loss" (Ibid.) as though she craved a bygone self that no longer exists in the present. The function of these beginning lines is, therefore, to show the impossibility of Neva's desire "to unify a contradiction", described as "nostalgia" (Ibid.).

The simultaneous representation and interaction of Neva's past and present appeals to our sense of empathy. During the island ritual, she must "get hurt without knowing why" (Ibid.: 106). Despite its esotericism, the old woman's mysterious rite seems, all the same, to be the only temporary solution for Neva to get over her nostalgia. The narrator surmises that the goal of making her physically suffer must have been to set her free from "two memories [...]: of E-beth and [...] her mother" by "exercising her in acts of love" (Ibid.: 109). With that in mind, we are told that "what had been done to her on the island remained unknown" (Ibid.: 146), and thereafter "occasionally she believed herself to be unlovable" (Ibid.: 127). These doubts about the violent actions by "the old lesbian" (Ibid.: 109) and Karen's adopted notion of love herald the text's resistance to a determinate conclusion and its interest in an unbiased depiction of all the subjects that it represents.

Such a dynamic is depicted elsewhere in a chapter entitled "The Stream of Pleasure" (Ibid.: 177), which already suggests the idea of openness. Although in the end Neva commits suicide, it is never explicitly mentioned except in rare comments, such as "That Strand bitch offed herself" (Ibid.: 873), as if the narrator wanted to disbelieve it. He relates that Neva's "act was immediately imperiled by her hope of managing us without needing to explain" (Ibid.). Yet, he says that "as long as we felt loved", there was no need for explanations insofar as they

"would commence an unraveling without end" (Ibid.). Thus, Neva remains a mystery, even to J.D. whose best guess is that her real name is Karen. Near the end, the narrator admits that "Offering perfection imperfectly, she inflicted despair", but he also states that "I reject this because I still love [...] Neva" (Ibid.: 816). As Vollmann remarks in the afterword, "*The Lucky Star* may be my most cynical book" but "we can all aspire to love others and ourselves" (Ibid.: 912).

Albeit these may seem idiosyncratic and paradoxical delineations regarding the notion of (self)love in the novel, they indicate Neva's sincerity, not so much in terms of self-congruence but rather as a reappraisal of it. To use Pickett's words, though simulation, as opposed to authenticity, is usually vicious, it may sometimes be "positive, even virtuous" (Pickett 2017, 3). The novel's ending and Vollmann's afore-mentioned comment hint at the sort of sincerity that he appreciates about Steinbeck's oeuvre, where the writer of *The Grapes of Wrath* conveyed his concern about "American [...] hypocrisy" (Vollmann 2009, 259). In light of Steinbeck's statement in a letter that his purpose in writing the novel was to "do some good" (quoted in Parini 1995, 181) and "lead them [people] to action" (Whitt 2006, 43), Vollmann (2009, 913) encourages us to "pursue the life-affirming question *how does one go forward*?".

A brief analysis of temporal relations in certain sections of *The Lucky Star* has bespoken the hardships of Neva's life. More importantly, it has challenged the notion of narrative conclusion by undermining narrative authority. Significantly, *The Grapes of Wrath* offers episodes in which the examination of temporal indicators may lead to a similar two-fold function, aspiring to what Steinbeck (1941) called "something like participation". In chapter twenty-five, we come across sentences like "The little farmers [...] sprayed the trees and sold no crop, they [...] could not pick the crop" (Steinbeck 1939, 457). Employing the past tense, the narrator speaks about that which he has heard about the cultivators' impossible harvest. Shifting to present tense, nevertheless, he tells his interlocutor more authentically about what he can attest to firsthand: "taste the wine – no grape flavor at all, just sulphur and tannic acid" (Ibid.). Then he makes the prediction that "This vineyard will belong to the bank. Only the great owners can survive" (Ibid.). The passage from the past to the present, and eventually to the future, in the narrative voice helps the reader empathize with, and invites them to "participate" in, the plight of the farmers as well as those who cannot afford the grapes from their vineyards.

Interestingly, this narrator, like other voices, is given partial access to the events, implying Steinbeck's lack of intention to write a book that conveys ab-

solute authority. In the penultimate, and the novel's final intercalary, chapter, the use of multiple voices is meant as a way for the migrants to express their misery and highlight the oppressing forces. Keeping that in mind, it is also a stylistic instrument that sheds light on the philosophical attitude that helps them get through various moments of suffering. When heavy rain strikes the migrants' tents, as they're waiting for government bureaucracy to finish, one narrative voice says, "It'll soon be over" (Ibid.: 559). On the contrary, however, all their belongings get wet, realizing that they cannot "git relief" nor any "kinda work" (Ibid.: 560) anytime soon.

Reflecting on the situation of these destitute people, when the rain finally stops, a new voice says, "Fella had a team of horses, had to use 'em to plow [...], wouldn' think a turnin' 'em out to starve when they wasn't workin'", to which another nameless character responds, "Them's horses – we're men" (Ibid.: 562). Through these voices, we run across the otherwise impossible persistence of the dispossessed Okies against all odds, as well as their humanity. Resisting narrative closure, thus, Steinbeck's novel appeals to our "participation" (Steinbeck 1941) in the unfolding of a text with no absolute voice of authority.

When it comes to such renditions, bespeaking the absence of ultimate teleology and an interest in sincerity, Steinbeck further employs spatial relations between the voices of the narrator and the characters. Near the end of chapter one, the narrative eye is positioned at a distance from the men, women, and children it observes: "Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, [...] The women studied the men's faces secretly [...]. The children stood near by" (Ibid.: 1). That the narrative voice talks at a distance situates the characters within an almost macroscopic spatial frame, within which its observations offer an objective account of collective human suffering.

At the same time, the reader comes across a close-up view of the exchange between the characters and the narrative voice in the final paragraph of chapter one. In this regard, the adverb "secretly" suggests that the invisible narrator is covertly noticing women's observation of men. In other words, the narrator seems to be engaged in a dialogic interaction with the women, insofar as he takes part in their act of observing the men secretly. Further demonstrating this spatial dynamic between various voices in the same passage is an internal dialogism as women ask, "What'll we do?" to which men answer, "I don't know" (Ibid.: 2). Crucially, this exchange equips the narrator with a chance to address the characters directly: "But it was all right" (Ibid.).

However we interpret the distant and close views of the characters by the narrative eye, it is noticeable that Steinbeck is not inclined toward an omniscient narrator but rather constructing a dialogic communication with it as well as the characters. On that note, he chooses not to use quotation marks for the sentence "But it was all right", heralding the importance of dialogue between his narrator and the anonymous voices.

Concerning *The Lucky Star*, the narrator holds a peculiar position. Richard is shown to interact with characters like J.D. in the novel's present. At times, he is merely an observer from a distance and a chronicler of a community's hardships. Such a distance is both temporal, as when he relates his conversations with Neva in the narrative's past, and spatial, in cases when he watches the events taking place from a remote standpoint. Similar to the narrator in *The Grapes of Warth*, Richard is a kind of participant-observer, who, like other characters, is involved in the unfolding of the text's events.

While this similarity does not equate Vollmann's and Steinbeck's styles of representation, it hints at their calculated stylizations of dialogic voices, signaled by temporal and spatial indicators within the novels. If Bakhtin (1981, 300) described the development of the novel as a function of "the deepening of dialogic essence", with increasingly more hard and fast truths drawn into dialogue, here it helps the novelists recount stories through voices that forthrightly point out human tragedy without any authoritative truths. As one might surmise, such a stylistic mechanism, connoting narrative openness and convolution simultaneously, is a way to suggest the pursuit of truth and the importance of "sincerity" to these writers.

This article has endeavored to offer a brief glimpse of the insights that might be achieved by reading the works of Vollmann and Steinbeck in tandem. A close analysis of the conceptual and stylistic mechanisms highlights the novelists' concern with sincerity as they produce a kind of empathetic knowledge that strives for truth. Whether understood as "congruence between feeling and avowal" (Trilling 1971, 7) or "a reappraisal of self-congruence" (Pickett 2017, 2), Vollmann seems to have benefited from Steinbeck's work both in terms of theme and concept and at the level of narrative and style. Furthermore, this investigation casts light on Vollmann's declarations about empathy and truth, allowing for association of his work with the "New Sincerity" and commonly attributed characteristics of post-postmodernist writing in U.S. literature.

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Ali Dehdarirad is the author of "*From Faraway California": Thomas Pynchon's Aesthetics of Space in the California Trilogy* (Sapienza UP 2023). Since 2021, he has been teaching American literature and culture at the Sapienza University of Rome, where he obtained his Ph.D. with a focus on American literature. He has published several essays on Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann, Cormac McCarthy, Paul Auster, Stephen Markley, John Edward Williams, and John Steinbeck. His forthcoming essay "We'd Tell Her to Embrace Her Inner Disgustingness" has been accepted for publication in the *Oxford University Handbook of American Street Literature*. Together with Sascha Pöhlmann and Giorgio Mariani, he is currently co-editing special issue of *RSAJournal*, titled "(Re)Reading Encyclopedic Narratives in the Digital Age."