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Ending Badly

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be to us nothing else than hell” because “the others are the most important thing within ourselves that we can draw from to know who we are.” “When we think about ourselves, when we try to find out who we are,” Sartre went on, we “use the knowledge others already have of us. We form an opinion of ourselves by means of tools others have given us. Whatever I say about myself, an other’s judgment is always contained in it. This means that if my relations with an other are bad, I am completely dependent on this other. And then I am truly in hell” (my translation).

Before and after Sartre, the moderns (to say nothing of their postmodern heirs) have both recognized and disowned this dependence. It is not that our relationships with others are good, bad, and anything in between. It is just that, no matter how they are, they always define us and therefore shape our self-definitions, who we are, who we think we are, or what we want to be taken for. Like it or not, being entails being dependent on people and situations outside you. Autonomy is a superstition, solipsism an untenable view of things, and egotism unethical, in today’s “network society” more than ever.

One way of looking at bad books—one way of entertaining the notion that there are bad books at all in the wake of the culture wars, the canon debate, and multiculturalism—would be trying to figure out the degree to which the text in question allows for this outside, acknowledges this paramount dependence. Now, moderns like Sartre were ambivalent about it. A romantic aftershock, their authenticity standard was one of originality. To be authentic was to be original, and to be original was to be indebted to no one or at least to appear so. The postmoderns borrow overtly and revel in literary and cultural indebtedness. They call it intertextuality and define authenticity, and with it originality, rather correlatively. To them, the original writer handles—plays on, recycles, etc.—effectively a material, a theme, and even a project that in an important sense comes from and echoes an outside, an elsewhere, other times and places.

Surely some postmoderns do a better job than others. Needless to say, there are good postmodern books, and then there are some not so good. But what postmodernism can be said to be doing more and more these days—and thus possibly take postmodernism in a new direction altogether, and into a new cultural paradigm—is institutionalize this concern, implement this poetics of dependence systematically, and in the process ground our aesthetical judgments ethically.

Let us face it: yesterday’s “bad” books are on today’s syllabi. Think, for example, about the whole sentimental tradition, about romance, or about the “paraliterary” genres. Things change, as they must, standards evolve (some say, collapse), benchmarks shift, for all the usually stated and unstated reasons. What does not go away is, first, the writers’ and their books’ genetic “dependence” on others—precursors, audiences, “the people out there” beyond the familial and the familiar—and, second, the talent and honesty with which that connection is incorporated, accounted for, and paid homage to. To write is to write with and ultimately for others. Writing is moving toward others, says Paul Auster. We write, adds Julia Kristeva, to honor the foreign—as we should, strangers to ourselves as we quintessentially are.

To my mind, the worst books bask ignorantly in a sort of stultifying self-centeredness hard to fathom, by me at least. Exercises in navel-gazing and simplistically formulaic, their horizon is exceedingly narrow. They do not care and are not curious. They do not explore and do not take risks. They do not draw from a world, nor do they not call out to one, and in that do not “project” one either, as Thomas Pynchon’s character famously puts it. Bad books may be, to some, stylistically exquisite—for now, for this scholastic-aesthetical moment—but usher you into

the idiomatic inferno of narrow-mindedness and delusional autarchy. They do not speak to you because they are busy speaking to themselves.

Textual Snowflakes

Daniel T. O’Hara

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I decide a book is bad if I get angrier and angrier as I read it. That happens rarely. But if I discover an author cheating, by taking shortcuts, not doing the necessary homework however long it might take, relying on second-hand knowledge, overlooking the other sides of the issue, or experience, then I am ready to explode, and so I know it is a bad book. If I am served up a self-interested snow job these days, it is usually done in the name of a good cause, which makes it harder to criticize.

Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (2006) is my choice. The book received honorable mentions in nationally prestigious contests, and leading Americanists have given it their endorsements. The gist of its argument, taken from its publisher’s website, is, “Throughout, Dimock contends that American literature is answerable not to the nation-state, but to the human species as a whole, and that it looks dramatically different when removed from a strictly national or English-language context.”

I applaud this goal, yet all of the texts drawn from global contexts “across deep time” are presented in English translations. Henry James’s novels and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, to give one comic example, get read together. I know—in this case, who cares? But this is true throughout. Knowing a text in its original language and cultural contexts is crucial. If such knowledge is removed, due to the scholar’s inadequacies or the assumed reader’s, the result is readings lacking resonance, depth, weight. Reading then is like looking at a child’s shaken snow globe, with the texts-snowflakes gradually settling down to one common level. All are globally equal now but equally bland and banal.

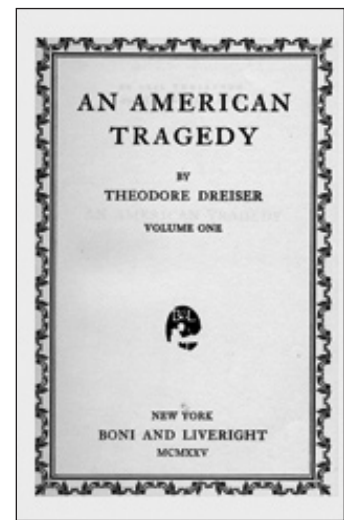
Ending Badly

William A. O’Rourke

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I’ve been telling students for many years that Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) is one of the best American novels, up until the time Clyde is caught, then it goes into the toilet, more or less. A great book than goes down hill at the end. Recently, I looked at it again, to see if what I have thought for so long is true. *AAT* is divided into three books; book three is essentially a police procedural, and here Dreiser makes use of what was historic material, since a similar killing had taken place, along with a circus-like trial, a fixture of the era, some twenty years earlier, one that had “inspired” the book. So, part of the problem is that there’s a lot of telling at the end, unlike the showing that had been going on earlier, such as the “murder” scene on the lake. In that way, the first two thirds of *AAT* is more a product of Dreiser’s imagination, until reality takes over, since the actual murderer did not share Clyde’s fictional background. The character of Clyde had been pulled out of Dreiser’s own murky inner life. Dreiser has never been accused of being a stylist, so a difference in language is not the question; it is more a matter of Dreiser letting the public record interfere with his re-imagining. In any case, in the 1951 movie, *A Place in the Sun*, directed by George Stevens, Stevens spends hardly any time on

the trial or Clyde’s incarceration. There is an old Hollywood saw: “You take good books and make bad movies, and you take bad books and make good movies.” *A Place in the Sun* is a wonderful movie, but it pushes only one part of Dreiser’s novel. Stevens has Elizabeth Taylor come visit Clyde on death row, whereas, in the novel, no such meeting with Sondra, the rich girl, takes place, and when Clyde is marched off to the death chamber, Elizabeth Taylor’s face is superimposed behind Montgomery Clift, and Clift’s expression can only be read to mean that it is worth being executed in order to have dated Elizabeth Taylor, not the message that Dreiser wanted to convey. *ATT*, though, is a great novel, great enough to survive a bad ending in either medium.



Poetic Throwback

Marjorie Perloff

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The various poetry books collected in Frederick Seidel’s blockbuster *Poems 1959–2009* (2009) have won extravagant praise from important poet-critics like Michael Hofmann (“*Life on Earth* is an exemplary book...[o]ne of the best by an American poet in the past twenty years”) and Lawrence Joseph, who declares in *The Nation* that Seidel is “one of the most vital and important poets we have.” What the critics (almost all male, I should note) seem to like about Seidel is his candor—his willingness, in casual, chatty (but occasionally rhyming) free verse, to let it all hang out, to talk about the messes he’s gotten into, especially with the women he’s gone to bed with—women who have absurd foibles and hang-ups.

“Cloclo,” from *Ooga-Booga* (2006), for example, is an elegy of sorts for “The golden person curled up on my doormat, / Using her mink coat as a blanket” who had lost the key to the apartment and was found by the poet “Luxuriously asleep in front of the front door like a dog.” What fun for the man who finds her there! Seidel proceeds to recall her life of artsy vacuousness, the poem ending with the phone call from Florence, informing him

that she has died quietly a minute ago,
Like a tear falling in a field of snow,
Climbing up the ladder to the bells out of
Alzheimer’s total whiteout,
Heavenly Clotilde Peploe called by us all
Cloclo.

How cleverly condescending can one get? A tear falling in a field of snow! Poor old Cloclo: she never had a chance, at least not in Seidel’s poem. And this poet is also given to writing political poems like “The Bush Administration,” which relates the poet’s own suicidal thoughts (“so sui-Seidel”) to the events leading up to 9/11 (“The United States of America preemptively eats the world”), responding to the radio news of an American being beheaded in the Congo with the words “The downpour drumming on

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