

LAWRENCE BUELL, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2014), 567 pp.

As treated in this ambitious study, the term Great American Novel recalls the overcooked noodle in the sink, elusive in direct proportion to the intensity of the effort to grasp it. Buell acknowledges the difficulty at the outset—only to then leap over it. Avowing that no single constellation of features can define what a broad range of writers have striven to achieve, he promises “not just a series of free-standing essays about N number of books,” but an examination partitioned according to four defining concepts, which he variously labels “templates,” “scenarios,” “recipes,” or (his preference) “scripts.” What might underlie these divisions as variations of an identifying American ‘dream,’ however, never emerges; consequently, the volume actually does consist of free-standing discussions that track no consistent thesis.

As the first and “surest guarantee of GAN candidacy,” Buell cites “a kind of master narrative,” repeatedly imitated and reinvented. How curious, then, that he neither delineates a profile of any such rudimentary narrative scheme in his immediate choice for the accolade, *The Scarlet Letter*, nor explains his claim of its recurrence in any of its alleged progeny, among which he lists *Adam Bede*, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, *Washington Square*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *As I Lay Dying*, a quartet of Updike novels, and even two dramas by Suzan-Lori Parks, *In the Blood* and *Fucking A—*. In what wildly distorted sense does Hester’s emblem function across more than sixteen decades as the “generative force” of a “master-text” somehow accommodating Celia Madden, Catherine Sloper, Isabel Archer, and Addie Bundren? It requires a heap of misreading to pledge them in the same sorority. In like manner, Hester’s scarlet bodice is elevated into a cultural “defining symbol,” reiterated in such diverse manifestations as the stain on Monia Lewinsky’s dress and, even, Mitt Romney’s sponsorship of healthcare legislation while Massachusetts governor. How can meanings so inconstant be said to define? Still more astonishing, Buell credits Hawthorne’s tale with having spawned numerous treatments of the “ordeals of immigrant transplantation,” from James’s *The Europeans* to Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder*

*of the World*. Whatever the ordeal driving *The Scarlet Letter* may be (and Buell no more exfoliates its core meaning than does Hawthorne) it does not stem from immigrant transplantation.

Script Two, “Aspiration in America,” gathers what Buell calls “up-from” stories, tracing to Benjamin Franklin’s mythic *Autobiography* (a debatable lineage: it is obviously not a novel, and although its tale of upward mobility confirmed a basic American tenet, it was first published in English in 1818, well after other popular fictional British and American up-from narratives). Buell also refers at some length to influence from *Wilhelm Meister* and summarizes critical studies of the bildungsroman—a detour that stops short of arriving at an American relevance or of noting that Goethe’s story, unlike the canny Franklin’s celebration of his rise, leads to disillusion. Successive thumbnail accounts of American up-from novels are as inconclusive: for all the attention given them, they reveal no thesis peculiar to a distinctively American script about the pursuit of success. Furthermore, Buell often proffers highly questionable assumptions. Is *Moby-Dick* really wound as a “picaresque wandering” that exhibits Ishmael’s rise in life? If General Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* “epitomizes” the up-from American novel, how does it express America any more than would a biographical novel about Moses or Skanderbeg? What in “the marriage plot against itself” said to be the hub of *The Portrait of a Lady* makes this novel an “exemplary” bildungsroman? Is *All the King’s Men* fundamentally the story of “a poor southern white country boy’s climb to political power,” or does its burden of meaning fall on the appropriately named reporter who narrates that story and comes to accept its lesson of fallibility in order to accept himself? And what material similarity links Ishmael, Judah Ben-Hur, Isabel, and Warren’s protagonist (whoever he may be) with Ben Franklin’s memoir? Again and again, one has to wonder how far the concept of a “master-text,” in any of its sub-categories, can be stretched before it is beyond recognition.

In launching his investigations, Buell posits that GANs effectively “converse” with one another. This conceit receives particular emphasis in the latter portions of the Script Two section. *The Adventures of Augie March*, for example, is held to be an ironic reflection of *Native Son*, which is also seen as generating its inversion in *Invisible Man*.

Comparisons of this sort can be provocative, but here they tend to founder in irrelevance. Buell extols *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy*, published in the same year, as having approached “nearest the mark” of the “long-awaited GAN.” Yet the reader is given no understanding of what the figurative “conversation” between Fitzgerald and Dreiser might explain about their novels’ perch near sublimity. Buell’s exhaustive lists of similarities in the paired stories about ascendancy from unpromising parental circumstances to enviable social privilege, matched by roughly equal “complementary” contrasts, lead only to the brink of sociology. Surely, radically different motives drive Jim Gatz and Clyde Griffiths, and their stories spin unrelated themes. Overlooking cardinal distinctions while indicating incidental or, at best, ancillary resemblances undermines whatever insight the juxtaposition might yield. To what point the occasional concordance of such minutiae is given emphasis remains rather clouded, especially as a commonality of details is not proposed as a defining feature of a GAN.

Buell finds his third script in “the romance of the divide, or rather divides,” which, “to keep discussion within manageable bounds,” he restricts to North/South and black/white fissures. Among the more prominent works corralled here are *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; *Huckleberry Finn*; *Absalom, Absalom*; *Gone With the Wind*; and *Beloved*—all predictable selections. Even so, the rubric is of questionable utility. Does the divide he chooses disclose unique elements at the epicenter of American consciousness, a conflict of values irresistible in their attraction to our most powerful storytellers? One might think it should, but it is not an argument Buell pursues. Instead, his choice is determined by expediency—the necessity of imposing “manageable bounds” within a multiplicity of national divides—and the mere popularity of this particular variation of the script. These uninspired criteria foster an unexceptional conventionality that belies the rich promise in his title. Alternative strategies were available. For example, had Buell juxtaposed the consequences of slavery with the manifestations of the nation’s ongoing divide between East and West divide in our fiction, his study might have illuminated far more complex tensions and contradictions than found in the clichéd, usually romantic portrayals of Dixie.

But the criterion of the divide as script leads to a more basic problem: a tendency to confuse setting (in this case, the South) with a quite different element, the resolved meaning of the story’s action; which of the two holds the essence of the script? Although the Civil War indisputably affects the characters of *Gone With the Wind*, Mitchell’s novel is not a vehicle for moral inquiry into slavery or for dissection of contending principles. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim’s color is a recurrent factor showing racial injustice, but ultimately it serves to exemplify an even deeper quarrel with human society, sustained throughout the novel. Huck’s narrative concludes: “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.” His alienation is not specifically a reaction to Jim’s mistreatment, much less to the vile institution it reflects, but to the rapacity and cruel folly inherent in human society. Similarly, the mainspring of *Absalom, Absalom* is neither miscegenation itself nor the cultural conflict between Blue and Grey; it is, instead, another of Faulkner’s epic tales about the rape of a virgin land, the dream of vanquishing mortality through creation of a dynasty, and fate’s consequent vengeance for the sacrifice of love to the hubris of that design.

Qualifying for Script Four are novels “given over in different degrees to tracking heterogeneous cross-sections of characters, whether closely interacting or widely dispersed, conjoined by a common task, challenge, or threat that dramatizes democracy under siege or duress. Often sprawling performances of encyclopedic scope with multiple agenda from the ethnographic to the metaphysical, these novels offer thought experiments in imagining forms of possible and/or balked ‘democratic’ collectivity in the context of their eras.” Quite a mouthful of pasta, that, difficult to swallow and harder still to digest. To facilitate chewing, Buell concentrates on three “compendious [?] mega novels” with sets “of characters imagined as social microcosms or vanguards:” *Moby-Dick*, *U.S.A.*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*—each from “a watershed moment for national history that is also seen as having world-historical significance.”

Once more, however, Buell’s prime example hardly fits the category. What pivotal “moment” in national or international history does Melville address? Petroleum’s ensuing displacement of whale oil? Obviously not. The

early stirring of American imperialism? Melville does characterize the *Pequod's* crew as an "Anacharsis Clootz deputation" representing humanity in its variety, but the notion that the novel centers on them—an adaptation of C. L. R. James's thesis that wrenches the tale into a parable about democracy—is patently nonsensical. Yes, Ahab is a maddened autocrat, willing to sacrifice all others in his quest, but he is also Pip's champion and the avatar of analytical reason: at the novel's crux is the question of how to respond to injustice in the order of life—or, alternatively, of how to deal with God's unknowability. Despite Buell's insistence to the contrary—not even (again) "for manageable present purposes"—Melville did not compose *Moby-Dick* as "an inquest into the state and possible fate of democratic society, American style, as it appears in the era of early industrial capitalism."

Buell apparently believes the mega novel has an affinity with the theme of national "breakdown," and after forcing a specious case with *Moby-Dick*, he proceeds to *U.S.A.*, the *locus classicus* of this combination. So far as it goes, his presentation of the trilogy as the betrayal of American republican principles by imperialistic power is sound and avoids the scattershot irrelevancies to which he is given elsewhere. But, perhaps because he perceives decline in its popularity, Buell stops at reporting the novel's contents. Had he at least compared this product of Dos Passos's generally leftist view in the 1930s with *Midcentury*, the same author's conservative reassessment of the nation's prospect in 1961, he might have shown how different polemical assessments of the nation, engaged with what Buell would have to concede is the same mega novel script, did or did not affect the fiction's literary quality. Or he could have used Dos Passos's iteration of his technique as a gauge to judge its adaptability when writers influenced by *U.S.A.* incorporated his innovations in their narratives. Instead, entirely ignoring *Midcentury*, Buell pairs *U.S.A.* with *The Grapes of Wrath*, a long novel with many characters that depicts social failure during the Great Depression, but which has basically little in common with the trilogy. He declares it "The Steinbeck Alternative." Unlike Dos Passos's mammoth experiment, he notes, Steinbeck's chronicle of desperate westward migration rose to the top of the best-seller list, and it has since attracted treble the number of scholarly publications and twenty times as many Ama-

zon reviews. How these statistics function as a criterion of GANdom is left unaddressed, as is what intrinsic factor makes the novel an alternative.

Buell evidently sets great store by popularity. In the Script One section, "universal appeal" is the overwhelming consideration in awarding GAN status to *The Scarlet Letter*. In weighing Steinbeck's major work against Dos Passos's, he again resorts to statistics as telling evidence, though of what, precisely, he does not elaborate. His pronouncement on *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, unambiguously inverts the initial standard: nomination of this exemplary "maximalist" mega novel owes principally to its standing as an abstruse "cult classic for self-identified anti-mainstreamers." Is Buell an acolyte of the cult? Gamedly, he ventures to decipher the significance of characters and events in the intricate whirligig Pynchon designed to confound the very rationality on which interpretation depends, but the task, at least in Buell's attempt, is self-defeating. Although he strains to draw comparisons to *Moby-Dick* and *U.S.A.*, the novel he would solve departs Euclid's universe to enter the realm of Riemann's postulates. Buell's exploration leads to a zone in which "great," "American," and "novel" are no longer definable in respect to the tradition his study presumes. Indeed, the setting for *Gravity's Rainbow* is Europe, the pivotal trope is the V-2 rocket, and there is a notable paucity of Americans among its dramatis personae.

In his volume's introductory pages, Buell traces the term in its title to P. T. Barnum's mocking use of it in 1866 and John De Forest's effort to invest it with meaning the following year. This history, however, is misleading. Buell too quickly slides past the fact that, in hoping to promote stories capturing "the American soul" by depicting "the ordinary emotions and manner of American existence," De Forest had a dual purpose: first, to establish realism as the proper American aesthetic; and second, equally important, to stress the necessity of an international copyright law for the native writer to survive financially and thereby give fiction sold in our marketplace an American complexion. Neither intention specifically feeds into Buell's four scripts. A more accurate genealogy of the idea behind the Great American Novel reaches much further back, to the country's birth.

The independence of a population with the same ethnic composition, culture, and lan-

guage as the entity from which it had just separated posed a question that would linger for the next century and a half: was political sovereignty sufficient to establish a nation with its own distinctive literature? Nativists not only insisted on the possibility but also indicated the path to its realization. Like other peoples bent on proclaiming greatness, America had to ground its assertion in a great story—which, for our classically trained founding generation, meant an epic. The *Aeneid* furnished a model protagonist, and in a file of epics, most famously Joel Barlow's *Columbiad*, Columbus was cast as the conveyer of civilization to a new world. The vision was clear: America's destiny was to lead mankind in a *novus ordo seclorum*. The abstract ideals of Columbianism, however, soon yielded to a new perception: telling America's essential story changed objective, from reaction against European antecedents to the conquest of the West. Daniel Boone and other representations of the frontiersman, after brief residence in a flagging epic genre, slipped into the novel, the epic's emerging successor at the top of the literary hierarchy. With James Fenimore Cooper and James Paulding in the 1820s and 1830s, the American novel fixed on themes of Western expansion, securing a hold, not only on the nation's imagination of itself but also on Europe's image of the rough-hewn adolescent giant across the ocean. Directly and indirectly, whether at the popular level of the Lone Ranger and Louis Lamour's many westerns (particularly the sprawling Sackett family chronicles) or in university seminars devoted to *The Great Gatsby* and the rarefied implications of Henry James's international theme, our fiction has persistently scouted our genesis as a reinvention. Even when the creation of a

nation or the realization of its destiny has not directly been the subject, American writers have continually been drawn to ask whether, in the pursuit of happiness that is our national commandment, our lives are testimony of tragic failure or ironic success. From our national independence on, we have asked our major stories to tell us who we are as Americans and to pass judgment on how we have defined ourselves. That is not characteristic of European literature. Ultimately, Buell's failure lies in his blindness to the abiding fascination at the core of our national dream (or nightmare), and especially to the historical imperatives behind the concept of the Great American Novel.

Reviewers commonly fault an author for not writing the book they themselves would have written. Here, however, the author has not written the book he has himself set out to write. Although Buell directs attention to a fair portion of putatively great novels by Americans, he neither advances a critical evaluation of what makes them great literature nor ties their supposed greatness to what is idiosyncratically American; sometimes, the greatness presumably lies only in the dreams of their authors. Never actually defining his subject, he substitutes four categories of what he misleadingly calls scripts—not, as one might infer, basic patterns of action, but mere labels for bins that aggregate and segregate according to such loose criteria that it would be difficult to exclude any American novel from one bin or another. In the end, the reader has gained no clear idea of Buell's purpose in this study, and there is much reason to suspect that Buell is equally befogged.

White River Junction, Vermont Frank Gado