

LAWRENCE BUELL, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014), xii + 567 pp.

Debates around the Great American Novel (GAN) have been going on for a century and a half, with periods of greater or lesser efflorescence. We are now in a time of heightened and, one suspects, enduring interest in the topic, given a number of factors: ongoing identitarian debates around the novelistic canon; contestations of the very legitimacy of universalizing constructs like the GAN; an inveterate American fixation with lists and rankings; and, not unrelated to these factors, the internet's maieutic role in the proliferation of all manner of discourse and data—websites, wikis, blogs, surveys, etc.—and advanced information technology's growing capacity to quantify literary reception as we see, for example, in the "computational criticism" being developed at the Stanford Literary Lab but also in social media.

For the record, the inaugural formal intervention into the politics of the GAN occurs in 1868, when novelist John W. De Forest, in an essay in *The Nation*, offers a brief prescription of what such a singular work might entail. Not surprisingly, he comes up with an essentialistic model. Such a work must be a "tableau" that depicts "the American soul" and, after briefly dismissing works by Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, settles his nomination on Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), though not before flagging its idealized characterizations and flawed plot (qtd. in Buell 24).

Lawrence Buell's views on the GAN owe little to the essentialization of De Forest and likeminded others who have contributed to GAN discussions. Indeed, his considerable breadth of reference and the exegetical nuance of his readings confirm what he announces in his title: though notionally a project that will yield a category containing precisely one work, the GAN critical enterprise is actually rather different; the objective of revealing the GAN is a kind of "dream" to be pursued, but not one that will yield any sort of apodictic result. As Buell acknowledges in his introduction, the whole "GAN idea" is "absurdly oxymoronic if taken too solemnly," if it attempts to discern "the one single once-and-for-all supernovel" (5).

Strangely, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is the first monograph-length study

of this complex field of literary production and reception and, given this complexity but also the extraordinary richness of the tradition, any fulsome first treatment of the topic will be long, and Buell's is long and intricate. Studies in the GAN are of course studies of canon (de)formation and reception aesthetics, but Buell resolutely ties *The Dream of the Great American Novel* to empirical receptions—mostly within the domain of professional readers, i.e., academics, writers, and critics, though sometimes citing statistical data on broad readership patterns—eschewing by design the sort of theoretical work done in the late twentieth century by people like Fish, Iser, Jauss, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. The result is a very approachable, theoretically unfussy study that provides rich commentary, not only on nominees for the GAN designation, but also on historical contexts and formative critical and social debates.

The broad parameters Buell sets for himself yield a leisurely-paced, highly erudite book; life on Buell's textual raft is "mighty free and easy," to borrow from Twain's Jim, and, indeed, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) figures into virtually all discussions of the GAN and certainly in Buell's.<sup>1</sup> Buell structures his typological study around four "scenarios" or "scripts," each of which is based on certain recurrent elements of plot and character development within a typically multi-work GAN domain. The first of these scripts, however, and exceptionally, emphasizes just a single work: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Hawthorne's best and best-known novel brought its author immediate recognition making him, in the words of Richard Brodhead, "the only major author never to have been underestimated," and making it an obvious early candidate for GAN anointment (qtd. in Buell 71). The tragic circumstances played out in the novel starkly encapsulate fundamental moral dilemmas in the Atlantic world around individual freedom and communitarian standards of comportment and citizenship as Hester's "able-ness" is played off against her adultery. As Buell observes, this novel continues to be the most taught long work of pre-modern American literature in American high schools and colleges and serves "as a key reference point for U.S. literary history"

<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1986) 128.

(72). Given its pretty much immediate canonization, *The Scarlet Letter* has enjoyed long-lived, careful attention, and has inspired considerable imitation over the years. In Buell's model, it garners GAN significance both due to its meditation on issues central to American national identity and an *iterative* dynamic whereby it becomes "classic" through myriad novelistic "retellings" over time (91).

Buell's other three GAN scripts are rather more involved than his first, and receive the bulk of his attention. Each captures a major historico-cultural theme: "up-from," *aspirational* narratives of social mobility; *conflictual* tales about racial and interregional strife; and, finally, *multitudinous* novels about great expansive communities, as small as a New England whaler and as large as the USA. We do not need Jay Gatsby to tell us that the greatest early "up-from" narrative is of course Benjamin Franklin's posthumously published *Autobiography* (1818), at once a precursor and generator of a long line of quintessentially American novels about characters who are "imagined as national exemplars who attempt for better or worse to act out versions of the traditional American dream script" (106). Surveying a constellation of six novels ranging from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925) through to Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997)—all essays in the *Bildungsroman*, in one way or another—Buell examines the depiction of prevailing American mythemes—the "self-made man," America's limitless opportunity, the American Dream—which together weave the nation's "single most iconic story line" (101).

A number of GAN candidates have focused on certain fundamental conflicts that have structured American life, directly and indirectly, for a very long time. Works falling within this cluster include *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Huckleberry Finn*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). All of these contend with interracial and interregional relations and conflicts, replete with chronic tension and frequent violence. Stowe's novel stands out from the group because of its clear, if melodramatic, delineation of the horrors of slavery and its obvious influence on American history. Quite simply, as Buell notes, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* changed the world" (226). At the same time, though unable to claim this kind of political agency, the other three works deal articulately with

their subject matter while advancing the novel as an expressive artistic medium. Whereas Hemingway would assert (with forgivable hyperbole) in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935) that all of modern American literature began with *Huckleberry Finn*, the Nobel Committee would later declare both Faulkner and Morrison to be great global writers (1949, 1993).

Unlike the three that precede it, Buell's final "script" involves GAN candidates that elaborate great novelistic universes, rather than particular privileged foundational themes. The place of these multitudinous works is secure in any canon of great American novels: Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1929-1938), and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Buell traces the ebb and (seemingly final) flow of *Moby Dick*'s critical receptions, with it now being firmly ensconced within the literary-critical imagination, not to mention within the consumer realm of Starbucks coffee shops and sundry other commercial undertakings (359). In contrast to the "microcosm" of *Moby Dick* stands "a macrocosmic complement," the *U.S.A.* trilogy and its panoramic sweep of American life during the early decades of the twentieth century (389). Expansive temporally and spatially, mimetically inclusive, formally innovative, and insistently modern, Dos Passos's masterwork has a depth, breadth, and thematic embrace that are unrivalled in American literature. Still, as Buell outlines in fascinating detail, the *U.S.A.* trilogy never quite received its coronation as the GAN that its early reception seemed to presage and remains more "precedent than prototype" for GAN candidates that come later (422). The last exercise in novelistic "maximalism" that Buell examines is Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a work that, in the words of David Cowart, is "widely recognized" as the "most important American novel" since World War Two and remains for Buell a better candidate for GAN designation than three other contemporary works, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), DeLillo's *Underworld*, and the four extant installments of William Vollmann's *Seven Dreams* series (1990, 1992, 1994, 2001) (qtd. in Buell 427)<sup>2</sup>.

Highly readable, scrupulously researched, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* is a

<sup>2</sup> I do note that, subsequent to the appearance of Buell's study, Vollmann has published the fifth part of his *Seven Dreams* series: *The Dying Grass* (2015).

major contribution to American literary historiography, not to mention to American Studies. Long a distinguished commentator in these fields, Lawrence Buell brings equanimity and a relaxed eloquence to the GAN debate, moving easily from his own period specialization—nineteenth-century American prose—into the modernist, postmodernist, and our own (post?)postmodern periods. In closing, let the

last words here be the author's own. For Buell, the GAN remains a "field of dreams," quite as much a critical enterprise as a creative one, and it seems certain that readers will continue to promote candidates for GAN canonization for the foreseeable future, and so it goes (465). How could it be otherwise?

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