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Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America

by Merve Emre (review)

Gayle Rogers

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things “as a gateway to ever vaster and more mysterious social and philosophical truths” and to develop a worldview that can be held in common with others (this would be Scarry’s argument), the more shaken you will be when you realize you do not hold these in common with others, not even your own lover (135). Worse yet, it’s not that other people don’t see or register your aesthetic raptures—it’s that they do, and only care for two minutes.

To Alex Woloch’s contention that the realist novel is “structurally destabilized . . . by too many people,” Figlerowicz would say that this dilemma is not perhaps as big a problem as it sounds.¹ One can only think of minor or major characters as “competing” for space, and that competition as structurally significant, if we equate lines on a page with actual space and actual space with *moreness*. The same fidelity to empiricism that, for Woloch, sees the novel torn between representing some and all characters is, in Figlerowicz’s treatment, what makes it possible for a character to take up almost all the “space there is” and be as rounded out and self-actualized as a character with three lines. Most people do not get more interesting or more able to speak for others no matter how much space is given them; moreover, who ever said that novels have to be the distributors of equal attention? At the back of this counterargument is also a rejoinder to the recent complaints in our discipline that books cannot make claims about the world without sufficient coverage of all of the available data. Figlerowicz would say that novels already know something about this when they use literary devices such as the flat protagonist to express “an intense metatextual doubt about how much a novel can communicate through the representation of nothing more than a small group of fictional bodies and minds” (3).

I wrote at the beginning that *Flat Protagonists* offers us the get-over-yourself model of the novel. But this is not really accurate. Figlerowicz’s flatness is not prescriptive, nor do her ethics simply invert Martha Nussbaum’s argument about empathy: in other words, one would not go to Figlerowicz’s chosen novels to *learn* how to get over oneself or think less of oneself any more than one can go to them to get out of oneself, as Nussbaum argues, by inhabiting others. At the end of the day, *Flat Protagonists* concerns itself less with procedures of ethical normativization than with phenomenology: it is social theory acknowledging that only literary criticism can get at some omnipresent but hard-to-pin-down social phenomena. As a book that does not believe in the limitlessness of any social resource—but especially not attention and sharedness—*Flat Protagonists* joins a growing number of literary-critical studies reinvested in form as conservation and in understanding the novel as engendering the world not as we would all want have it but as we would have to have it.

Note

1. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

***Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America.* Merve Emre. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 286. \$85.00 (cloth); \$27.50 (paper); \$27.50 (eBook).**

Reviewed by Gayle Rogers, University of Pittsburgh

We love *bad* writers: the rebels, the social pariahs, the norm-flouting cads, the political dissidents, even those famed modernists who intentionally created *bad* works in order to make a point about textual production and consumption. But rarely do we celebrate *bad readers*. Un-

200 imaginative, uncritical, and self-absorbed, they are the bane of many an instructor's existence. At their worst, they sound like Homer Simpson, who corrects his daughter Lisa's incipient structuralism by insisting that "the point of *Moby-Dick* is 'be yourself.'" The heresy of paraphrase that Cleanth Brooks preached against seems like a peccadillo compared to the greater sin of substituting platitude and cliché for analytic engagement with a text.

There have always been bad readers, but as Merve Emre's fascinating and highly astute new book *Paraliterary* demonstrates, the particular classes and types of bad readers that were *made* as part of postwar American diplomatic efforts necessitate a full-scale reconstruction and reconsideration. She neither apologizes for nor laments them, but rather, takes their existence as a point of departure for a wide-ranging synthesis of deep archival research and cutting-edge polemic. "We, as critics," she writes, "must proudly claim the bad readers as our own if we wish to make claims about reading at all," because "their creation helped devise enduring strategies for how people could use literature to learn to speak, feel, perceive, and interact with others throughout the postwar period" (16, 4). Bad readers, it turns out, were the locus of the "consolid[ation of] new practices of reading literary texts that posited a strong, disciplined, and habitual relationship between aesthetic representation and readers' lived experiences of public communication"—practices whose unpredictable effects are still with us (3).

The types of bad reading at the core of Emre's study are not as bad as Homer Simpson's: actually, they have been valorized variously in the past seventy years, from Susan Sontag to surface reading. The fact that we have scrutinized so little the agendas and worldviews that produced them—even as they speak to some of the most heated debates in contemporary literary studies—makes this book all the more urgent. We do know in vivid detail how the United States was instructing citizens in the hopes that their skills of "reading literature might, quite literally, change the world": good reading "would emotionally move and ethically instruct the nation's political adversaries," it would "educate and improve its allies," and "it would transform readers into living, breathing representatives of the culture that produced them" (4). We also know specifically about the institutionalization and cultural politics of New Criticism and its "good reading" strictures. We know much less about two vital questions that hinge on sociological formulations: "Who, precisely, was reading and decoding these representations of state power? And what did the knowledge produced by critique set out to accomplish?" (12). That is, when masses of citizens were being trained as readers in universities and in ephemera alike, how and where were their "imitative, emotional, information seeking, faddish, escapist, propagandist," or other "bad" reading habits actually encouraged, embraced, and repurposed, rather than filtered out (4)? And what were the international effects of these alternative forms of "literary socialization" (6)? Here, Emre powerfully charts "the kinds of citizens—the internationalized subjects—that practices of bad reading aspired to produce" and shows "how these literate subjects used reading to navigate a political climate that championed liberal individualism, on the one hand, while establishing unprecedented forms of institutional oversight, on the other" (5).

Emre's goal is not to lift the veil and give discrete biographies of bad readers, but to understand them as a social production through which both glossy magazines and Faulkner's *The Town* (1957) look dramatically different. This book takes the big-name acronyms and authors that appear in much scholarship on Cold War literature and reconfigures them in an orbit in which the CCF, OSS, VOA, and RFE operate alongside, against, and through the reading practices developed in *National Geographic*, in study abroad programs, in conduct books, in American Express ad campaigns, and in the tactics of black revolutionary politics of the 1960s. Here, and in many other sites, Emre thus shifts her primary focus from "the national production of literary fiction" and the employment of authors in cultural diplomacy to the "international acts of speech, gesture, perception, consumption, and face-to-face interaction" that characterized the reception of key literary works of the period (3). This turn toward sociology and modes of consumption prompts *Paraliterary's* attention to the often-marginalized "expressive language produced by students,

career diplomats, tourists, spies, ambassadors, businessmen, soldiers, and revolutionaries [. . . who were] tasked with trade, travel, communication, and intercourse—of all kinds—as well as building cooperation, mutuality, and community” (13). They learned to read and to write, and to cultivate readerships, just as their better-known novelistic peers did, in distinct ways that form the backbone of what Emre denotes as “paraliterary” discourses. With her titular term—whose connotations of parasitism and paramilitarism she invites for their unofficial, supplementary overtones—Emre enters and revises the historiography of quasi-literary productions that have mattered a great deal to New Historicists, deconstructionists, and scholars of cultural studies. Paraliterature and the practices that produced and interpreted it thrived in their ability to feed off the host (“literature”) while also carving out spaces in which the unofficial, the cast aside, and the bemoaned responses to literature itself became charged tactics.

Across this book’s remarkably diverse and yet conceptually entwined chapters, the paraliterary detritus of bureaucracy and instruction rubs shoulders with high-art novels. But the conclusions are hardly foregone: for instance, “today, nothing seems more conventional than the canon [F. O.] Matthiessen stitched together on his Fulbright tour of Eastern Europe. Yet the criteria that Matthiessen used to restock USIS libraries with Whitman, Melville, James, and Eliot; to organize syllabi and seminars; and to supervise research were by no means apparent to his contemporaries—criteria derived from the institutionally specific convergence of learning to feel through reading a lovable canon, declarations of passionate criticism, and the physicality of communication” (78). Far from a dispassionate, scientific approach to textuality, Matthiessen—after drifting away from his own New Critical precepts—actually became a sort of pop psychologist in international diplomatic circuits. Similarly surprising and refreshing are Emre’s explorations of Sylvia Plath’s fashion reviews during her Fulbright fellowship and Henry James’s ambivalent relationship with the reading practices of women’s colleges and “Ladies’ culture clubs” (27). Emre’s enlightening readings of novels such as *Naked Lunch*, *Giovanni’s Room*, *The American Express*, and *Fear of Flying*, too, reveal that their remediation of the optics and communicative potentialities of international branding was bound up with debates over how literature itself established—or failed to establish—an uncrossable hermeneutic line between reality and fiction.

Paraliterary’s chapters on countercultural texts—including its final one, on black radicalism—are highly original and inventive. They give new context to what both midcentury figures and their next-generation academic counterparts constructed as paranoid, affective, mimetic, public, and personal ways of reading. And they do so without casting everyone from Erica Jong to James Baldwin in simplistic opposition to a straw-man monolith of dominant theories of textual autonomy. “Literature” emerges in Emre’s book neither as an institution nor as a mode of disciplining subjects, but as a category whose “high cultural value” only makes sense through its vacillating stabilization and destabilization in the messy, crass world of advertising or archiving (98). Failure is a common thread for both central and peripheral projects: Faulkner’s work with Eisenhower’s Person-to-Person Initiative fails, just as Baldwin, Richard Wright, John A. Williams, and other key black writers “banded together, only to fall apart in opposition to Faulkner and Eisenhower’s institution-building project” (207). In this way, they joined countless unacknowledged peers from the worlds of corporate sloganeering and espionage alike. The legacies of the bad readers of the postwar era are incorporated in our quotidian work, even if we forswear them as a group. *Paraliterary’s* story is striking not because it documents grandiose and ill-fated plans, but because of its nuanced sense of the multiple registers of what we call “ordinary” life and its reading practices across history. Thankfully, like most scholars of Cold War literature, Emre rejects the conspiratorial puppet-master approaches that have landed scholars like Eric Bennett, Joel Whitney, and Hugh Wilford in too many familiar debates about the state’s agency and internal coordination. Instead, her book does what many of us believe good literature does: it makes the familiar unfamiliar in revelatory and insightful ways. With uncommon verve, each chapter enters related but markedly different terrain that reframes the postwar moment in

202 a broader debate about how we communicate (by words, texts, images, face-to-face encounters) and about literature's putative or possible instrumentality. Emre concludes with a provocative rejoinder and challenge to both "weak theory" and what Jeffrey Williams deemed "the new modesty in literary criticism." Along the way, *Paraliterary* attempts to strike a delicate balance between readings of traditional literary texts and historical accounts of sociologies of reading. It almost always succeeds on this count; its paratactic structures are welcome and illuminating, and Emre is conscious of the difficulty in positing "micro- and macrosociological" claims at once, as she does (179). At specific moments, her narrative thread gets buried under her own ample and rich evidence: one wishes for more narrative, less description at a few points, so that the scale of claims and evidence are better aligned. But a small price to pay for the admirably far-reaching work this book executes marvelously. Emre's prose is elegant and convincing, and this book will be required reading for scholars of the postwar world's overlapping, incomplete, and understudied interpretive communities.

Note

1. *The Simpsons*, "The Fat and the Furriest," episode 318 (episode 5, season 15), written by Joel H. Cohen, Fox network, November 30, 2003.

***The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri: Contingencies and Encounters of an 'Artistic Animator'.* Leda Cempellin. Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2017. Pp. 256. \$58.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Roger Rothman, Bucknell University

I suspect that Daniel Spoerri is not a household name among readers of *Modernism/modernity*. This is a shame because he was an artist especially attuned to the sorts of interdisciplinarity this journal takes as its core concern. He began his career as a dancer, then turned to poetry, and then to object production. And in almost every instance, the work he produced was itself multidisciplinary: his poems are visual, his sculptures literary. But Spoerri is known almost exclusively within art-historical circles, and even there his reception has been limited to but a single body of work, his so-called "tableaux-pièges" (snare-pictures), in which the remains of a meal—dirtied dinner plates, emptied glasses, used stemware, napkins, and a tablecloth—are glued to the table's surface then hung horizontally on the wall. Indeed, for the bulk of his career, Spoerri has been known only as "that guy who hangs tables on the wall."

As the first English-language monograph on Spoerri's long and varied career, Leda Cempellin's new book should go a long way toward drawing Spoerri out of the margins of art history. Her book offers a richly detailed account of an artist who, on account of his multidisciplinary, has for decades eluded scholarly consideration. He was born Daniel Isaac Feinstein, in Romania, in 1930. His father, a Jew who had converted to Christianity, was arrested and murdered by the Nazis in 1941. His mother, Lydia Spoerri, a Christian, was a Swiss citizen and she was able to emigrate with her son a year later. Cempellin doesn't linger long on Spoerri's childhood, but she does propose that Spoerri's absent father, as well as the geographical disruption and trauma of his childhood years, played a role in the artist's lifelong engagement with memory, movement, and death.

Cempellin's book is cleverly structured. Rather than frame Spoerri's career within the confines of his renowned tableaux-pièges, the book focuses its attention on the artist's insistently