

Giving Voice: On the Work of Evan Dara

Although the term “postmodern” is still used often enough by critics as a convenient label for certain works of fiction that are considered out of the “mainstream” of current literary fiction, and descriptions of new books ladled with adjectives such as “unconventional,” “original,” or “innovative” are quite common, the era of “experimental” postmodern American fiction—when experimental fiction could be said to have any kind of real cultural salience—was in fact relatively short-lived: 10-15 years, from the mid-1960s to about 1980. This is not to say there were no formally or stylistically adventurous writers of fiction before this period, nor necessarily that no comparably adventurous writers at all have appeared in the years since. But writers willing to jettison all assumptions about the formal properties of novels and attempt building something entirely new in their place have been relatively few and far between in the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first two of the twenty-first.

One such writer, however, is Evan Dara. (Or at least the writer presenting his work under that name, since so little is known about him beyond the work—he makes the elusiveness of Thomas Pynchon seem like a craving for celebrity in comparison—we can’t be sure this is other than a pseudonym.) Dara’s first novel, *The Lost Scrapbook*, was published in 1995, and has been followed by two other novels, *The Easy Chain* (2007) and *Flee* (2013), as well as a play, *Provisional Biography of Mose Eakins* (2018), all of them published by Aurora, a press apparently owned and administered by Dara himself. All three of the novels challenge the expectations of readers accustomed to fiction that observes the post-postmodern consensus that novels need not scrupulously follow entrenched conventions of linear narrative and the kind of

expository prose associated with it, but should otherwise still offer readers some recognizable variant of the form historically tied to works of fiction: an invoked world in which created characters engage in observable human activities (even if they might be subject to various departures from strict realism), activities that follow some version of narrative logic. Dara's novels, especially the first two, instead present us with disembodied voices in place of characters and events that seem to arise arbitrarily and to bleed into each other without warning—or any immediately apparent purpose.

If nothing else, it is obvious once one begins reading these novels that the author wants to subvert any presumptions we might have that the novel we are reading will bear enough family resemblance to those we have read before that it will be explicable according to the “rules” we believe we have learned about how novels should proceed. Clearly it intends to replace those rules with others applicable only to this work (although any one of Dara's novels certainly does then provide direction in reading the others), rules that we will have to learn as we read. In this way, Dara's novels work like all of their predecessors in the lineage of “experimental” fiction, presenting the reader with a heterodox formal arrangement the reader must learn to assimilate by attending closely to the new patterns the work establishes as alternatives to those patterns more conventional fiction has predisposed us to expect. Indeed, in the challenge they pose to the assumption that the conventional patterns define the novel as a form, Dara's novels are arguably the most radically disruptive books in American fiction since, say, Gilbert Sorrentino in a work like *Mulligan Stew* (1979).

The most formally radical of the novels is *The Lost Scrapbook*. The initial readers of this book might understandably have thought it is in fact essentially formless, although eventually the formal logic of the novel does become more discernible. The first half or so of what is a very long book (a little under 500 pages) seems to consist of a series of disconnected episodes (some longer than others) leaning heavily on interior monologue and introducing “characters” whose relationships to each other are not immediately apparent. Moreover, these self-standing scenes don't merely succeed each other but at times appear to merge, one dissolving into the other, as if the novel's discourse represents a radio set whose dial is being tuned, bringing in one station before moving on to another. Ultimately we reach a program to which presumably the search has been dedicated: most of the remaining part of the novel focuses on the plight of Isaura, a town in

Missouri on which an ecological catastrophe has been inflicted by a chemical company that has exploited the forbearance of the community for many years (as the narrative reveals).

This relatively extended narrative focusing on the depredations of the Ozark Chemical Company and their effect on the citizens of Isaura—by no means related in straightforward expository prose but narratively coherent nevertheless—of course inevitably prompts the reader to ponder the structural connections between it and the concatenation of voices and episodes preceding it. In the only contemporaneous review of *The Lost Scrapbook* (really the only review of Dara's work to appear in a "major" American publication—the *Washington Post*—at all), Tom LeClair suggests that all of the prior voices are displaced victims, "literal and figurative," from the calamity at Isaura. Perhaps this is a fruitful way of considering the structural integrity of *The Lost Scrapbook*, although too much emphasis on the "literal" connections among the characters and events threatens to impute a more seamless structure to the novel than it actually contains: to an extent, its most radically adventurous quality is the *absence* of an ultimate integration of its parts, the possibility that a novel might still achieve authentic thematic and aesthetic coherence even when connections are left unmade and conventional unity disregarded, even deliberately undermined.

This sort of comprehensive fragmentation makes *The Lost Scrapbook* more audacious than most of the other works over the past twenty-five years received as "experimental, which in comparison still seem more faithful to the norms of current literary culture. (Perhaps books like David Markson's *Readers Block* and *This is Not a Novel* might rival Dara's novel in its claim to be "something new"—certainly the more flamboyantly experimental novels of a writer such as Mark Danielewski are just gimmicky when judged next to either *The Lost Scrapbook* or *The Easy Chain*.) Dara appears to trust the reader's ability to infer connections and notice implicit patterns of situation and reference, to tolerate the ambiguities and uncertainties in which the novel persists without necessarily expecting the writer to remove them through any contrived devices. The rhetorical irresolution created by the novel's extreme fragmentation is reinforced within the discrete narrative fragments (and most of them do relate a story or scene) by the emphasis on speech—both in monologue and dialogue—rather than expository prose, which further requires the reader to discern continuity in the various episodes by carefully registering what the voices are talking about absent direct description. Luckily Dara proves himself

exceptionally adept at rendering contemporary American speech, making the task enjoyable in itself, and the enactment of this strategy in the rendition of Isaura's ordeal is especially impressive.

Unfortunately, this concluding story also works to produce what is ultimately the most significant weakness of *The Lost Scrapbook*. It is not inaccurate to call this final section of the novel an expose of entities like the Ozark Chemical Company, companies that in carrying out the prescribed mission of American capitalism are in the process of degrading and despoiling the natural environment, apparently without compunction. When we recall the scenes that have come before, we can see that the depiction of the ruin of Isaura is the culmination of a portrayal of America in all its social, cultural, and economic dysfunction—an America in which the atomizing effects of capitalism have spread to all features of ordinary life. In this way, it seems to me, *The Lost Scrapbook* in effect neutralizes its own formal audacity by making it too easy for the reader to resolve (at least in retrospect) the interpretive dilemma posed by the seemingly dissociated episodes that have brought us to the Isaura narrative, to integrate all of the novel's parts in what turns out to be an unorthodox but finally structurally harmonious story about the baneful influences of late twentieth century American capitalism, its elevation of profit to preeminent value and disregard for the common good determining the shape of human interaction and inhibiting even our ability to communicate (a motif to which Dara returns in his most recent work). However accurate this vision of the degeneracy of current reality might be (and I for one accept its accuracy), ultimately it comes close to undercutting the novel's integrity as experimental fiction, arguably converting it to a work of realism by other means.

Although *The Lost Scrapbook* is often quite funny, it would not really be appropriate to call it satire. The humor is not of the regenerative kind that implies the offenses portrayed might be ameliorated. It does indeed provoke the more corrosive kind of laughter associated with postmodern writers such as DeLillo, Pynchon, and Gaddis, or even the "black humor" of Vonnegut or Heller. But finally the humor seems part of the larger effort to critique, to "say something" about the dismal state of American culture and the dangers of unchecked capitalism. Dara's critique is perhaps more vehement than most, and offers no false hope that the conditions imposed by advanced capitalism will be overcome any time soon, but in its substance it hardly differs much from similar critiques increasingly to be found in mainstream literary fiction. What

makes *The Lost Scrapbook* distinctive, of course, is its formal innovation, the quality that presumably has also caused readers to balk at the “difficulty” such a work is presumed to pose. While these readers would find *The Lost Scrapbook* in fact to be an invigorating reading experience that rewards the effort to meet its challenge, they might also finally be disappointed that the ingenuity the novel exhibits seems to be employed in support of a conventionally polemical purpose.

Still, if a writer’s commitment to a theme or idea (political or otherwise) inspires a genuinely adventurous approach to form or style—that is, serves the ultimate purpose of experimental fiction to revitalize the form itself—probably we ought to grant that writer his subject. Some might say that the novel’s length does not justify the thematic payoff, but I would contend that such length is required for the formal effect to be adequately felt: if *The Lost Scrapbook* could be regarded as a version of a picaresque narrative, the journey taken is by the reader in the experience of reading, and as with all picaresque narratives, much of the interest lies in the journey itself, not the destination. However, both Dara’s aesthetic approach and his political critique are more effectively realized in his second novel, *The Easy Chain*. In some ways it is surprising that this novel did not win Dara a somewhat larger audience and more attention from critics (again only one review, again by LeClair, in *Bookforum*), since, while it is hardly a conventional narrative, something like a recognizable story “arc” can be perceived behind the multiple registers of talk and shifts of setting. It even has a kind of mystery plot (actually several mysteries), even if those mysteries never quite get resolved.

Perhaps the most significant departure in *The Easy Chain* from the strategies employed in *The Lost Scrapbook* is that it features a protagonist—albeit one who is present only fleetingly (most directly at the novel’s beginning) and is depicted in a mosaic-like fashion, from a multitude of perspectives, so that we cannot really say we have a very firm grasp on his personal qualities or his motivations. In this novel, Dara takes the method introduced in *The Lost Scrapbook*, its emphasis on speech and soliloquy, and applies it to the development of the main character. We know Lincoln Selwyn mostly from what others say about him—although we often don’t know who these others are beyond their disembodied voices. The outline, if not all the details, of Lincoln’s story is clear enough: The son of English parents but raised in the Netherlands, Lincoln emigrates to the United States to attend college (the University of

Chicago), but instead finds himself, through mechanisms that often remain shrouded from our direct observation, a wildly successful entrepreneur and man about town, steadily accruing admirers and gaining influence. Then, apparently Selwyn disappears. (Later we learn he probably gained much of his success through shady means, although the investigators from whom we get this information are themselves not altogether reliable.) After a break in the narrative (represented in the text by a series of blank pages), we encounter Lincoln back in Holland, where he seems to be trying to fill in lacunae in his own knowledge about his family, including his mother and an aunt who had emigrated to the United States before him and whose whereabouts he has unsuccessfully tried to uncover. Next we discover that Lincoln has returned to the U.S., where at the novel's conclusion we are shocked to find him preparing to blow up the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, and, when the attempt fails, to shoot the private investigator he had tasked with finding the aunt.

The story, of course, does not come as an uninterrupted linear narrative. Not only are we sometimes not aware of Lincoln's specific activities, but the interruptions in the story of Lincoln Selwyn are often filled with other, seemingly unrelated stories featuring independent characters, such as the story about a Boulder, Colorado restaurant forced out of business when the rent on their building is arbitrarily raised. As with *The Lost Scrapbook*, these set-pieces are thematically related to Lincoln's story: the restaurant's plight turns into an apocalyptic narrative about the collapse of civilization itself and the reversion of the land to nature. *The Easy Chain* is ultimately centered around the same concern animating the previous novel, the ravages of advanced capitalism, but Lincoln Selwyn's life provides a more consistent, and more compelling, unity in the novel's aesthetic design. Indeed, it seems more fitting to speak about "design" in *The Easy Chain* than in *The Lost Scrapbook* (which does not mean the latter is simply chaotic). We see in *The Easy Chain* similar disruptions of narrative continuity and conventional prose (variations in textual arrangement, graphical effects such as those in the novel's final section, with its seemingly random divergences in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling), yet here they more readily seem part of the novel's unified portrayal of Lincoln Selwy, his elusiveness, his contradictory impulses, his lack of a core identity we can easily recognize.

This does not mean that *The Easy Chain* abandons experiment for convention or too comfortably courts facile accessibility. Readers not familiar with *The Lost Scrapbook* are

unlikely to think it too conspicuously conforms to expectations of conventional literary fiction. Its achievement consists not simply of the application of “craft,” but from a successful attempt to bring artistic coherence to a work that doesn’t settle for familiar means of character development or rely on a stable point of view. “Experimental” is not synonymous with “anarchic” when applied to formal innovations in fiction, and *The Easy Chain* adeptly achieves a totality of vision in a way that is perhaps more acutely visible than in *The Lost Scrapbook*. The balance between invention and design in *The Easy Chain* is the most finely measured among Dara’s novels.

If that balance skews somewhat to the former in *The Lost Scrapbook*, it skews more decidedly to the latter in Dara’s third novel, *Flee*. Certainly to readers for whom it might be their introduction to Dara (especially because it is the briefest of the three), this novel again would hardly seem a mainstream literary novel, but its more unconventional strategies—which are largely the same ones introduced in the first two novels—are employed to limited enough effect that it is more apparent they are designed to support the novel’s quasi-absurdist story. In *Flee* it is the story that is emphasized through the novel’s strategies of indirection and omission much as the character of Lincoln Selwyn is evoked in *The Easy Chain*. However, a story about the gradual abandonment of a good-sized city (most likely based on Burlington, Vermont) after its university shuts down due to its own malfeasance is inherently improbable and incongruous, and these qualities are only heightened through Dara’s by now signature methods—sudden discontinuities, multiple voices, etc. So compatible are form and content in *Flee*, in fact, that this novel can indeed be accurately described as satire, allowing Dara’s recurrent focus on capitalist values acting to impede human flourishing to be rendered more distinctly as satirical judgment.

In its more compact form, *Flee* demonstrates that Dara’s invocation of multiple voices and perspectives can operate to relate a story that doesn’t flash the usual narrative signals and create characters that are shorn of information beyond the clues offered in their talk—a local couple attempting to profit from the emptying out of their town are tracked throughout the novel and act, if not as protagonists, as narrative anchors, individual representatives of the broader dilemma facing the town whose particular experiences the reader can follow for continuity—but for the first time in Dara’s fiction the strategy seems overly familiar, too derivative of the work of William Gaddis, whose voice- and dialogue-centered novels provide the primary touchstone for Dara’s fiction. Ironically, *Flee* seems a bit too much like Gaddis’s *JR* in miniature, even

though it is *The Easy Chain* that is more reminiscent of Gaddis's novel in its subject and featured protagonist.

Perhaps it is a realization that this method has become somewhat perfunctory that led Dara to offer as his most recent work not a novel, but a play, the *Provisional Biography of Mose Eakins*, available as a download on the Aurora website. Here, of course, human speech is the form's natural medium, and the play is stripped down to just characters and talk, the stage "As bare as you can stand it." (It has something of the feel of a Greek drama, individual characters set off against a chorus-like group called "the Swirl.") Mose Eakins is (as described by one of the Swirl) "an American field-risk analyst working for Concord Oil." He is introduced to us speaking to various co-workers—none of them actually present on stage—in a briskly efficient but largely supercilious manner. Not long afterward, Mose begins to notice that people are beginning to react strangely in his presence: they seem not to hear what he is saying and instead speak about themselves in ways that strike Mose as wholly inappropriate, as if he is overhearing them reveal their unguarded thoughts. Eventually, Mose is informed he suffers from "imparlance," a disorder that causes people to "lose the capacity to infuse their words with intelligible significance." As a side effect, those to whom the sufferer speaks "often give voice to thoughts they usually keep hidden." Mose's life steadily deteriorates, and even though he comes to recognize that he himself has participated in the degradation of language, its reduction to utilitarian exchange and self-advancement, his ultimate fate is not a happy one.

Although *Provisional Biography of Mose Eakins* focuses on a theme central to much postmodern fiction, the failures of language to "communicate" reliably, that failure is tied to the debasement of language inflicted by society under capitalism, situating the play squarely among the three novels as cultural critique. (There may also be a sly dig at the incomprehension with which the literary establishment has greeted Dara's novels, as many readers and critics profess that such works lack "the capacity to infuse their words with intelligible significance.") The novels as well concern themselves, both implicitly and explicitly, with the obstacles language must overcome in order to be intelligible, but they do achieve their own kind of cogency. As does *Mose Eakins*, suggesting that finally Evan Dara belongs with the original generation of postmodernists in the audacity of his invention but doesn't really seem to share the

postmodernist skepticism about language as a representational medium. In *Mose Eakins*, he memorably represents the corruption of language by forces that have emptied it of all but the most crudely functional signifying potential, the destruction of literary power it would otherwise possess. Ultimately Dara is a moralist, not an aesthete.