

Doing Good With Dirty Hands

***Doing Evil to Achieve Good: Moral Choice in Conflict Situations*; Edited by Richard McCormick and Paul Ramsey;**
Loyola University Press; Chicago.

Reportedly, the American transcendentalist Margaret Fuller once self-seriously declared that she was "now prepared to accept the universe." (To which Thomas Carlyle responded, "By [G—], Madam, you'd better!") Most American liberals—transcendentalists of a sort also—would rather not stoop so low as Fuller, however. Their vision of infinite human goodness is so beautiful that they feel horribly imposed upon by a fallen world where good intentions do not preclude baleful consequences and where decent but distraught men frequently find the lesser of two evils to be their best available option. Such simon-pure idealism paves the way to incalculable concrete grief in the real world we all must inhabit. Because liberals are offended by the racism in South Africa and right-wing oppression in Central and South America, they shrilly insist that until a new order of unadulterated peace, democracy, and justice comes into being in these areas, we must have nothing whatever to do with them. Meanwhile, Cuban and Soviet agents relentlessly prepare to inflict suffering upon the people of these regions—black and white—on a scale they have never known. Similarly, with consciences troubled by the implications of nuclear warfare, liberals demand that the West divest itself of its cruel weaponry. The Soviets commend them for their moral integrity—while continuing to amass the firepower necessary to enforce a worldwide tyranny, brutal and dehumanizing beyond all liberal comprehension. Sober observers may indeed be grateful that, for all its

blind spots, the current administration has at least noticed that we are now so far east of Eden that naively paradisiacal expectations can only make it easier for totalitarian serpents to get America in their crushing coils.

It would be presumptuous to posit that any of the contributors to *Doing Evil to Achieve Good* support Reagan's policies. The list of "social problems of the first magnitude" offered in the introduction indeed suggests that these theologians and philosophers would prefer to ignore the gulag, Afghanistan, and Poland and instead worry about racism in the United States and repression in "some areas of the Third World." In the text itself, five learned men debate the meaning and value of the Catholic doctrine of the double effect (which justifies actions done for "a proportionately grave reason" but occasioning foreseen yet unintended evil) in abstruse and hypothetical terms far removed from specific evils anywhere in the world. But even from the windows of the scholar's ivory tower, man's moral dilemma appears much more unpleasant than liberals generally acknowledge. In the central essay, "Ambiguity in Moral Choice," Father McCormick argues that "love . . . is always controlled by the possible" and must not be "measured by the mere desire or intention." This means, he further elaborates, that in a world "infected by sin and weakness," we must inevitably permit, though not intend, some evils in order to prevent

greater ones. Such insights are central to conservative wisdom. Nonetheless, the convoluted and unresolved arguments in which these scholars engage as they try to establish what evil is and how man can distinguish greater evils from lesser ones underscores the commonsense perception that a

Business as Usual

Emily Stipes Watts: *The Businessman in American Literature*; University of Georgia Press; Athens.

Although fraught with the conventional liberal wisdoms, or trivialities, a TV show aired on NBC called *Family Ties* points to a long-lived aberration presented through the products of American culture as if it is the norm: it is the statement that the businessman is an odd man, a veritable weirdo. The program's scenario presents two 60's protesters who remember sit-ins and dancing nude at Woodstock with nostalgia. However, in the intervening years they have created a family in which Ricky Nelson wouldn't feel uncomfortable. Of course, the father runs a public TV station and the mother must be her "own person" by being an architect, and great masses of granola are consumed. But given the facts that Ozzie never seemed to do anything, that Harriet was too good to be true even in the 50's, and that the Nelsons consumed vast quantities of ice cream, these minor updates can be accepted. The interesting point about *Family Ties* is that the first-born, who is

subtle head can articulate morality's finer points but cannot establish its foundations. For that we need a rarer gift, as several of the contributors acknowledge. Fortunately, the eviction notice served on Adam and Eve was not the last divine message sent to earth. (BC) □

now a high school student, is a thorough-going supporter of the free-enterprise system, a young man for whom "grounding" means an injunction against watching *Wall Street Week*. What is striking is that the would-be—or will-be—businessman, contrary to popular portrayals, is not presented as if he is "going through a stage" like acne; in most cases, he seems to be mature and his parents the adolescents.

For the most part, those who have made money or who aspire to do so have taken a beating in the entertainment media and in the arts in America. After the Bolsheviks took over in Russia, the writers there were instructed with truncheons and less-subtle means to glorify the workers who operated the turret lathes and who harvested the wheat. As Professor Watts shows in *The Businessman in American Literature*, American writers, with few exceptions, have deemed it their duty to denigrate the workers in this country who have "made it," to wield the truncheon against the successful. She argues that this state goes back beyond Babbitt, behind Silas Lapham, all the way to the Puritans. Professor Watts does see some changes on the present scene, evidenced in works by Ken Kesey, Stanley Elkin, and James Dickey. Some of her assertions in this regard, however, are dubious. What is unquestionable is that it's a wonder that any young people in this country who have been exposed to "important" works of American fiction have aspired to do anything but dance nude at Woodstock. □



Strategies of Prose Packaging

R.H.W. Dillard: *The First Man on the Sun*; Louisiana State University Press; Baton Rouge.

Popular books—science fiction and mysteries, in particular—are often available as double-deckers: two plots in one package, two novellas for the price of one, as distinct from the types in the 19th century, when one part led to another. This current state is brought about by the existence of periodicals in which the writers of these stories can publish for cash; prices are determined by word counts. As many of the science-fiction writers, to concentrate on one group, are professional in the sense that they write in the same way that a bricklayer lays bricks—as a means to an end—they tend to be frugal and to therefore recycle what they can. Previously published



magazine pieces end up between stiff covers. To a certain extent, this approach is becoming a convention. This status can be discerned through R.H.W. Dillard's *The First Man on the Sun*, his second novel.

Dillard is essentially a poet. His four volumes of poetry need not be consulted to determine this; his prose style, with its attention to detail (e.g., a walk through a woods elicits an observation of the sun catching the dew on a spider's web), announces the importance of words. Ideas, unfortunately, take second place.

Just as Dillard is a novelist-poet, his novel is of two natures: it is a double-decker, one part science-fiction book, one part conventional novel. *Science* fiction in this case is not as precise as, perhaps, *speculative* would be. That is, men do take off in a vehicle and sail to the sun. But that event is secondary; it exists merely as a convenient frame upon which Dillard crafts his real message, which is something of a Hallmark greeting card to writers including Sterne, Nabokov, Henry Miller, Borges, Ursula LeGuin, and various other innovators of fictional

form. Dillard does have a nice touch. For example, the "science" fiction chapters are written in the future tense. But ultimately his book is weak; it does not hold. He has put two disparate works together, two works that are more different than the two distinct plots in a common science-fiction double-decker. Unlike those professional science-fiction writers, Dillard is a *serious* writer, which means that he writes so that his work will be carefully examined. At best, trying to delineate *The First Man on the Sun* becomes an exercise with all of the importance of figuring out whether Certs is a candy mint or a breath mint. □

The Artist as Island

David Storey: *A Prodigal Child*; E. P. Dutton; New York.

In an earlier age, the artist spoke for the community as a whole. If he appeared at all in his art, he typically did so as an unobtrusive, integral part of society—like Chaucer's likable but amusingly inept poet or Dryden's companionable Neander. But at least since the Romantics, the artist has become an ever-more-solitary figure, alienated from the world at large and self-seriously preoccupied with affirming the uniqueness of his own talented sensitivity. Perhaps at first some advantages of independence, variety, and honesty accrued to this introspective individuality, but the long-term consequence has been to make art a stranger or an enemy to life. When almost every writer is determined to march to the beat of a different drummer, and to call as much attention as possible to the idiosyncracies of his own rhythm, then the steady social cadences of faith and principle are inevitably drowned out in a horrid cacophony. Indeed, one of the reasons that the 20th cen-

tury is so fragmented is that so many artists have for so long championed the sovereignty of the daringly original and imaginative self. The disintegration is now so far advanced that those few like Walker Percy and Saul Bellow who would refurbish what once was a shared ethical, cultural, and religious legacy make themselves solitary by that very desire. The commonplace tradition, which survived through Samuel Johnson, is gone and with it any hope of a natural relationship between the modern author and his audience. For if the author and his values are genuinely and radically unique, how can the reader hope to es-



tablish sympathy for and interest in any depiction of his artist-protagonist? If the novelist ignores the cohesive traditions of society, or acknowledges them only to disparage them, where are the minds of creator and auditor ever to come together?

Such is the dilemma posed by *A Prodigal Child*. David Storey, winner of Britain's Booker Prize, is possessed of a truly rare talent, especially for capturing the precise features of character and conversation. But there's little meaning or enjoyment in a novel narrowly focused on the highly unusual development of a cold-hearted young sculptor named Bryan who leaves behind, and comes to be ashamed of, his working-class family. In answer to the question "If God doesn't exist, and there is no ultimate purpose, what's the point of living?" the protagonist proposes to make himself into "someone special," someone who can create art that no one else can do—while simultaneously sinking into a bizarre, adulterous fixation on his vain benefactress. On what terms is the reader to share this "point of living," though, especially since Storey's authorial distance from Bryan is slight and no adequate foil appears in the book?

The protagonist does assert at a key point that "There is such a thing as love," but this assertion remains an unfelt abstraction, despite Storey's lame stretching toward some larger communal values in a too-abrupt conclusion in which Bryan rejoins his family. But the final two chapters are mere groping: they are too undeveloped and too contrived to satisfy imaginatively. Still, the author's evident yearning for values larger than the artistic ego is encouraging for all who recognize the allusion in the title. Contrary to Thomas Wolfe, the talented prodigals of modernity may yet go home again. And if they do, we may all join in the joy and feasting. (BC) □