

and a crane employed in order to move the artwork, which currently resides in the Whitney. The story of this painting—which, we are told, “was the death of” Defeo (ingesting the lead of the paint, it’s suggested, gave her cancer)—reminds us vividly how art might intrude upon life. The artist’s obsession, the passionate, often hysterical pleasures of trying again and again to make the impossible thing, figures a dangerous pleasure that is the superficial core of the Beat phenomenon: in this world view, dedication does not take the form of cynical optimism but instead becomes vehicle to new pleasures—by doing what one should not, one ushers into the world new forms.

From this perspective, *The Beats* reveals a different kind of history. The three or four most prominent Beat figures recede, and an entire century of anarchist art practices emerges. These lesser-known figures represent a long tradition of radical organizing and theorizing—a populist counterculture that connects Wobblies to Beats to hippies to Black nationalists to punks and so on, in an endlessly transforming, multigenerational culture of D.I.Y. aesthetics. Their dedication to impossible projects might be called “practical romanticism”; see, for example, Philip Lamantia’s call to end “the supreme disalienation of humanity and its language.” These are Utopian objectives, to be sure—but pursuing such fantastic notions brings an irresistible springtime to the soul following the dolorous cynicism that precedes it.

Matthias Regan

§

Walter Mosley, *The Long Fall*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2009. 305pp. \$25.95

Considering that it included a half-serious call for “the end of the novel,” Walter Benn Michaels’s recent *Bookforum* essay, “Going Boom” (February/March 2009), met with surprisingly little resistance from the larger literary community. According to Michaels, the kind of fiction in which “what people really want is respect for their otherness rather than money for their mortgages” can hardly do justice to our moment of economic crisis. Toward the end of his essay, he even starts naming names: “For sure, no more books like *The Corrections*, or any of Oprah’s other choices. And no more stories about the children of immigrants, trying to figure out whether and where they fit into American culture.” Critics and novelists from across the spectrum accorded Michaels plaudits for speaking a courageous truth; “Going Boom” was feted with a special panel at the New York Public Library.

“Going Boom” met with enthusiasm in part because Michaels is right: contemporary literary fiction has an allergy to money problems. His prescription for this allergy is a combination of Brett Easton Ellis, whose *American*

Psycho he prizes for its satire of the ruling classes, and the HBO series *The Wire*, with its exhaustive depiction of criminals, cops, and civilians, all battered into fatalism by urban institutions. This solution, powerful as it is, remains artificially narrow. In searching for an alternative to the Oprah novel, Michaels hasn't looked as far as he might have: he does not see that both of his acceptable models belong, to one degree or another, to the larger, thriving genre of crime fiction—an American institution built on and around money. From Elmore Leonard's arriviste gangsters to Dashiell Hammett's cynical, salaryman detectives, crime fiction routinely documents both the movement of money and the degradations people will undertake to get it. In these narratives, money represents escape or power or triumph, and nobody ever gets ahead without someone else suffering. The recognition of this fact won't fix the housing market, but does at least serve as a compelling alternative to a litany of troubled suburbanites striving for liberation.

True to the tradition in which he writes, the crime novelist Walter Mosley rarely loses focus on his characters' checkbooks, or the way money expands and constricts their ability to live with their actions. Mosley is best known for his novels about Easy Rawlins, a midcentury Los Angeleno detective who wins and loses a small kingdom of apartment buildings to corporate skullduggery. *Blonde Faith*, the most recent Easy Rawlins novel, includes the following queasy pleasure: watching a blue-collar client beg to get some of his up-front fee back after Rawlins brings the client's runaway daughter home in less time than he had paid for. (Rawlins rebuffs him with an implied threat to let the teenager's pimp know where she lives.) Leonid McGill, the private detective at the center of Mosley's latest novel, *The Long Fall*, spends as much time trying to make ends meet as he does trying to solve the central mystery plot. As he accepts payment for a job that may have put four innocent men in danger, he thinks, "Who would take a job like that? Me. And I did it just to pay last month's bills." A journeyman P.I. cut from the John D. MacDonal school, McGill makes his living by renting out his moral agency for a day rate. Mosley's own interest in his hero's financial wherewithal becomes obsessive: the novel tracks exactly how much McGill makes for every job he takes and faithfully reports how and where he spends the money. In the first chapter, McGill worries about where next month's bill money is coming from; in the third, he negotiates late payment with his office building's rental agent; in the fifth, he bribes a stoolie with \$20 to rat out an old friend; by the tenth, he's considering taking a job from a hit man. Careful readers can tabulate exactly how much he makes over the course of the novel, and can divide the sum by the novel's double-digit body count to calculate the morality/money exchange rate. If "Going Boom" seeks to inspire fiction to grapple with economic reality, then *The Long Fall* ought to be just the thing for a critic like Michaels.

McGill does contend with problems beyond the narrow scope of market forces. He even has a family. But the traumas of marriage and fatherhood aren't presented as a refuge from capital—they're presented as yet another money hole that forces McGill to hire on with hit men whom he loathes. *The Long Fall* locates exactly where family falls prey to the forces that dominate working life. For example: McGill discovers that his teenage son, a puckishly criminal "dark genius" named Twill, has undertaken a high-minded, hare-brained plan to exact vigilante justice for a girlfriend. McGill starts a shadow campaign to avert his son's inevitable arrest for murder, a plan that involves dummy websites, tech-heavy surveillance, and, naturally, large quantities of money. To fund his efforts, McGill takes a job targeting a mob witness in hiding, even though he knows that by doing so he's pulling the trigger as a vigilante himself. There is no moral dilemma here because McGill doesn't see himself as making a choice. In *The Long Fall*, capital forces working people into indecent corners where they are expected to make snap decisions; to ensure the survival of loved ones, Mosley's characters often chuck morality out the window altogether. Opting out of the system leaves the people close to you without defense or resources.

Changing the system isn't an option, either. Reminders of collapsed revolutions dog McGill at every turn: the office he spends the novel trying to pay for is in the Tesla Building; McGill himself is named for Brezhnev, and he remembers his days as a red-diaper baby with condescension and shame. Even when he does manage a moral victory, it isn't through smarts or bravery. Instead, the heat passes when he realizes the hit he's agreed to help with is actually a smaller cog in a larger machine. Even a reprieve from violence has nothing to do with personal agency—it's a randomly dispensed gift from bosses with large bank accounts. The brutality of Mosley's depiction of need is where the dramatic force of the novel lies, and where it most directly engages both capitalism and the insoluble intrapersonal struggles capitalism creates. Housing crises might come and go, but the moral thrasher at the heart of economic inequality always grinds both quickly and fine.

What *The Long Fall* does offer by way of consolation is the notion that by remaining conscious of the compromises you make, it might be possible to feel coherent in a market-driven world that wants to pull you apart. McGill is immersed in a world of filthy lucre, but fully alive and conscious of his situation. Our hero never makes it free of the profitable yet dirty work he wants to escape, but the novel lets him acknowledge the ache it causes: "I was no longer a moral illiterate," McGill says, watching a man he may have to lead to his death. "I could read the signs and I knew what they meant."

Sam Eccleston