



BEING
WRONG

ADVENTURES IN
THE MARGIN OF ERROR

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*For my family,
given and chosen*

*And for Michael and Amanda,
at whose expense
I wrote about what I knew*

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know.”” One of her colleagues, the Canadian poet Anne Carson, put it even more plainly in a poem called “Essay on What I Think About Most.” (The opening lines are “Error. / And its emotions.”) “What we are engaged in when we do poetry,” Carson wrote, “is error.” I take her to mean by this three things. The first is that poetry is made of words, and, as we’ve seen, words have error built into them from the get-go. Every syllable is a stepping stone across the gap, an effort to explain something (train tracks, thunder, happiness) by recourse to something it is not (a word). The second is that writing, whether of poetry or anything else, involves a certain inevitable amount of getting it wrong—an awareness that truth is always on the lam, that the instant you think you’ve got it pinned down on the page, it shimmers, distorts, wiggles away. Last, but possibly most important, I take her to mean that poetry, like error, startles, unsettles, and defies; it urges us toward new theories about old things.

Making mistakes as one might make poems, rejecting certainty, deliberately exploring ambiguity and error: this is the optimistic model of wrongness on Ecstasy. It does not truck with (to borrow Carson’s words again) “fear, anxiety, shame, remorse / and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes.” I don’t agree that such emotions are silly, but I do agree that they are not a good place to set down our luggage and settle in. Artists entice us past them, into a world where error is not about fear and shame, but about disruption, reinvention, and pleasure. Art is an invitation to enjoy ourselves in the land of wrongness.

As that suggests, it is not just the makers of art but its beneficiaries—you and me—who get to experience an acute pleasure in error. Think for a moment about “suspension of disbelief,” the prerequisite for enjoying fictional narratives of all kinds. As readers, spectators, or listeners, we consent to believe, albeit temporarily, in something we know to be false. What we expect to receive in exchange is pleasure. And we do. But that pleasure often

* Szyborska explicitly contrasted the poet’s embrace of doubt with its antithesis, the zealot’s embrace of certainty. The trouble with “torturers, dictators, fanatics and demagogues,” she wrote, is that “they ‘know,’ and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don’t want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish the force of their arguments.”

comes to us in forms that—fittingly, since they derive from error—we do not usually enjoy.

Take suspense. Under normal circumstances, we don’t relish the anxiety of not knowing, but when it comes to art, we are veritable suspense junkies. I don’t just mean that we gravitate toward works that are explicitly created and billed as thrillers, although we certainly love those, too. Virtually all fictional narratives contain some element of strategic withholding, hoodwinking, and revealing, and we simply can’t get enough of it. We love to be kept guessing—and, what’s more, we are happiest when all of our guesses prove wrong. That’s why some of the most satisfying fictional narratives (*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Our Mutual Friend*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Usual Suspects*, to name a few) don’t merely resolve their suspense at the end, but do so in a way that comports with the facts yet still contrives to astonish us.†

So one perverse pleasure of art is the pleasure of being lost, in the sense of being confused or in the dark. (Traditionally, this confusion is temporary, and resolves into satisfying clarity at the conclusion. In modern art, with its more acute interest in error, the sense of being lost is often ongoing: see Gertrude Stein.) But a second pleasure is that of being lost in a different sense: of exploring uncharted territory, whether in the world or in the self. We say of a particularly engrossing work of art that we *got lost in it*—as if, through experiencing it, we had wandered into an unfamiliar world. And

† I can’t resist a footnote on Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, since it is arguably the best example of pleasure from error in all of literary history—not to mention one of the world’s greatest meditations on certainty and wrongness. The book famously opens with the phrase “It is a truth universally acknowledged” (“that a single man, in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”)—but in fact, “truth universally acknowledged” is the plaything of Austen’s novel. The more universally or vociferously any “truth” is averred in it, the more you can bet it isn’t true at all. This is particularly the case when it comes to ostensible verities about the novel’s characters; *Pride and Prejudice* is a book about people who, believing themselves to be astute scholars of human nature, persistently and dramatically misunderstand each other. Unlike in *The Comedy of Errors*, however, we the reader don’t stand aside smirking at the sequence of mistakes. On the contrary, we are wholly party to them—with the happy result that we are also party to the pleasurable shock of wrongness when the truth is revealed at the end.