Stuart Burrows, *Novel* 54:3 (November 2021), 475-78

Close Reading on a Global Scale

CHRISTOPHER LAING HILL, *Figures of the World: The Naturalist Novel and Transnational Form* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2020), pp. 280, paper, $47.24.

Figures of the World is an immensely impressive work. It pulls off two highly difficult feats: first, it offers a model for how to read across languages, cultures, and traditions; second, it reshapes our understanding of the breadth and reach of naturalist fiction. Christopher Laing Hill looks in detail at texts from France, North America, and Japan, making reference along the way to works and debates in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, Holland, Belgium, the Balkans, Scandinavia, Russia, Latin America, China, and Korea. Remarkably, given the geographical, cultural, and linguistic range on offer here, *Figures of the World* is never glib, indeed never even gives the impression of overreaching. This is due in part to the fact that Laing Hill is a wonderfully lucid writer; in part to the extraordinary amount of work that has gone into producing this study. There will be few critics in a position to test all of his claims about how "as naturalist fiction traveled the world . . . [it] became not one but many naturalisms" (xiii). But although I am able to pass judgment only on Laing Hill's reading of American literature and, to a lesser extent, of the French nineteenth century novel, let me begin simply by saying *chapeau*! We live in an overhyped age, when blurbs are rarely to be trusted, but *Figures of the World* is the real thing, and I learned an enormous amount from it.

Laing Hill tracks what he calls three "naturalist topoi of representation" across literature from the world over, focusing for the most part on works written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These topoi are the "body figure," the attempt "to show the relationship between physical, psychological, and social life" (xv) by means of a corporeal metonymic logic, a signal instance of which is the repeated references to legs in Émile Zola's 1877 *L'Assommoir*; the "Nana figure" (xv), taken from Zola's 1880 novel of that name, which "staged social contradictions through self-liberated female characters" (xv); and the "social figure" (xv), which "created models of social structure and development" (xv), giving rise to the language of surface and depth in Zola's 1885 *Germinal*. Each of these figures serves as what Erich Auerbach called a 'point of departure': "a firmly circumscribed, easily seen, set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy" (135). That these figures can all be traced back to Zola is hardly surprising given that the term naturalism is practically synonymous with his work. Yet the strategy is not simply a tribute to the scale of Zola's achievement in his twenty-volume Rougon-Macquart series of novels. Taking his cue from Pierre Bourdieu, Laing Hill observes that "sometimes it is not what an author *says* but what he or she can be *made to say* that counts. Writers who are particularly 'elastic'—who can be made to say many different things—circulate well . . . a paradoxical quality of Zola's work is that his fiction ranged far beyond—and often contradicted—his statements of method. Naturalism as a program indeed proved rather flexible (hence the variety of practices that writers considered to be naturalistic)" (46). This formulation strikes me as wonderfully helpful. Zola's elasticity provides one answer to "the question behind this book": "how a tendency in French fiction in the 1860s could turn into so many

 DOI 10.1215/00295132-9353971

different naturalisms in some sixty years" (11). Answering this question does not, however, prompt Laing Hill to offer anything approaching a history of influence. *Figures of the World* rejects the idea that naturalist writers were imitating a French model, decrying the fact that "most work on naturalism as an international phenomenon . . . takes a European scale, implying a shared chronology if not a geographical evenness" (4). Such work fails to recognize that literary history is messy, even at times contradictory. The history of naturalist fiction in particular "was one of multiple mediations . . . shaped by multiple poles of international power, with multiple, discrepant outcomes" (37).

Laing Hill makes an impassioned case for the particular brand of criticism such multiplicity demands, one that works on a gamut of scales simultaneously, from the national to the international, from the study of genre to the close reading of individual passages. He notes that naturalist writers in, say, Argentina or Belgium, were inevitably as much concerned with the near-at-hand as they were with Zola. Yet the fact that battles over naturalism were inevitably national should not blind us to the fact that these "writers imagined themselves taking part in something on an other-than-national scale" (13). As a result the history of naturalism is fundamentally heterogeneous. "Writers who identified themselves as naturalists in one part of the world," Laing Hill observes, were "writing in ways their counterparts in other areas might not have recognized" (10). Paying close attention to such a history leads him to the conclusion that it might be better to dispense altogether with the problem of definition, a problem that has long preoccupied critics of naturalism, concerned to distinguish the genre from its close relative, realism: "When it comes to definitions, then, I propose taking writers and critics at their word: if they called it naturalism, then naturalism it was" (11). This approach is not without its cost. The attempt to define naturalism has, after all, produced some fascinating insights. Lee Clark Mitchell's *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism*, for example, argues that naturalism substitutes scenes of chance for the scenes of deliberation to be found in the realist novel. Huckleberry Finn agonizes over whether to betray the runaway Jim to his owners before deciding not to, despite the fact that his actions will be seen as stealing. Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, by contrast, really does steal, yet his action is the product of an accident, and Theodore Dreiser's hero never thinks of himself as a thief. *Figures of the World* makes a very different argument, contending that "what distinguishes naturalism is the plethora of programmatic statements and the intensity of critical debate that turned it into an 'ism' that writers could embrace or denounce" (39). Naturalism can thus be seen as a forerunner to "the many -isms of the so-called modernist turn, futurism, vorticism, and so on" (39). The invocation of modernism is somewhat dismissive, and Laing Hill does not pursue this notion of a through line from naturalism to the formal experiments of the first half of the twentieth century. But the idea is thought-provoking.

In the face of the "chronologically ragged" form taken by naturalist fiction, which "waxed in some places when it was waning in others" (10), scholars should "Proceed inductively, anticipate contradiction, and embrace the unexpected" (183). Do as the historian does, in other words. Laing Hill is very clear on this point, arguing for the need to approach "the transnational rise and fall of naturalist fiction as *history*—convoluted and unruly—not as a matter of 'rules' and models" (37). The target here is the work of critics such as Pascale Casanova, who argued in *The World Republic of Letters* for the existence of a global literary system, the capital of which was, inevitably, Paris. Laing Hill takes on both Casanova's

history and what he refers to as her "circular logic" (16), in which "peripheral writers are dominated because they can't understand why they are, and they cannot understand why they are because they are dominated" (16). He cites approvingly Aamir Mufti's argument that world literature scholarship of the kind pioneered by Casanova assumes a barrier-free space of circulation, blinding critics to both "unevenness and inequality" and to "the great variety of ways of telling stories" across the globe. *Figures of the World* is equally dismissive of Franco Moretti's model of distant reading. What is needed instead is close reading on a "world" scale, a method that would "block simplistic assumptions about the equivalence and translatability of texts and contexts in a 'global' perspective" (xvii).

Much as I applaud the defense of close reading, Laing Hill's case is somewhat undermined by the comparative weakness of his analysis of individual texts. For whereas his account of the circulation, imitation, and inspiration of the "Nana figure" is nothing less than extraordinary, the reading of the novel itself is somewhat perfunctory. The analysis of the crippled bodies strewn across Zola's *L'Assommoir* is stronger, as is the tour through the landscape of *Germinal*, though this too is somewhat underdeveloped. The real problem, however, has to do with the analysis of three key American novels (I am unable to pass judgment on the close reading of Japanese fiction offered here). Laing Hill points out, rightly enough, that recent scholarship on American naturalism has minimized the debt of writers such as Frank Norris and Dreiser to Zola, a connection readily acknowledged by earlier criticism. But the decision to ignore much of the most important work in the field is misjudged. One of the more pleasing ironies of American criticism is the fact that some of the clumsiest fiction has produced some of the deftest scholarship. Norris and Dreiser are the key figures in work such as Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines*, Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, and Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*. Laing Hill briefly refers to Seltzer, confines Benn Michaels to a footnote, and fails to refer at all to Fleissner, a frustrating omission given the originality and imagination of her reading of two of the central texts of this study, *Sister Carrie* and *McTeague*. And although it is hard not to take a certain pleasure in seeing Benn Michaels's well-known account of naturalism summarily dismissed, the intricacies of his argument deserve better. As for Seltzer, his imaginative readings of Jack London would surely have enriched Laing Hill's analysis of *The Sea Wolf*. Seltzer views the naturalist novel as a mutation of realism, one that results in "thematic and narrative shifts . . . from inheritance to heredity, from progress (as evolution) to recapitulation (as devolution), from histories of marriage and adultery to case histories of bodies, sexualities, and populations." The genealogy Seltzer offers, though it takes realism as its starting point, has clear affinities with the "naturalist topoi of representation" that structure *Figures of the World*. That said, Laing Hill not only takes us back to an earlier genealogy—one with Zola at its source—he greatly enlarges and enriches it, reminding us just how much criticism can miss when it focuses too closely on national literary traditions. For my own part, I finished his book not only with a long reading list for the long dark winter ahead (I write this in December 2020), but also with a renewed sense of why literary history matters, and how we don't need a literary lab to do it.

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