

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE GOOD AND THE READ: LITERARY VALUE AND READERSHIP IN CANADIAN LITERATURE

174 Albert Braz
University of Alberta

The matter of literary value remains one of the most problematic issues in literary studies. This is especially true when dealing with national literatures. Not all contemporary scholars are as blunt as the celebrated Danish critic Georg Brandes who, in 1899, declared that it is pointless “closing one’s eyes to the fact that most of humanity is dull, ignorant, of limited judgment. The best is inaccessible to them, the finest is incomprehensible” (65). Still, many of today’s scholars make no effort to camouflage their disappointment that, say, formally conservative realist novels continue to be published whereas experimental ones are often out of print, without addressing whether the latter ever attain much of a readership. Others, in contrast, are captivated by the sociopolitical and economic conditions of literary production and show little interest in aesthetic matters, be they achievements or failures. The two books under review—Colin Hill’s *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction* (2012) and Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias, eds., *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* (2012)—exemplify these two trends in contemporary literary scholarship.

Colin Hill’s *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction* is an impressive study of the fortunes—and misfortunes—of modern fiction in Canada. Hill investigates the labours of “a group of writers who deliberately and against much resistance modernized Canadian fiction in the early twentieth century” (6). He defines Canadian modern realism as a movement that arose in opposition to sentimental romanticism and “sought to represent the ‘new’ and unexpressed Canadian experience” (216), and

which “demonstrated a sustained and experimental interest in psychological writing and the epistemological representation of human consciousness” (7). Hill contends that the realist aesthetic continues to prevail in Canadian literature, since by 1950 realism was “established as the dominant and default mode of serious fiction” in the country (218). That said, for him, the heyday of the realist movement in Canada was between 1919 and 1950, the period on which he focuses. After opening his monograph with a discussion of the contexts, aesthetics, and origins of the movement, Hill devotes chapters to Raymond Knister as a revolutionary modern realist; a re-evaluation of prairie realism; Frederick Philip Grove’s eclectic realism; urban and social realism; Morley Callaghan as a cosmopolitan modern realist; and, finally, an overview of modern realism and Canadian literature. The most compelling chapter in the book, though, is the second one, a comparative analysis of the modern realism manifestos published in the literary magazines *Canadian Bookman* and *The Canadian Forum* in the 1920s.

Hill remarks that whereas “*The Canadian Forum* is usually praised for its intellectual and cosmopolitan contributions to Canadian literature, *Canadian Bookman* is almost always dismissed as uncritical and backward-looking” (24). Part of the reason for the antipathy toward the second journal, he notes, is its close links to the Canadian Authors Association, which was so inclusive in its membership that it accepted nearly anyone who called himself or herself a writer and was frequently accused of literary boosterism. The CAA also had a significant female representation, which the male literary establishment at the time did not always appreciate. This is perhaps most notoriously echoed in “The Canadian Authors Meet,” in which F.R. Scott not only satirizes those poets who endlessly “paint the native maple” but is particularly dismissive of the “poetess” Miss Crotchet, who greets “the other unknowns with a cheer— / Virgins of sixty who still write of passion” (Scott 115). Hill, however, makes a compelling case that the *Canadian Bookman* played a much more pivotal role in the development of modern realist fiction in Canada than did *The Canadian Forum*. While “the essential creative works of modern realism would not be published in the *Bookman* (which published very little creative work),” he writes, in the 1920s the magazine published a series of manifestos on modern realism that “established a sense of urgency about Canada’s need for modern writing and offered initial definitions of the new modern realism and its characteristics” (29). In other words, contrary to what is usually suggested in Canadian literary history, the supposedly traditional *Canadian Bookman* had considerably more impact on the development of literary modernism in Canada than did the ostensibly cutting-edge *The Canadian Forum*.

There are numerous other insightful readings of Canadian literature in *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction*, reflecting Hill’s apparent familiarity with about every single work of modern fiction written in Canada. Hill shows why he believes “Knister was the first writer of prose in Canada to think seriously about modern fiction” (77) and why Grove is not only “a giant on the Canadian literary scene of

the early twentieth-century” but also that “there is scarcely an aspect of the modern-realist movement that does not bear his imprint” (122). In addition, he maintains that there is a serious flaw in the typical criticism of prairie realism, for if “prairie writers are imitative and derivative then their style is not geographically determined” (115). The one chapter that is not quite persuasive is the one on Callaghan. For Hill, Callaghan is notable for being “the most internationally connected Canadian prose writer of his generation” (191) as well as for “calling for the mimetic reflection of Canada” (201). But it is difficult to reconcile the notion that Callaghan marks a major turning point in the representation of Canadian spaces, especially urban ones, with his proclivity to depict Canadian cities as Anytown North America. Similarly, what Hill considers Callaghan’s cosmopolitanism could be interpreted as little more than an absence of local specificity. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Brandes contends that, because novelists “see before them the possibility of being known and read throughout the whole world,” they “begin to write for an invisible, abstract public, and this does damage to literary production” (65). It could certainly be argued that what is supposed to be the cosmopolitanism of Callaghan is really the result of his attempting to reach the universal without the particular, a tradition that continues to live on in much of the work of Douglas Coupland, the Margaret Atwood of the MaddAddam trilogy, and the so-called free trade fiction.

There are two other blind spots in Hill’s book. The first of these is a limited interest in (non-literary) history. Hill analyzes in detail a novel like Robert J.C. Stead’s *Homesteaders*, which “spans the period between 1882 and about 1910” and portrays “a prairie landscape that is quickly changing” because of modernization (94). He quotes Stead to the effect that the railroad is supplanting the ox-cart, yet does not mention that one of the ethnocultural groups being displaced by the European and Euro-Canadian arrivals is the Métis. Actually, in his reassessment of prairie realism, he does not address the fact the region was riven by the military-political conflicts that culminated in the Northwest Rebellion, an event that has been called “the tragedy of the Canadian internal war of 1885” and which “showed how badly we could go wrong as a country, how easily and deeply we could scar ourselves, both the victims and the victimizers” (Saul xiii). Moreover, it is rather problematic to refer to the prairie as “a culturally neutral (for the writer of European descent) and, in the early twentieth century, largely unexplored subject” (118). Even for people of European heritage, the prairie is hardly culturally neutral, as reflected in the growing tendency to “de-Frenchify” its past, both the strictly European past and the Métis one (Braz 113).

The other shortcoming in Hill’s book is its privileging a genre regardless of its impact on readers, which takes us back to the matter of literary value. For example, Hill states that “The best-known Canadian fiction of the early twentieth century” is composed of “works by [Hugh] MacLennan, [Martha] Ostenso, Callaghan, Grove, and [Malcolm] Ross” (5; see also 18). But if by “best-known” one means most widely read, then the case could be made that the pre-eminent texts are likely L.M.

Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Ralph Connor's *Black Rock*, Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna*, and perhaps Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. While those texts are not formally innovative, they all managed to travel beyond their authors' national borders. In the process, they also conveyed their national imaginaries to other lands, something that the overwhelming majority of what Hill considers "some of the most remarkable works of Canadian fiction of the period" (18) never did. The reality is that many of the texts that have been canonized nationally do not seem to have much appeal not only in other countries but, often, even with popular (non-academic) audiences in Canada. Therefore, one should at least query the literary value of books that have never succeeded in capturing the imagination of readers, although in some cases they have never been published.

Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias's *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* is very different from *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction*, starting with the fact it is a collection of essays by a group of scholars rather than the work of a single author. Excluding a short preface by the two editors, the volume comprises twelve essays: "Introduction—Shifting the Ground of a Discipline: Emergence and Canadian Literary Studies in English," by Kamboureli; "National Literatures in the Shadow of Neoliberalism," by Jeff Derksen; "'Beyond CanLit(e)': Reading. Interdisciplinarity. Transatlantically." by Danielle Fuller; "White Settlers and the Biopolitics of State Building in Canada," by Janine Brodie; "'Some Great Crisis': Vimy as Originary Violence," by Zacharias; "Amplifying Threat: Reasonable Accommodations and Quebec's Bouchard-Taylor Commission Hearings (2007)," by Monika Kin Gagnon and Yasmin Jiwani; "The Time Has Come: Self and Community Articulations in *Colour. An Issue* and *Awakening Thunder*," by Larissa Lai; "Archivable Concepts: Talonbooks and Literary Translation," by Kathy Mezei; "Is CanLit Lost in Japanese Translation?" by Yoko Fujimoto; "The Cunning of Reconciliation: Reinventing White Civility in the 'Age of Apology,'" by Pauline Wakeham; "The Long March to 'Recognition': Sákéj Henderson, First Nations Jurisprudence, and *Sui Generis Solidarity*," by Len Findlay; and "bush/writing: embodied deconstruction, traces of community, and writing against the state in indigenous acts of inscription," by peter kulchyski.

Not the least of the virtues of *Modern Realism in English-Canadian Fiction* is Hill's insistence on the agency of writers, arguing that the modern realist movement in Canada was "driven by three dozen writers" (6) who "demonstrated that the 'region' is subjected to the creative whim and experiment of the author; the author is not subjected to the creative whim of a personified landscape or region or geographical space" (222). Such a focus on authorship is something that one does not see much in *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies*, which is less interested in aesthetic and linguistic concerns than in sociological ones. In her comprehensive Introduction, Kamboureli asserts that literary studies in English-speaking Canada "has begun to demonstrate a steady shift toward a foregrounding of the situational and material conditions that influence the production of Canadian literary texts" (1). She elabo-

rates that she and her collaborators have started “to take note of, largely, precisely what our times entail: the various and often contradictory economies—restricted and general—that have formed of late as much the literature we study as the sites, contexts, and conditions within which we study it” (30). Kamboureli evidently perceives the type of scholarship represented in this book as radical, being designed to “stop[] the romancing of the nation and of CanLit as a statist institution” (9). But like Robert Lecker in his recent *Keepers of the Code: English-Canadian Literary Anthologies and the Representation of Nation*, she does not show how Canadian literature can be such a hegemonic force given its peripherality in Canadian schools. After all, even if “the idealized canon” of Canadian literature represents some “idealized Canada” (Lecker 17), it has always had to compete with more established canons—notably British and US—in the country’s educational system.

Kamboureli explains that she strives “to examine how the field of Canadian literary studies has been reconfigured as a discipline through what I call ‘emergent’ events or discourses and how such events advance a thematics that is acutely different from thematic criticism” (3). She further adds that the essays in the volume “shift our understanding of what constitutes the putative object of literary study” (4) and that “not all of the contributors in this collection are literary scholars [...] and that some of the literary scholars take on issues that are not, at least not at first sight, directly related to the literary” (6). Yet Kamboureli does not acknowledge what may be sacrificed in this move away from the literary. One cannot help but notice that one of the totems of literary criticism, the close reading of texts in their authorial, generic, or cultural contexts, is largely absent in the collection. As Haun Saussy points out, “at moments in the last few decades, it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature: one could study aesthetic theory, literary history, reception, pedagogy—even the history of theories of literature—as so many independent fields” (“Exquisite Cadavers” 12). This claim is supported by Richard Rorty, who states that the emergence of a “new subdiscipline called ‘literary theory’” in the 1970s allowed him to teach what were “just straight philosophy courses” in literature departments (63). Of course, this disciplinary prolificacy is not without consequences, often leading to the “downgrading of ‘literature’ from the exclusive focus of the discipline to the status of one mode of cultural discourse among others” (Saussy, “Exquisite Cadavers” 21).

There are several essays in *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies* that explore traditional literary concerns. Mezei contends that “translation plays a crucial but generally unacknowledged role” in Canadian life and culture (173) and then traces how Vancouver’s Talonbooks used translation to make a name for itself, with the result that about a quarter of its “booklist now consists of translations, and that a corpus of Quebec playwrights are accessible and available for study in schools and universities and for mounting productions nationally and internationally” (184). Fujimoto documents how Japanese translations frequently treat Canadian texts as part of “‘world’/Western literature” or “‘foreign literature’” (196), and thus “‘Canada’

tends to become a sign deprived of and separated from the complex reality of the signified” (189). In her study of two special issues of journals devoted to Asian Canadian women and colour in the 1990s, Lai illustrates how such “collective, community-based forms of publishing made space for multiple voices to be heard” (151), underlining the fact that, as the editors of one of the issues declare, “We have never been silent, only ignored” (qtd. in Lai 155). In her examination of “reading as a social practice” (65), Fuller relates the results of her collaborative study of how non-professional readers in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States interpret books accessed through such events as Canada Reads or the One Book, One Community program. Interestingly, one of the Canadian participants in the project responded that she enjoys being part of a mass reading event because it “puts me in touch with the real person behind the book. I like to know more about the author and the ‘why’ behind the book” (qtd. in Fuller 72), which suggests that the imagined life of the writer continues to have an impact on the reading experience of some readers.

Even though most of the other contributions to the Kamboureli-Zacharias collection do not provide sustained readings of the texts they discuss, they are all compelling intellectually. In his exploration of national literatures in the age of neoliberalism, Derksen outlines “the diminishing of the role of the nation in globalization and a waning of state influence within global capital” (44) and asserts that “rescaled notions of rights and citizenship that jump up to the global, or cohere around cosmopolitanism, are not so clearly libratory (sic)” (50). Brodie, in turn, attempts “to demonstrate the ways in which racialized hierarchies were embedded in the formative narratives and practices of Canada’s settler state” (108). After examining discourses of citizenship in Speeches from the Throne between 1867 and 1946, she also notes “the absence of inspiring appeals to national purpose and national identity that now embroider these transcripts” (98). In their collaborative study, Gagnon and Jiwani analyze the coverage by five Québec newspapers of l’Affaire Hérrouxville, in which a small town gained international notoriety in 2007 by passing resolutions banning “the stoning of women, the covering of women’s faces through veiling, and a host of other such prohibitions” (129). The authors conclude that the outcome would have been radically different had the debate been framed, not as “how far do *we as Quebecers* have to go to ‘accommodate’ minorities?” but as “how much do cultural minorities have to change in order to feel accepted and gain a sense of belonging to the nation?” (149). At last, Wakeham examines how, since Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s 1988 apology to Japanese Canadians for their mistreatment during the Second World War, “the phenomenon of reconciliation has become naturalized as a product of the ‘core’ of Canadian beneficence and integrated into a national mythology of magnanimous governance” (209). But she is extremely skeptical about the motivation for this policy of official redress, seeing it as nothing less than a contemporary “reinvention of white civility,” a “fantasy of national benevolence” (210).

Still, there are often surprising gaps in the essays in *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies*, which usually betray either a lack of knowledge or of interest in

Canadian culture before the twentieth century. Most conspicuously perhaps, in his own piece, Zacharias maintains that the growing discourse on “the battle of Vimy Ridge [...] as the ‘birthplace’ of the Canadian nation” reflects a profound “concern with a lack of a violent crisis at the birth of the Canadian nation” (111). He adds that this trope is informed both by “the ‘myth of the empty origin,’ [which] imagines the history of Canada as a blank state,” and by “the ‘myth of national amnesia,’ [which] offers something of an explanation for the empty-origin myth” (111). Yet, he himself never alludes to the Northwest Rebellion, a conflict that has to be perceived if not as a civil war—since some pundits insist that “we’ve never had a civil war” (Ferguson xi)—then, as mentioned earlier, as an “internal” war (Saul xiii), the last war fought on Canadian soil. In short, it is as if Zacharias too is not immune to that which he criticizes, the appeal of Eurocentrism.

180 Even two of the most provocative essays in the volume, those by Findlay and kulchyski, raise challenges. Findlay’s essay is unapologetically activist, aiming “to enhance the profile among Canadianists of the work of Sákéj Henderson,” whom he considers “a major ‘public intellectual’ and an arrestingly indigenous exemplar of that variously problematic expression” (235, 236). Findlay is obviously impressed by Henderson’s legal work, particularly on Indigenous rights and citizenship, and his ecological knowledge. So he feels that it is urgent that Canadianists familiarize themselves with Henderson, since they “need to indigenize their practice in ways that recognize their own privileges and limits, and the pressing need for an end to appropriation and plundering of indigenous knowledge and the ecologies that sustain it” (238). For Findlay, Henderson embodies “the rootedness of indigenous knowledge communities,” which is a salutary antidote to the “exilic” ethos that has become emblematic of our time (236). Significantly, late in the essay, the “non-Aboriginal materialist” Findlay admits his occasional discomfort when Henderson talks unironically about “the Life-giver” and “split-head consciousness” rather than about “economic production” (242). No less important, considering that Henderson is an Oklahoma Chickasaw who now lives and works in Saskatchewan, one wonders how rooted he is likely to be in the local soil, except perhaps in relation to non-Indigenous people.

kulchyski (who does not use capital letters) is also after a grounded relation to the land. In fact, he states that “what is written on the land, what is written especially in the rocks, says more to me than i can speak, defies me and embraces me, fills me with questions and longings the effect of which can be summed up in the expression ‘haunts me’” (249-50). In an attempt to counter the “cultural superiority” inherent in the Western conception of writing (254), he theorizes bush writing, which will enable figures opposed to the state and its “linear-phonetic writing of progress, development, and modernity” to “tell another story in an other way” and which, at least partly, “is a story of dissidents” (260). But when he describes the Indigenous opponents of Manitoba Hydro’s operations near Grand Rapids, Manitoba, as “position[ing] their bodies in an old way on a new place, writing a new river story of resistance” (258),

he effaces the difference between human actions and representations or articulations of those actions. Moreover, he implies that bush writing is transparent to cultural insiders, all of whom supposedly grasp its meaning, making one wonder how complex a form of writing it can be and how it is attained. As Dany Laferrière has his narrator state in *I Am a Japanese Writer (Je suis un écrivain japonais)*, “Being a writer and a Caribbean doesn’t necessarily make me a Caribbean writer. Why do people always want to mix things up?” (14). Indeed, if every culturally unassimilated Indigenous person possesses knowledge of the ways of the land, what exactly constitutes Indigenous scholarship?

Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies is, in many ways, a very representative work of contemporary literary criticism, one that reflects the instability in the field. For instance, despite the frequent claims in the collection about the newness of its approach, one cannot help but notice some disciplinary anxieties, never more so than in the Introduction. Kamboureli goes as far as to conscript the celebrated linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson to legitimize the kind of criticism exhibited in the volume, but then equates “literariness” with “making strange” (6, 7). More revealing, she notes that “while a lot of criticism about Canadian literature practises and promotes a certain kind of interdisciplinarity, the same cannot be said about most of our peers in the social sciences and legal studies” (34). This would not appear to be true of literature as such, as reflected in the “aesthetic turn” in the social sciences and international studies (Bleiker, “Aesthetic Turn” 510-11; *Aesthetics* 3-5, 18-47), in which scholars embrace aesthetic works because they provide them with insights into “the aspects of human life that are most difficult, if not impossible, to study and observe externally or objectively—the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people’s circumstances, especially their political circumstances” (Zuckert 189). Furthermore, the reason scholars in other fields tend not to read the writings of literary critics might be precisely that the latter have so little to say about the workings of literary texts.

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