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Christy Wampole, *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 296 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780231185172; \$140.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780231185165; \$34.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780231546034.

Review by Russell Williams, The American University of Paris.

There's a gruesome, yet revealing, moment in Michel Houellebecq's landmark *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998). Bruno, one of the novel's two protagonists, reflects on his childhood, specifically time spent as a four-year-old, pedaling his tricycle around his grandparents' apartment in Alger. As a middle-aged *lycée* prof, he has slumbered into depression and reminisces that "c'est probablement à ces moments qu'il avait connu son maximum de bonheur terrestre" (p. 51). This is a Houellebecq novel, however, even fleeting instances of remembered happiness will quickly fade to black: "En 1961, son grand-père mourut. Sous nos climats, un cadavre de mammifère ou d'oiseau attire d'abord certaines mouches (*Musca, Curtonevra*); dès que la décomposition le touche un tant soit peu, de nouvelles espèces entrent en jeu, notamment les *Calliphora* et les *Lucilia*. Le cadavre, sous l'action combinée des bactéries et des sucs digestifs rejetés par les larves, se liquéfie plus ou moins et devient le siège de fermentations butyriques et ammoniacales. Au bout de trois mois, les mouches ont terminé leur œuvre et sont remplacées par l'escouade des coléoptères du genre *Dermestes* et par le lépidoptère *Aglossa pinguinalis*, qui se nourrissent surtout des graisses. Les matières protéiques en voie de fermentation sont exploitées par les larves de *Piophilila petasionis* et par les coléoptères du genre *Corynetes*. Le cadavre, décomposé et contenant encore quelque humidité, devient ensuite le fief des acariens, qui en absorbent les dernières sanies. Une fois desséché et momifié, il héberge encore des exploitants: les larves des attagènes et des anthrènes, les chenilles d'*Aglossa cuprealis* et de *Tineola bisellelia*. Ce sont elles qui terminent le cycle" (p. 51).

Sentimental realist depiction of Bruno's childhood decomposes into the bleakest possible real as Houellebecq's lyrical prose adopts the neutral discourses of the science textbook. The novel's narration, as we come to learn, disinterestedly performed by a post-human clone decades after the eugenic extinction of the human race, underlines the unflinching gaze that has come to be a characteristic of Houellebecq's narrating voices in the twenty-five years since his major literary breakthrough. This stylistic approach, one that worries the edges of traditionally humanistic realism, has also come to be seen as Houellebecq's caustic authorial vision as he has established himself, to borrow a phrase from the protagonist of *La Possibilité d'une île*, as France's foremost "observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine." [1] He places humanity pitilessly amongst the broader cosmological cycle of life.

Despite Houellebecq's prominence in contemporary writing and his status as the most notorious purveyor of contemporary French fiction, he is far from universally enjoyed. Critics recoil at his non-literariness, his spasmodic reaction, his pessimism (not to mention his Islamophobia, racism, and sexism). Christy Wampole has bad news for his detractors: Houellebecq is not the only contemporary writer in France to share such impulses, yet merely the most visible purveyor of what she terms "degenerative realism." This goes beyond, this book convincingly argues, just a flair for provocation or a taste for the visceral. Wampole identifies a deeper movement amongst contemporary writers who share a preoccupation with the extent of the novel form's relationship with the reality that it so often strives to represent. These are writers who are "acutely aware of how fiction and truth now coexist uneasily and have recognized the aesthetic potential in this circumstance" (p. 5). Exploring and reading this potential, as with the opening extract, is not for the faint-hearted and draws attention to the ugly, the deformed, the decaying, using precise textual strategies to unpack the anxieties of our contemporary moment. It does not strive to cheer, to reassure or, in the words of Alexandre Gefen, "*réparer le monde.*" [2] Indeed, Wampole's work brings an important yet sobering corrective to Gefen's influential volume on contemporary French fiction. Writers in the mode of degenerative realism bring bad news; this study demonstrates the bleak rhetorical strategies that underpin this sobering delivery.

Degenerative realism is less of a stylistic trope than an approach, a mood or a certain contemporary spirit of realism, but it does have implications for contemporary literary style. Wampole initially elaborates by demonstrating that "one prevalent tendency in France at the moment is the reliance on demography as the structuring element of plots in many contemporary novels" (p. 33), highlighting the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century resonances in today's fiction. For Wampole, this means that the concepts and approaches of classical demographers and thinkers including Darwin, Malthus, and Quetelet (as well as Sade) have helped to shape the forms, if not definitively the contents of not only Houellebecq, but also the novels of the acutely mediatized Frédéric Beigbeder and Yann Moix. The sexual economy at work in these as well as in the little-explored Charles Robinson is welcome, as is the study of the pernicious presence of novelist-turned-conspiracist Renaud Camus's *grand remplacement* theory in contemporary letters.

Wampole's readings are bold and creative, her prose lively and readable, her insights consistently profound and acute. This is all perhaps most true in her second chapter where she explores the role the internet has played in concurrently inspiring, contaminating and molding contemporary literary fiction. In this, her corpus is again refreshingly original: Aurélien Bellanger, Antoine Bello and Philippe Vasset. Likewise, her analytical *parcours* is timely, ranging from the Minitel to the Internet and speculating richly on what it means to write—and also to read—fiction in our post-truth age. The final chapters articulate how the contemporary approach to realism she discusses is marked by a broader postmodern compression of time, as culture shifts towards 24/7 rolling "real time" experience, particularly by which "the temporal urgency of both journalistic writing and the pamphlet is subsumed into the degenerative realist novel, which tries to cope as quickly as possible with what its author depicts as impending doom" (p. 122). Literature, she argues, is closer to the breaking news agenda than ever before. This is proved in particular by her timely analysis of Jean Raspail's paranoid immigration fantasy *Le Camp des Saints* (1973), purportedly (if perhaps a little implausibly) Trump strategist Steve Bannon's favorite novel, and Jean Rolin's *Les Événements* (2015). Wampole then concludes with a close reading of Houellebecq's *Soumission* (2015), demonstrating how the essayistic is central to the novelistic voice of this contemporary *provocateur*.

It feels perhaps a little churlish to point towards the aporia of such a rich analysis, yet in suggesting further routes for exploration, I hope to complement the richness of Wampole's study. The roots of *Degenerative Realism* are firmly anchored in the nineteenth century, the corpus of material she highlights orients itself largely with regards to the literary canon. Yet many of the writers Wampole explores are either hostile to or suspicious of literary tradition. Equally, if they are anchored in the canon, yet spill out of and interrogate the same, then there must be implications for how we speak of literary value. Wampole largely swerves this question, particularly in her considerations of Moix and Beigbeder particularly, two writers whose television personas seem more significant than their novels. It is surprising, too, to see the absence of a number of proto-degenerative realists from modernity who have been championed as important points of reference by her corpus: Moix has praised Céline; Beigbeder's work seems to attempt to dialogue with Guy Debord; the influence of Georges Perec and Georges Bataille, too, runs deep in postmodernity. It might yet be rewarding to think about Baudelaire from the perspective of degenerative realism. A key touchstone for Houellebecq, "le Baudelaire des supermarchés" for Dominique Noguez, makes frequent recourse to images of decomposition in his own degenerate celebration of modernity.[3]

It is understandable that Wampole seeks to coin a moment in French writing, one that resonates with Mark Fisher's work on "capitalist realism," but it is significant, too that her book follows other studies in the field that it would be interesting to take into more explicit consideration.[4] In particular, Alain-Philippe Durand's and Naomi Mandel's work on the "novels of the contemporary extreme," a body of work which includes considerable overlap with Wampole's, examines novels that do not "merely reflect on violence," "they seek it out, engage it, and in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it" (p. 1). Durand's and Mandel's volume is helpful and could be read productively in concert with Wampole's.[5] Martin Crowley and Victoria Best, too, have raised similar questions in their work on explicit sex in recent French fiction and film.[6] Durand, Mandel, Crowley and Best, alongside the present author, also point outside France towards the degenerative 1990s influence of the American writer Bret Easton Ellis. In France I would equally posit Emmanuel Carrère, another major conservative voice who seems to be very interested in the borders and the agency of literary realism. Equally, Wampole's corpus is almost exclusively male, white, and straight, a point she recognizes. A thorough study of what a black, female or queer degenerative realism could look like is equally a fascinating prospect.

Critical obnoxiousness aside, this is a timely, important if depressing study of the literature of a France that seems to slouch from crisis to crisis, perhaps to the right, perhaps towards another form of social conservatism. The degenerate mode has crystalized in contemporary France, but the signifiers, Brexit, and Trump (not to mention Modi, Duterte and Bolsonaro) show that her study overlaps a growing moment in global history. *Degenerative Realism* is never comfortable reading, but it is a significant consideration of what is at stake when literature strives to, and to what extent literature still can, wrestle with the realistic mode in the twenty-first century, absorbing and responding to the challenges of a troubled, and perhaps itself in some ways decomposing, postmodern world.

NOTES

[1] Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 21.

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- [2] Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde* (Paris: Éditions Corti, 2017).
- [3] Dominique Noguez, *Houellebecq, en fait* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
- [4] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009).
- [5] Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel, eds., *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* (London: Continuum, 2006).
- [6] Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

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