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Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character by Marta
Figlerowicz (review)

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Modernism/modernity, Volume 25, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 197-199
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2018.0010>



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Book Reviews

Flat Protagonists: A Theory of Novel Character.
Marta Figlerowicz. New York: Oxford University
Press, 2016. Pp. 208. \$53.00 (cloth); \$52.99 (eBook).

Reviewed by Nan Z. Da, University of Notre Dame

Here is a get-over-yourself model of literary character. Flat protagonists are those that do not become more filled out or more compelling to others over the course of the novel even though they occupy the most space. Marta Figlerowicz takes a wonderful risk in giving her book this name because the flatness of the protagonists she tracks is not a dimensional reduction (as in: keeping them flat to study them from a distance, paring down their attributes until only the most essential—usually, historical materialist—ones remain, or turning them into the new objects of an anti-depth hermeneutics). Rather, their flatness inheres in their fidelity to a truth about the scarcity of attention and interest in the world. Her characters are those that get less interesting, less round, less representative of the world they centrally inhabit, not because of anyone's failure or intention but because, regardless of genre or period, they realistically represent how most of our lives unfold.

Figlerowicz finds exemplary flat protagonists in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*, François de Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, Isabelle de Charrière's *Letters of Mistress Henley Published by Her Friend*, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. The philosophical question she poses to them—"Can a represented world make present to its reader not only the breadth and depth of character relationships, but also the resurging indifference that . . . inevitably dilutes them?"—is answered by a *literary device* rather than a literary topos (1). The flat protagonist is a solution to a problem of representation, not something that clusters into certain words or attributes. The natural diminishment of interest and attention cannot be "functionalized," or seen in a character-space, or located on any social-network map of the novel.

A novel, like another person, does not have all the time and space in the world for you; and in a novel, as in human relations, the affective and social ties between people can only go so far. There are not communities or objects enough to be permanent audiences to our observations and insights. Although Figlerowicz's novel theory does not care much

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME TWENTY FIVE,
NUMBER ONE,
PP 197–214. © 2018
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UNIVERSITY PRESS



198 about genealogy, it does propose a different genealogy for the modern novel. Its ancestor would not be the protomodernist novel (if such a thing exists), but a character like Oroonoko, whose self-mutilation after murdering his wife and child is witnessed by onlookers who take nothing “deep or precise” from it (46). Or characters like Jude and Arabella, for whom “invoking familiar cultural tropes does not ensure that [their] lives will become compelling to others, or that the relationships to which they refer in these grand terms will last” (101). The novels themselves are “flat” insofar as they realize, through their protagonists, that even the world they think they are representing is incomplete, small, one in which wonderfully generalizable claims lose robustness and become trivial if their scope constricts even a little.

In a sense, the flat character is right in keeping with the essential characteristics of the *bildungsroman*. When you grow up, you realize the world was not as much for you as you thought even though you have gotten into the habit of orienting it around you. The more platitudinous version of this insight would be that as you grow up you realize how small you are, how limited your ability to make a real difference. Figlerowicz walks this line and defamiliarizes it by producing moments of deep interpretive accuracy, such as this one: “At the beginning of [*Jude the Obscure*], . . . Jude carves into the tree at his village crossroads an arrow pointing towards Christminster with his initials above it, as if his own departure there were as self-evident and important as the city’s geographical location” (103). I once wrote a botched close reading of this scene, over-allegorizing the carving, but also treating referentiality as something that spreads indefinitely. The correct reading is that sometimes you make a literal mark on this world to convince yourself that you will make a mark on this world and nobody cares: Jude never returns to these crossroads and later speaks of Christminster to someone who “does not even respond to his generalization” (103).

The deflationary move here is less important than the consequences of insisting that “everything [one] sees or hears must be addressed to [one] personally and with full cognizance of [their] particular condition” (100). More than hubris, moments of self-importance such as these show us that the place where personal specifics meet the general world is rife with “cultural tropes” that characters clumsily try on (101). If socialization is, to some extent, testing your ability to trope yourself, then the phenomenon of flattening is a literary nod to the paradoxes of that process. The move from specific to universal, from one moment to communal experience, is not simply a tradeoff in nuance and individuality, nor can it be accounted for by listing all the mediators of experience. To scale up is, in this book, to decide to wear, for a while, something like a trope, a generalization, that seems antithetical to phenomenological experience itself.

Each chapter of the book helps us appreciate the “aesthetic effort” that goes into constructing such flatness, without lapsing into clichés of human insignificance (89). And we are made to appreciate how difficult a task this is and how past misreadings have turned on this unexpected flatness. Oroonoko has to be repeatedly catapulted to prominence in each and every community he enters for us to see the ease with which his beliefs and concerns lose scope. For Graffigny’s protagonist Zilia, letter writing should obviously have the effect of making her fuller, more visible and insightful, and accordingly more persuasive and self-assured. But the more she writes the more she realizes that the realist aspiration of transferring one’s particular insights into public knowledge turns out to be the most romantic of all. The technical difficulties of figuring flatness have the greatest philosophical payoff for Figlerowicz’s last example: Proust’s narrator-character Marcel. Where others have made sense of *In Search of Lost Time*’s heightened first-person narration as a way of living life through memory and association (as in: everything reminds Marcel of when he . . .), Figlerowicz uses it to take measure of a double limitation: “his limited influence on his outward surroundings . . . [and] the felt finitude of his inner life” (129). It’s not that Figlerowicz shows Marcel’s heightened sensitivity to come to naught. He is, conforming to Elaine Scarry’s aesthetic theory, someone whose beautiful experiences have a decentering and opening effect all around. Figlerowicz merely tracks this effect all the way to the end. The more you use beautiful

things “as a gateway to ever vaster and more mysterious social and philosophical truths” and to develop a worldview that can be held in common with others (this would be Scarry’s argument), the more shaken you will be when you realize you do not hold these in common with others, not even your own lover (135). Worse yet, it’s not that other people don’t see or register your aesthetic raptures—it’s that they do, and only care for two minutes.

To Alex Woloch’s contention that the realist novel is “structurally destabilized . . . by too many people,” Figlerowicz would say that this dilemma is not perhaps as big a problem as it sounds.¹ One can only think of minor or major characters as “competing” for space, and that competition as structurally significant, if we equate lines on a page with actual space and actual space with *moreness*. The same fidelity to empiricism that, for Woloch, sees the novel torn between representing some and all characters is, in Figlerowicz’s treatment, what makes it possible for a character to take up almost all the “space there is” and be as rounded out and self-actualized as a character with three lines. Most people do not get more interesting or more able to speak for others no matter how much space is given them; moreover, who ever said that novels have to be the distributors of equal attention? At the back of this counterargument is also a rejoinder to the recent complaints in our discipline that books cannot make claims about the world without sufficient coverage of all of the available data. Figlerowicz would say that novels already know something about this when they use literary devices such as the flat protagonist to express “an intense metatextual doubt about how much a novel can communicate through the representation of nothing more than a small group of fictional bodies and minds” (3).

I wrote at the beginning that *Flat Protagonists* offers us the get-over-yourself model of the novel. But this is not really accurate. Figlerowicz’s flatness is not prescriptive, nor do her ethics simply invert Martha Nussbaum’s argument about empathy: in other words, one would not go to Figlerowicz’s chosen novels to *learn* how to get over oneself or think less of oneself any more than one can go to them to get out of oneself, as Nussbaum argues, by inhabiting others. At the end of the day, *Flat Protagonists* concerns itself less with procedures of ethical normativization than with phenomenology: it is social theory acknowledging that only literary criticism can get at some omnipresent but hard-to-pin-down social phenomena. As a book that does not believe in the limitlessness of any social resource—but especially not attention and sharedness—*Flat Protagonists* joins a growing number of literary-critical studies reinvested in form as conservation and in understanding the novel as engendering the world not as we would all want have it but as we would have to have it.

Note

1. Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

***Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America.* Merve Emre. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 286. \$85.00 (cloth); \$27.50 (paper); \$27.50 (eBook).**

Reviewed by Gayle Rogers, University of Pittsburgh

We love *bad* writers: the rebels, the social pariahs, the norm-flouting cads, the political dissidents, even those famed modernists who intentionally created *bad* works in order to make a point about textual production and consumption. But rarely do we celebrate *bad readers*. Un-