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Abstract

Review of

Asher Ghaffar, editor. *History, Imperialism, Critique: New Essays in World Literature*. Routledge, 2019. viii + 238 pp.

Keywords

Giambattista Vico, Timothy Brennan, World Literature

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This volume, born of a 2015 conference at NYU, uses Timothy Brennan's 2014 *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies* as a point of departure for new readings and definitions of world literature. Editor Asher Ghaffar divides *History, Imperialism, Critique: New Essays in World Literature* into three sections: intellectual history, literary history, and poetic history. The eleven chapters feature a combination of established and newer scholars and cover both well-known authors and those not typically included in the world literature canon. The collection highlights myriad transnational and cross-cultural connections, from Muhammad Iqbal's embrace of German philosophy to the 1940 broadcast of Rabindranath Tagore's 1912 play, *The Post Office*, on Parisian radio in the final hours before Nazi occupation of that city began.

Ghaffar's introduction sets the stage by briefly tracing the history of postcolonial thought, with a focus on Brennan's analysis of Vichian humanism and its connection to Marxism and anticolonialism. The first four essays respond to Brennan's work by examining the intellectual underpinnings of world literature in South Asia, China, and the French Antilles. Chapter authors Auritro Majumder and Himani Bannerji each foreground Tagore, particularly his reaction to and participation in the *swadeshi* 'national self-sufficiency' movement. In his essay titled "World Literature, the Geist, and the East, 1907-1942," Majumder shows that Tagore and Mao Zedong "represent two ends of a shared dialogue" (20) in which *visva-sahitya* 'world literature' becomes both site and source of anticolonial resistance. Bannerji, for her part, focuses on Tagore's idealistic yet practical humanism in his conception of an anti-colonial, anti-nationalist society in his chapter, "Rabindranath Tagore's postcolonialism: a vision of decolonization and a modernist idealism." Between these two essays lies Eric Brandon's study of Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Brandon highlights significant similarities between Giambattista Vico and Césaire, as well as important differences, some of which can be attributed to Césaire's participation in the French interwar avant-garde. The final chapter of the section, penned by Ghaffar, the anthology's editor, likewise traces similarities between Vico and his object of inquiry, the South Asian poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal. Ghaffar points out that although scholars often link Iqbal to Nietzsche, the former's anti-imperialist, anti-nationalist, pro-*swadeshi* humanism must be read in multiple contexts, including but not limited to Hegel, British idealism, and Islam.

The more openly polemical middle part of the collection delivers innovative, (re)contextualized readings of literature from China, the Soviet Union, and Mexico. Daniel Dooghan demonstrates that Chinese author Lu Xun's particular intersection of the local and the global makes him a much richer, more complex

figure than the national allegorist and modernist he is normally depicted to be, while Djordje Popović challenges Joseph Brodsky's Heideggerian, modernist reading of Andrey Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*. The section closes with Christian Gerzso's exploration of the Mexican *Estridentismo* 'Stridentism' movement, in which he analyzes the group's magazine, *Horizonte*, and Xavier Icaza's novel, *Panchito Chapopote*, written in 1926 and published in 1928. Gerzso shows that changes within the movement indicate not, as is usually asserted, "an awkward compromise" (132, 143) between European avant-gardism and the state, but rather the development of a specifically Mexican avant-garde.

The authors in the final section employ Vichian philology and historicism in close readings of non-canonical works. These begin with Sreya Chatterjee's concise analysis of Irish author Brian Friel's 1980 play *Translations*, in which she uses Vico's concept of poetic logic to reflect on the respective roles of the English and Irish languages in Irish national history. This is followed by Marco Katz Montiel's analysis of José Enrique Rodó's extended essay, *Ariel* (1900). One of the more explicitly political pieces in the book, Montiel's analysis begins and ends in present-day Uruguay, showing how *Ariel* continues to challenge empire in all its forms. Mela Jones Heestand keeps the reader in South America as she invokes Freud alongside Vico and Brennan in a new reading of José María Arguedas's 1957 novel *Deep Rivers*. Her study, which hinges on a disturbing, rarely analyzed central scene, interprets the narrator's fixation on his Quechua past as a potential means of integrating past and present, rather than mere nostalgia. The section closes with Benjamin Noys's exploration of Nietzsche's global reach in three novels: Roberto Arlt's *Seven Madmen* (1929), Waguih Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), and Sam Selvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975).

History, Imperialism, Critique concludes with an Afterword by Timothy Brennan in which he recaps the links between Vico, Marxism, and twentieth-century anti-imperialism. His observations lend the collection a cohesion that it may otherwise sometimes seem to lack, especially for readers not fully conversant with Vichian humanism and Brennan's *Borrowed Light*. That said, this is not necessarily an issue, as many of the essays could also be read as standalone pieces. The anthology is for the most part well-written and effectively edited and indexed. One does regret the imbalance in gender representation: only three chapters are written by women, and no works by women are included for analysis. Bannerji endeavors to include female voices and representation in her discussion of Tagore, while Noys addresses Nietzsche's misogyny, but this is hardly sufficient. Still, scholars seeking fresh takes on world literature will appreciate the emphasis on philology and its relationship to materialist, anticolonial humanism in a variety of contexts, both well- and lesser-known.

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