

Into Our Labours: Work and Its Representation in World-Literary Perspective, by Neil Lazarus

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Reviewed by Corinne Sandwith

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5878-2493>

University of Pretoria, South Africa

corinne.sandwith@up.ac.za

Into Our Labours opens with a refreshing restatement (and partial revision) of the classic Marxist position on the sociality of literary form by setting this idea in closer relation to the notion of the modern “world system” and the wider set of articulations and inequalities which this concept brings into view. For Lazarus, the work of Brazilian scholar Roberto Schwarz—specifically his efforts to theorise the differences between Brazilian and “metropolitan” literature—provides an especially instructive example of what such a methodology might look like. In its efforts to reimagine “world literature” in “world-systemic terms,” Lazarus’s *Into Our Labours* explicitly builds on the arguments of an earlier volume jointly authored by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), namely *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015), in particular, its understanding of “world-literature” not as a recent literary phenomenon but as a means of describing the place of literature within an inherently uneven modern capitalist world-system, one which takes distinctive shapes in different contexts, but which is nevertheless also graspable as constitutive and all-pervasive. Central to this paradigm, and also productive for literary scholars in the global South, is the delinking of modernity from the West.

Lazarus’s promotion of a world-literary perspective reopens and intensifies long-standing scholarly tensions between those approaches which foreground the “over-determinations” and structural underpinning of colonial-capitalist violence and those which place greater emphasis on human freedom, lateral movements and plural modernities. For those in the “alternative modernities” camp, systemic approaches such as those represented by Lazarus are regarded as reductive and homogenising. For advocates of a world-systems approach, the emphasis on multiplicity is seen as limiting the engagement with the structural violence of capitalism and the “logistics of power in



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the real world” (28). As Lazarus argues, the idea of a singular modernity entails neither a capitulation to Western dominance nor a refusal to acknowledge difference; rather, it provides a more effective means to engage with the violently unequal world that capitalism continues to produce.

As the title suggests, Lazarus’s analysis of the literary representations of capitalist modernity in world-systemic terms is centred on the question of labour. The focus on labour as an “organising matrix through which some of the key aspects of modernity have been given representation in literary work” (16) thus addresses an important gap in the literature, which has tended to home in on the shock of modernity in urban contexts. Focusing in particular on the literary representation of urban and rural labour in the context of capitalist modernisation, the book draws attention to the ways in which changing modes of work are registered in changing literary form, genre and aesthetic strategies, thus foregrounding a long history of literary engagements with the inequalities and unevenness of the modern capitalist world-system.

In keeping with the logic of a singular, all-pervasive capitalist modernity and the particular ways in which this has been registered in literary texts, Lazarus reads a wide selection of modern novels, while also working with an understanding of “literary modernity” as extending from around the mid-nineteenth century to the present. This allows him to track the incremental and decisive changes in forms of labour and material contexts and the ways in which these differences are registered in literary form. Turning initially to an eclectic corpus including Anita Desai’s *The Village by the Sea* (1984), Jiang Yang’s *A Cadre of School Life: Six Chapters* (1982), Maxim Gorky’s *My Universities* (1923), Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), Meredith Tax’s *Rivington Street* (1982) and Ivan Turgenev’s *Virgin Soil* (1877), Lazarus draws out several themes in the wider literary registration of capitalist modernity. These include literary engagements with the gradual shift from “task-oriented” to “time-oriented” labour, the psychodynamic implications (time consciousness and subjectivity) of the rationalisation of labour under capitalism, the intricate connections between the “village” and the modern economy and the sexual division of labour. Literature’s articulation (refraction, abstraction) of capitalist modernity also includes the assault of rationalised wage-labour on socially residual ideas of autonomy and self-determination and the ongoing resonance of long-established patterns of production not as “backward” relics but as undervalued constituents of an interlocking field. Against these patterns, the discussion also draws attention to literary representations of alternative forms of labour—the “humanity-engendering, world-making power” of incorporated or collective labour (88) and the labour of agrarian economies. Further discussion, also referencing a wide range of texts across multiple geographies and historical contexts, refers to the ways in which the literature of modernity bears witness to the intrinsic violence of capitalist relations, the social phenomenology of work and the ways in which the “capitalisation of social relations has become so deeply imbedded as to assume the status of routine and social normalcy” (96).

As Lazarus's reading suggests, literary engagements with capitalist modernity are most clearly registered at the level of form: in narrative voice, diction, syntax and rhetorical and figurative devices. This meticulous attention to literary form provides one of the particular pleasures and insights of this study. However, the decision to move from one novel and historical context to the next (as a means of underscoring capitalism's systemic reach) at times produces a curiously abstracted and de-historicised account. In such cases, the novels are used to support a general theory rather than to explicate specific historical circumstance, a decision which also leads to a kind of patchwork quality. In these instances, what is provided is less an historically attuned account of the representation of labour than an abstraction of some of the central labour-related themes in textual representation and their intersections with both Marxist and sociological scholarship. Of course, the swerves in this discussion can be seen as a deliberate attempt to draw unexpected comparisons in order to emphasise trans-historical and trans-spatial connections and reverberations as part of the larger argument about the catastrophic and ongoing violence of capital which "knows no bounds" (99). Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), for example, is described as a reflection on the devastations wrought by the "long-term sedimentation of capitalist social relations" in the Nigerian context. As Lazarus points out, "Okri writes of Lagos, but it might as well have been Quezon City or Mumbai or Mexico City. Or Johannesburg. . . . It is the same story everywhere" (103). To deny or downplay the connections between these disparate regions is to fail to register the scope of the catastrophe. Historical generalisation is thus characterised as a necessary political gesture, one that entails the recognition of both historical particularity and structural commonalities. At certain points in the discussion, as I have suggested, the need to assert the logic of integral connections against the fetishisation of incommensurability may have led to the partial elision of the concrete situations and conceptual frameworks within which each text could be situated.

Leaving this potential (but not inevitable) danger aside, I end this review with a discussion of the many ways in which the world-literature perspective proves particularly instructive, not least of which is the important mapping of world literary modernity that the study accomplishes and the invitation it extends to rethinking conventional literary periodisations and demarcations. First is Lazarus's argument that literary representations of factory work in Victorian fiction (many of which detail the assault of capitalist relations) should be extended beyond Euro-America to include such works as Feodor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925), Song Yǒng's story "The Blast Furnace" (1926) and Kyōng-ae Kang's *From Wonso Pond* (1934). Also compelling is the wider view of the pervasive country-to-city narrative that the world-systems analysis opens up: the reading of the movement from country to city not only as a regional concern but as a "central topoi of modern fiction" (128). The interest in drawing out the varieties and "structural identities" (128) of the country-to-city narrative over time and space leads to an important reframing in which Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946) is situated alongside Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1894), Kyōng-ae Kang's *From Wonso Pond*, Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Alongside this more capacious reading of the city-fortune novel is the attention Lazarus

gives to the literary representations of the rural hinterland, a subject that has tended to be neglected in favour of modern urbanity. Here, Lazarus notes that literary depictions of the land/village world as depleted and incapable of sustaining life—the rural as a place of suffering—is a “staple concern of countless works in the world-literary corpus” (130). Against conventional framings of the rural as backward, static or “prior,” Lazarus draws usefully on contemporary rubrics of “commodity frontier,” “metabolic rift” and “world ecology” to explore the ways in which capitalist development leads to the massive restructuring of modes of production and the environment itself. What ensues—and what modern literature also registers—is the creation of both peripheral zones within metropolitan “centres” and the integration and immiseration of peasant communities as part of colonial and neocolonial modernisation.

Further commonalities in the literature of modernity, as Lazarus explains, include anxieties about the different values placed on mental and manual labour as well as the related question of historical and contemporary representations of the figure of the peasant. Here, Lazarus makes an intriguing but tentative argument about the absence of class division in works such as Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1953), Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1970) and Ben Okri’s *Dangerous Love* (1996), but quickly moves to a more sustained discussion of a pervasive concern in modern literature with the commercialisation of the literary sphere itself, this time using George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891) and Norwegian author Knut Hamsun’s novel *Hunger* (1890) as exemplary representations. Lazarus’s argument about the importance of rethinking the corpus of modern literary texts in relation to the sociological category of the modern world-system is revealed with particular clarity in his discussion of Hamsun’s *Hunger*, a novel which has tended to be assimilated into the more dominant (and more revered) tradition of existentialist modernism. As Lazarus argues, it is only when we think about *Hunger* in relation to the historical fact of Norwegian underdevelopment and Norway’s relative peripherality in the world-system that the “particular formal features of the work—its specific aesthetic structure and internal logic—become fully comprehensible” (122). Framed in this way, the novel emerges not as an expression of “international modernism” but as a compelling example of the “modernism of underdevelopment” (122).

The discussion of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) through a world-systemic lens is similarly rewarding. Misread by contemporary African critics such as Chinua Achebe as a deplorable example of the existentialist preoccupations of Western modernism, the novel—as Lazarus suggests—is much more plausibly read as an attempt to engage with the material constraints engendered by neocolonial economic relations. As in Hamsun’s novel, an attentive reading of literary form reveals the ways in which these concerns are registered in aesthetic terms: in the “fiercely compacted form of the novel,” its “telescoping of allegorical, parabolic and realist registers, its forcing together of picaresque, morality play and critical realism” (128). This alternative reading of literary experimentalism as the literary registration of inequality and uneven capitalist development draws an interesting “counter-list” of

modernist novels into view, one which might include Liam O’Flaherty, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Ayi Kwei Armah, Dambudzo Marechera, Miroslav Krežla, José Rizal, Samaresh Basu and Wang Anyi (123).

As the above examples suggest, the insights to be gained from a world-literary perspective for scholars of African and postcolonial literature are considerable. This is evident not least in the new connections and parallels that are opened up—in particular, those between postcolonial and Euro-American canons—connections which are often obscured by conventional generic, regional and historical demarcations. In this sense too, the world-systems perspective allows for a much richer and more layered conception of modernist literature itself, which, despite the very different orientations and particular historical dispensations they index, can also be seen as arising from broadly similar conditions. Also important for this reconceptualisation of the global literary corpus is the reading of modernist inscription, in particular, not as paradigmatically Western in provenance but global in scope. Finally, the world-systems model also has important implications for decolonial theory, specifically the move towards conceptual integration, which, in Lazarus’s work, is strikingly contrasted with the insistence in decolonial theory on “pulling the ‘global south’ away from an extravagantly homogenised imperialist ‘north’” (9–10). For Lazarus, this obscures the multiple ways in which these zones continue to be connected. As such, *Into Our Labours* provides a useful point of departure for rethinking decolonial theory in the South African context: in particular, the reading of the global South not as separate but integral to the capitalist world-system, not outside of capitalist logics but constitutive of them.

References

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