***Figures of the World: The Naturalist Novel and Transnational Form*. By Christopher Laing Hill. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020. xx + 258 pp.**

Figures of the World is the most ambitious and measured comparative study I have read in recent years. Presenting the rise and demise of the naturalist novel in several languages and on more continents than one would have thought a single scholar could cover, the book may seem at first blush to be pitched at that dauntingly abstract theoretical level of "world literature" (indeed, *world* in the title might be read that way by some). But Christopher Laing Hill argues against the call of "world literature" as it has been discussed since the 1990s to offer a grounded and concrete series of methods, techniques, and interventions for studying literature on a broad scale that nevertheless refuses the totality of claims about the world and worldedness.

The preface lays out the stakes of what is to come by acknowledging both the historical-critical scorn for naturalism and its importance for modern literary history. Naturalism suffered rebukes almost from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, when it became known as "shoemaker realism" (6, 189n16) and suffered an even more scathing critique by Georg Lukács, who thought that its excessive descriptions would lull readers into passivity. Rather than simply accept these flip judgments on the form, Hill takes a practical approach to argue that, since naturalism spread around the globe quickly (if also unevenly), it is necessarily important to literary study today, particularly as scholars grasp for new paradigms with which to understand our increasingly interconnected global cultures, which, despite such connections, fail to meet or agree. This argument is perhaps best summed up by one of the pithy rhetorical questions that pepper this highly readable book: "Do we really want to ignore the circulation of texts and genres that we know has been occurring for centuries, and is only increasing in importance, or do we want to find better ways to approach it?" (xiv). Hill's book is best when it showcases this nuts-and-bolts approach to vexing problems of literary study.

Pushing back against scholars as disparate as Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, and Mariano Siskind, Hill reveals how the lofty goals and grandiose rhetoric of much scholarship under the rubric of "world literature" lack substance. "This book . . . has no intention of presenting a totalizing history of the form. The goal instead is porousness, partiality, and recognition that the order of the globe is a myth, the pandemonium of the planet a reality to be welcomed" (xx). More in tune with David Damrosch and Emily Apter in terms of tracking its subject through translation in pursuit of global-literary circuits, the book veers from even these luminaries on the ultimate question of scale. Hill's less grand approach is to follow the positive traces of the overt translations and

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self-avowedly naturalist fiction as well as to expand the scope to works that may derive from or pay homage to European originals in striking out on new paths for alternative forms of naturalism.

Chapter 1, "Literary Travels and Literary Transformation," provides a clear reason for stepping outside the "world literature" paradigm by evoking the unevenness of the history of naturalism around the world: "I propose taking writers and critics at their word: if they called it naturalism, then naturalism it was" (11). Hill continually prioritizes contingency and history over transhistorical and world-leveling statements and formal or structural readings: "Naturalism's impact was great in some places, scant in others; there might be a school here, only a few writers there; some naturalist upsurges were contemporaneous with what was happening in France, while others 'lagged'; noisy adherents often faced vociferous abstainers" (7). This recognition enables Hill's decidedly inductive methodology. He proposes that close readings of the self-named naturalist works will lead to better results than approaching the phenomenon with preconceived ideas about world literature, which he demonstrates tend toward the Eurocentric.

The payoff is in the careful close readings situated in their milieu of circulation in varying scales (from the idiosyncratic and subnational through the national to the regional and beyond). Hill's approach then finds three (among many) themes characteristic of naturalism that largely hold across the cultures and languages he reads (primarily French, English, and Japanese): "Among frequent topics one finds sexuality . . . , hypocrisy and corruption . . . , and the fate of individuals facing gigantic forces" (7–8). These three topoi found in many such works also roughly correspond to three Émile Zola novels, *L'assommoir*, *Nana*, and *Germinal*, and to the titular figures that serve as the locus for the three main body chapters, titled "The Degenerate Body," "The Unbound Woman," and "Plains, Boats, and Backwaters." Each chapter begins with the corresponding Zola story, discussing its French significance, its subsequent circulation and translation, and its derivative versions and lineages through North American and Japanese cultural responses. Despite this description, these chapters are more than mere circulation and reception histories. In the close readings of these figures, often across several novels and languages, the force of Hill's argument can best be sensed. In fact, told in this way, the impressive diversity of the spread of naturalism resists reception history as we know it, which is to say that Hill understands how typical reception history can make origins all too important, when his research on these varying naturalisms provincializes the center by making the periphery more exciting and relevant to our thinking about globalization today.

Bringing into relief the nuance of difference between traditional reception history of a sacred cultural object and its loss of aura as the object diffuses out in reproduction, on the one hand, and the same story told without the moral assessment that words like *sacred*, *diffusion*, and *aura* connote, on the

other, is a key (if also a difficult) trick to pull off. Consider how Hill calls Zola's novels (not essential material for the spread of naturalism but) vectors "for the transmission of naturalism" (xviii), as if the spreading of naturalism were viral or something to be contained rather than a process natural to culture itself. Indeed, in employing this rhetoric, Hill sounds like some of the characters in the naturalist novels he reads: for instance, Fauchery's portrayal of "Nana as a gilded vector of disease" (105). In his repetition of the disease rhetoric of the nineteenth century, Hill signals (perhaps unwittingly) certain internal difficulties of sustaining an approach without normativity, which runs counter to so much of our knee-jerk thinking about literature. Hill is rightfully wary of reproducing a European center, yet the origin of this disease called naturalism is clearly France and Zola. Simply inverting the moral judgment of the spread of European culture from civilizing and enlightening to diseased does not undo France's structural position as the powerful center.

Similarly, Hill aptly confronts the problem of ranking derivations below their originals through a notion of the "productive failure" of translation, adaptation, and transmission (13), the idea being that derivations are important in their own right, without pejorative or normative reference to the ways they transform the originals. Here again, however, the rhetoric works against the main argument. For to call a work of cultural production a "productive failure" presumes the possibility of a successful translation, suggesting that not all adaptations are failures and not all failures productive. Hill tells us to "pay attention to failures, because failure to follow a received model may be as instructive as fidelity to one" (171). But if we presuppose that fidelity is a red herring and that adaptations necessarily twist and transform, then acknowledging failure is not necessary. Since Lawrence Venuti, at least (but likely since Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin before him), we have known that in a translation nothing is ever transparent. Translations always produce new meanings in their new moments in their different cultures, and this point, of course, can be expanded to all varieties of transmission (adaptations, derivative works, works under the influence, etc.). If all cultural products (even the putatively same ones) always move and change, then seeking origins and centers is a fool's errand; talking about the viral spread of cultural material is not only unnecessary but also distracting—for such circulation is a rule of cultural material: culture, by definition, is composed of artifacts copied, adopted, adapted, and appropriated into new circumstances, generating alternative meanings. Although this is not a book of translation or adaptation studies, it is not unrelated to them, and like such studies, the book suffers because we do not yet have language adequate for discussing properly its own innovations for thinking about these vexing issues (such as urging us to move beyond hierarchical thinking about cultural products while retaining hierarchical rhetoric with words like *derivative*). Indeed, what Hill finds in the "failures" is more interesting than the label *failure* allows: namely,

in the inability to adapt Zola's techniques to address local circumstances, new techniques and methods were developed that might also be labeled naturalist.

Unfortunate rhetorical flourishes aside, the book is a powerful exemplar, demonstrating the possibility of doing truly comparative work today. This is elegantly accomplished in the three body chapters. If Hill's rhetoric is less than instructive, his method presents nothing less than a road map for doing comparative literary work that transcends A/B comparison and shirks the world literature paradigm. The book stands as a testament to what is possible: a transnational, multilinguistic, nuanced study of one of the most world-changing moments of literary history. Though Hill makes some reference to interest in naturalism elsewhere in the global South (e.g., Brazil), *Figures of the World*, in its desire to resist presenting a totality, leaves open and indeed welcomes the possibility of other studies of naturalism with other figures to find and other tales to tell. Although the variegation of naturalism as well as its historical importance is shown in so many places, one cannot help but be struck by the book's intensity of focus on northern, still-industrializing countries. So convincing are Hill's comparisons of the multitude of naturalisms that, in the end, readers will not be faulted for having the sense that the book is *not* actually comparing work from dissimilar cultures but tracing a branching tree structure of cultural development within a single large-scale culture arising in modernity. As such, the book's subject ultimately provides a case study of cultural production within something like Fredric Jameson's "singular modernity." At every turn Hill resists and anticipates such a totalizing claim by emphasizing the unevenness of economic and cultural development. Nevertheless, the techniques of comparison that he employs draw together and begin to sketch out a flatter plane for comparison across such unevenness. The work left will be to see if more focused attention on the global South will prove the case for a flat single modernity or for uneven alternative modernities.

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