
Filippo Menozzi, *World Literature, Non-Synchronism and the Politics of Time*
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 213 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-41697-3

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Filippo Menozzi's *World Literature, Non-Synchronism and the Politics of Time* is part of the series *New Comparisons in World Literature* edited by Pablo Mukherjee and Neil Lazarus which publishes works aimed at understanding how literature reflects and represents new modes of existence created by globalization. Menozzi's aim is to present non-synchronism as a critical tool to read literary works and as a means to redefine and therefore change the perception of the narratives of the peripheries of world economy.

As the author points out, the work is grounded in Warwick Research Collective's definition of "world literature", by which it is meant not a creation of a specific canon or a way of reading texts, but rather a way of seeing literature as the "register" of what happens in a globalized world where the hegemonic mode of capitalist production has defined modernity as a "historical regime" (5). Modernity, thus, is not represented by the "West" but is a product of global capitalism. Within this context, Menozzi introduces the key concept of non-synchronism, first expressed by German philosopher Ernst Bloch in the essay "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics", written in 1932. Bloch's observation of Germany in the 1930s as an incompletely capitalist society, in which, besides, non-timely myths of Golden Ages and of the past survived, led him to interpret this situation as a possible explanation of the rise of fascism in Europe. In Menozzi's view, "Bloch's essay can be read as a plea to consider the importance of these non-synchronic elements and to re-channel them into a conscious class struggle able to subvert both fascism and capitalism" (15). Menozzi re-functionalises the significance of non-synchronous elements, which can be channelled into class struggle to subvert both fascism and capitalism. As a critical concept, non-synchronism calls forth other notions which are not strictly literary, and, after analyzing novels where "the representational space acts as a conjuncture of uneven temporalities" (36), the concluding chapter fittingly touches on the differences with anachronism, unequal development, *longue durée*, *kairos* as well as with the Trotskyian concept of permanent revolution.

On the basis of these core ideas, non-synchronism can then be understood as a frame which unveils the unevenness of the hegemonic homogenizing tendency of capitalism at the periphery of the world-system. Menozzi observes how contemporary political rhetoric across the world has used narratives of returning to a better past as a form of political mobilisation, which he calls cultural contemporary nostalgia: a recycling of symbols and maxims of the past which feeds upon the perception of an unstable present. But there can be other implications of the 'return to the past': Menozzi's main argument is that the "appearance of non-contemporaneous elements in the present should not be dismissed as nostalgic survival or retrospective longing, a mere sign of obscurantism and regression.... the emergence of non-contemporaneous remnants – the conjuncture of diverging temporalities in the present ... – testifies to the way in which the global expansion of capitalism has redefined the very concept and experience of time" (4). This is especially true of the novels chosen as case studies, in which the "idioms of nostalgia" (4) – the residual elements that have escaped, so to speak, the forces

of economic production – reveal the uneven dynamics of capitalism and testify that “in peripheral zones of global capitalism, the temporal consciousness of the present is inhabited by multiple layers and strata” (4). Against the general notion of a single modernity, multiple perceptions of time may indeed be signals of the discontinuous condition of modernity as theorised by Henri Lefebvre. However, world literature, in the sense Menozzi clarifies at the outset – a sense divergent from Damrosch’s view of world literature as referring to books actively circulating beyond their original national boundaries – has a systemic perspective which does not lose focus on totality. Literature becomes the archive of social, political and, interestingly, spatio-temporal dimensions of the periphery rather than the centre of the system. Such a perspective, according to Menozzi, allows commensurability and is an alternative to the acknowledgment of rupture and difference adopted by most post-colonial theory. At the same time, it recognises the differences and does not oversimplify the condition of peripheral literary products as merely derivative. In Menozzi’s words: “the idea of a singular modernity feeding into the discourse of world literature offers a productive tool for assembling, connecting and transmitting different historical experiences” (11).

The view of world-literature as a register, as the Warwick Research Collective has emphasized, points to the fact that fictional texts always convey multiple layers and strata and, at the same time, are products existing in a historical reality. In discussing non-synchronism from a literary point of view, Menozzi engages with the notion of peripheral modernism as defined by the WRC and Benita Parry. The aesthetic forms of peripheral modernism “express historical, economic and social unevenness through the combination of differing formal strategies and elements” (33) and question the perception and experience of time in world-literary works. Within this perspective, the use of literary devices that manipulate time are not mere experiments with form, as in modernist aesthetics, but they rather acquire a deeper historical and political significance. Menozzi explains how peripheral modernism serves him as epistemological ground for his notion of non-synchronous aesthetic in order to overcome a stance of rupture and disjuncture and to state the dialectical relationship between what he calls “archaic forms” (34) and modernity. It is important to mention that non-synchronism is concerned with the intersection of both stylistic devices and thematic concerns in order to provide a deeper understanding of the rift between the local and the systemic.

Menozzi dedicates one chapter to each of the five contemporary novels he analyses: *Nampally Road* by Meena Alexander (1991), *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy (2014), M. G. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Toyin Falola’s memoir *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* (2014), and *Green Lion* by Henrietta Rose-Innes (2015). In Menozzi’s reading these texts are examples of what he terms non-synchronous aesthetic. The author productively places the narrative elements related to time, such as prolepsis, digression and embedded narratives, within the broader context of global capitalism, at the forefront of which the peripheries stand out. For each novel the focus is on elements that involve temporality in different ways. Menozzi lucidly analyses how nostalgic returns of the past have a contrasting value (“Dislocating Time: *Nampally Road* and the Politics of Non-Synchronism”, 47-73), or how reframing temporality uncovers “the material conditions of peripherality, which are at the heart of world literature as a paradigm” (107) (“Beyond Diaspora and Nostalgia: M. G. Vassanji’s *Asynchronous Images*”, 103-131). Or, for example in *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy – a novel on the Kilvenmani massacre of agricultural workers on strike in south India in 1968 – Menozzi analyses the tension between the narrator’s will to report more than one story and the necessity to

write one, single story to provide a reliable truth. About the novel, he also observes that rather than being divided into chapters and following chronological linearity, it is divided into “grounds”, as in archaeological excavations, and constructed by using a stratigraphic process. In Menozzi’s interpretation, Kandasamy’s use and critique of metafiction, which questions the fictional representation of history, overcomes the postmodern limitation of being a “mere play with textuality” (88). Menozzi lucidly shows how literary forms can express the “combination and togetherness of these different strata of time” (79) and how techniques, rather than being mere ends in themselves, can be used as critical tools for writing.

Another interesting narratological element singled out by Menozzi is peripeteia in *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* by Toyin Falola, a memoir which tellingly does not follow chronological order and overtly criticizes historical narratives. Menozzi interprets Falola’s recurrent use of peripeteia as a means to construe tension between diegesis and the time of remembering framed by the memoir, as well as a means to intersect the narration of the Agbekoya rebellion and a mythical Yoruba past. The chapter dedicated to Henrietta Rose-Innes’s *Green Lion* (161-190), instead, expands on issues of world-ecology. As Menozzi explains, the novel can be read as an account of the “sixth extinction” of the age of “Capitalocene”, a concept he draws from Jason W. Moore. He discusses how the failure of the conservation of a species illustrates the “temporality of capital accumulation” (166). The choice of this last novel is interesting as it demonstrates how non-synchronism can also be found in texts dealing with the tight implications of world economy with ecology at different levels of meaning. Such forms, according to Menozzi, manifest the militant need to recover a “non-alienated relationship between humans and nature” (166).

What seems most intriguing and adds value to the research on world literature is the way Menozzi draws concepts from philosophy and history to read literary expression. This book is clearly positioned at the heart of current theory and provides a critical understanding of how literary works can become militant spaces denouncing the unevenness of capitalism through a reworking of time in fiction.