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The Absent Cause of World Literature

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The resurgence of World Literature must be seen in relation to the economization of all spheres of life. Traditional, 'specialized' literary criticism replicates literature's power to interpellate subjects characterized by attention. Both literature and state funded literary criticism in research and teaching are currently under siege because they are counter-hegemonic in relation to a lifeworld shaped by a global attention deficit syndrome, which is the bedrock of a hypertrophic consumerism. Recent proposals for writing histories and systematic descriptions of World Literature are complicit with this move because they champion, to the detriment of deep attention, the relevance, mobility, exchange value, and translatability of texts, successfully competing with traditional 'painstaking' practices of literary criticism for ever dwindling institutional resources.

1. Introduction

I am teaching and researching 'Spanish Language and Culture' (*Spaanse Taal en Cultuur*) in the Netherlands, where the humanities, and literature in particular, are under siege. In the neoliberal and utilitarian climate of the Netherlands, language teaching is still somewhat valued for providing marketable skills. Yet, as the suppression of my actual field of expertise, literature, in the official denomination of my position indicates, 'language' (that is: language acquisition) and 'culture' are 'vampirising' literature. Programmes are downsized or axed. In the near future, students will take general courses that are supposed to provide them with transferable skills and a general orientation in the development of 'European' cultures and literatures. Afterward, they can 'specialize' in a particular language while being forced to choose a minor that broadens their views – all within the limitations of a three-year BA. The number of available courses in a specific language will be drastically reduced. Since literature cannot make a convincing claim of training for a clearly defined career in business, its relevance for society (read: the economy), will lose further ground to 'culture'. After all, this blurry term has the advantage of being related to a culture industry, promising to supply 'context knowledge' for all kinds of business activities.

Faced with dwindling resources, the remaining instructors of literature will undoubtedly tend to focus on the 'masterpieces', texts that appear relevant to the

academic fashions of the day. Since courses in this debris of foreign language programmes must be open to students with rudimentary or no foreign language skills, there will be a strong pressure to use translations of the great works. From where I am standing, World Literature is real, and it is less a promise than a threat. From this perspective, I argue that the recent renaissance of World Literature is – regardless of the methodological and theoretical sophistication of its proponents – a symptom of an economic development. Writing the 'History of X Literature' has always been a political project, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when it provided the underpinning for a common national imagery. From its beginnings in the 19th century, the 'History of World Literature' has also been the vehicle of ideologies (see Ref. 1, pp. 27–46), and now, in the neoliberal century, it is the vehicle for a globalism that masks very real economic interests. Taking my hints from Frederic Jameson, I will look at World Literature as a genre and discuss how this genre's 'ideology of form' relates to the economisation of all spheres of life and (re)production of the subjects of this pan-economism.

2. World Literature: Genre and Ideology

World Literature in the specific sense of the term has not been a subject of my academic training and practice, nor am I an expert on the debates on New World Literature waged within the field of Comparative Literature. Countering the common assumption among comparatists that the frame of those working in the literature of a specific language is the nation, the frame of my work has never been based on the literary production of one nation. There is more than one world, and my world is the Spanish-speaking world (although the term has also to be qualified, as I will explain shortly), comprising a multitude of countries on three continents. Recently I co-edited an encyclopaedic project with the title *Handbuch Spanisch* (*Handbook Spanish*).[2] The purpose of this book is to provide the reader with an overview of the most important aspects of the language, literature, culture and history of the Spanish-speaking world. Covering 14 Spanish-speaking countries and hence 14 national literatures from their beginnings (the 11th century in Europe, and the late 15th century in the territories conquered and colonized by Spain), we tried to orchestrate an extremely condensed World History of Spanish Literature. The book targets anybody with an interest in and/or a need to know something about 'Spanish' in the German-speaking world. The publisher had an eye on journalists and those working in international organisations and business as potential buyers, but our market was predominantly students in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. The *Handbuch* is a translation of one world into another.

While we editors intuitively had no doubts about the usefulness if not necessity of such a work, the methodological and theoretical reflection gave us considerable qualms. In the introduction we had to justify the choices and restrictions that a large-scale project of this nature requires. We faced the fact that Spanish is not the only language in the 'Spanish-speaking world': in Spain there are at least three important languages and their literatures besides Castilian (Catalan, Basque, Galician); in Spanish-America there are numerous important indigenous languages, some of them spoken by small communities, some spoken by larger portions of the population, to the point of competing with Spanish as majority languages (Quechua in some of the Andean countries and Guaraní in

Paraguay). The genre and the audience we had chosen required us to present literary texts in clusters of national literatures and commonly agreed periods and genres – parameters and concepts that scholarship in the field has questioned over recent decades.

Of course, we tried to preserve and convey the complexity of matters as far as possible, but ultimately the design of the *Handbuch* found its justification in the practical use it must have for its readers. As university teachers we were aware that the needs of our students had changed. In the compressed and tightly regulated BA programmes that have mushroomed in Europe as a result of the politically imposed 'Bologna Process',[27] students no longer have the leisure to familiarise themselves with complex matters. Moreover, students' cognitive abilities today are conditioned by media-technologies (the world wide web, social networks, gaming), and the presumed ubiquity of instant knowledge, which generates the need for reliable and easily accessible reference works. 'Need' is, of course, another word for demand: from the perspective of the publisher, educational politics have produced a market for the genre. There is apparently an economic background that conditioned our scholarly work. The economic interest of the publisher is apparent: This is about selling a book. Although the foremost concern of us, the editors, was predominantly the scholarly quality of the publication and the benefits that our students may draw from it, the enterprise was also fuelled by our own economic interest. As usual in academic publishing in our field, we could not expect significant revenues. However, this publication will, we hope, accrue cultural capital (which has the potential of translating into actual capital).

These are only the surface economic parameters for producing our manual. Its actual *raison d'être* and the shape it has taken can be traced to a more fundamental economic process. The 'usefulness' of the book (and the need/demand it answers) is related to a political and economic process referred to by the shorthand 'Bologna Process'. This process has the explicit objective of creating a 'European Higher Education Area' and a 'Europe of Knowledge' (see Ref. 28). While politics names a series of lofty objectives for this initiative, there can be no doubt that the main justification for this homogenisation of educational systems and the compression of curricula is the reduction of public spending and, under the banner of 'employability',[3] the transformation of education in the Humboldtian sense into job training. Although, as editors of the *Handbuch*, as academics and scholars, we acted on a conscious level, the genre we had chosen (or were 'invited' to choose) is inescapably tied to an economic process and its ideology that change the very fabric of our lives. I think that writing a History of World Literature – and the Renaissance of World Literature as a whole – is determined by the same ideology.

What, then, is the ideological underpinning of writing about World Literature in the beginning of the 21st century? A possible approach to this question is Fredric Jameson's analysis of the political unconscious. According to Jameson, '[T]he literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction' (Ref. 4, p. 67).[5] Hence he speaks of an '*ideology of the form*, that is, the determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation' (Ref. 4, p. 84; Jameson's emphasis). Apparently, Jameson is referring here to works of literature, products of the imagination where the text, unbridled

by the checks of consciousness required for 'non-fictional texts', manifests the real conflicts and contradictions inherent in a socio-political and economic formation. I propose to apply Jameson's tools for the analysis of literary texts to texts about literature. A history of literature is, I argue, a privileged genre for the observation of the workings of contemporary ideology and the contradictions within this formation.

Jameson postulates three exegetic horizons. The first level in which the political unconscious manifests itself is the horizon of the texts. In an act of wish fulfilment (*Wunscherfüllung*), 'the individual narrative [supplement: literary history], the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction' (Ref. 4, p. 62). This contradiction is related to a class conflict. If we transpose Jameson's thesis from the 1980s to our decade, the struggle is not one of class per se, because the classes as clearly defined social formations with a consciousness of a common interest have been eroded by the socially accepted promise of the *enrichissez-vous*. Moreover, the stage of World Literature, the symbolic and imaginary order it responds to, is a global one. On this scale the conflict is not a classic confrontation within a *polis* conceived as a nation, but a confrontation between a privileged centre, the 'Western World', and a subaltern yet threatening ('emerging') periphery; that is, the globalised underdeveloped or developing world. Both clash violently at the shores of the Mediterranean and the US–Mexico border. The dissolution or resolution of this conflict (*Wunscherfüllung*) is the rationale of the genre History of World Literature. The issue of eurocentrism has been one the great obsessions in the debate on the new World Literature. Criticism against specific systems or classifications of World Literature have been cast in terms of eurocentrism (Ref. 1, pp. 24–26), accusing traditional accounts of World Literature of unjustly privileging a particular country or city or Europe as a whole. From its inception in the 19th century, World Literature was a European enterprise – necessarily so because literature is inherently a Western notion that presupposes a particular economic system (a notion of intellectual property, a market for literary product, a professionalisation of the writer) and writing and reading subjects who are grounded in a supposedly apolitical private sphere.[6] In the 21st century a non-eurocentric history of World Literature is per se an expression of the 'European' globalisation that promises the free fluctuation of people and ideas and goods (including literary texts); this non-European History of World literature will 'fulfil' the wish to mitigate irreconcilable conflicts.[7]

Jameson uses the notion of the *ideologeme* to describe his second horizon of interpretation. The ideologeme is an 'amphibious formation', as he says. It manifests itself 'as a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system' or as protonarrative, that is, 'a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the 'collective characters' which are the classes in opposition' (Ref. 4, p. 87). The 'pseudoidea' or belief system is associated with transformations that World Literature has experienced over the last two centuries. Nineteenth-century World Literature was largely inspired by the idea of the superiority of the Western World and its necessary civilising mission, including and based on the spread of Western literature. With the de-colonisation of the world, Western superiority has been cast in the culture-transcending values of 'humanism', leading to a liberating process. Recently the pseudo-idea has morphed into the Global itself, which is ultimately the apotheosis of Western universalism. This apotheosis coincides paradoxically with a lament over the

decline of the Old World. In terms of World Literature, this manifests itself in a re-distribution of the cultural capital allocated to specific regions, transforming a map of literature centred on Europe into a supposedly centre-less globe of literature. The protonarrative to this evolving pseudo-idea is the 'natural' process of modernisation that affects the world as a whole. The subplots of this narrative are variations of the trope of the 'rise and fall of nations'. In the new History of World Literature, the European will gradually be eclipsed by the 'emerging literatures' in Asia and Latin America.

Finally, there is, according to Jameson, the 'ideology of the form', manifest in the genre (Ref. 4, p. 84). This ideology relates to a mode of production. The 'form' or genre, here the History of World Literature, is a sedimentation of the contradictions in a society and culture. This form has a 'content' in its 'own right, as carrying the ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works' (Ref. 4, pp. 98–99). It is important to realize that Jameson is not interested here in the intentions of individual authors, as those are irrelevant for the ideology of the form. It does not matter which methodology is chosen or what theoretical reasoning shapes the actual product: Those who write a History of World Literature cannot escape the underlying historic process.

I have labelled this process with the buzzword 'Globalisation'. I understand this notion not only as the creation of a fetterless global market, but also the economisation of all spheres of life, and the transformation of these spheres into markets. Dejlal Kadir has emphasised that World Literature has always been subjected to a global cultural and socio-economic frame, and, at the same time, was an agent in shaping this world:

> [T]here has been a very limited world in world literature, and no more literature in the world than what has been allowed by the historically constructed optic and parameters of specific and shifting cultural criteria that precondition our world-generating impulses and the market viability of their cultural products. (Ref. 8, p. 8)

It is obvious that literature today ties into a global market and that those dealing professionally with literature are subjected, more than ever, to the laws of the market. This includes those 'teaching literature' and producing meta-literary commodities (books, articles, etc). A History of World Literature is subject to the same market laws as our *Handbuch*: it is necessarily a product that must sell and justifies its existence by its exchange value. It is also apparent that the imminent substitution of 'traditional' literary criticism and largely self-contained language departments by World-Literaturesque training in marketable context skills is an austerity measure with the purpose of maximising the profit of 'real business.'

However, it is important to realise that literature and particularly the institutional teaching of literature and research into literature are not just markets like any other. Literature in education and research (and the humanities as a whole) is the particular target of market forces because they play(ed) a crucial role in the reproduction of the economic system. Literature has been both an ideological instrument of capitalist society and a counter-hegemonic force. On the one hand, the realist novel has been the vehicle of a bourgeois culture; on the other, the novel in its modernist phase offered alternative models of subjectivity. With the triumph of hypertrophic capitalism, World Literature is part and parcel of the move to weaken literature as a counter-hegemonic force.

3. World Literature and the New Order

The fundamental insight of Louis Althusser's classic 'Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état'[9] is that the capitalist system requires not only the reproduction of the means of production but also the reproduction of the subjects of the capitalist system. He calls the mechanism for instilling the hegemonic ideology interpellation.[10] For Althusser, "l'idéologie est une «representation' du rapport imaginaire des individus à leurs conditions réelles d'existence' (Ref. 9, p. 296) ['ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relation individuals have with their real conditions of existence' (my translation)]. This representation is part of the process of reproducing these conditions.[11] Interpellation is a 'hailing' of the individual ('hé, vous, là-bas!'; Ref. 9, p. 305) which, in the words of John Mowitt

> incites human beings to identify their self-experience with the image of that experience that comes for them in the discourses emanating from the ideological state apparatuses. […] The identification with an image of one's self is constitutive of that self. (Ref. 12, p. xiv)

Althusser identifies so-called 'ideological state apparatuses' as the institutional basis of interpellation. Among these ideological state apparatuses (army, civil service, public health, etc), which today we may more appropriately call ideological market apparatuses, the educational system is necessarily of crucial importance. Moreover, literature, too, has historically played an important role in the interpellation of subjects, because it has been the vehicle for identificatory images. School and universities 'hail' students to take their place in the existing society and economic system; literature provides ideological images with which the reader can identify. Both come together in the teaching of literature in schools, and particularly at universities. The changing status of literature in a society and the market-induced transformation of the teaching and researching of literature indicates that we have reached a situation in which a new economic system and historic formation requires a different kind of interpellation through literature and the teaching of literature.

While the changes in the economic basis certainly affect the educational system as a whole, the particular pressure put on the teaching of literature is more than just the corollary to a general development: 'Traditional' literature (in its material form: the book) and the 'traditional' study of literature today are *per se* counter-hegemonic practices that must be eradicated or transformed. The main reason for this is that literature is not just a medium and mediator of ideological images: literature is a Foucaultian technology of the self in a more specific sense.[13] From the 16th century on, literature tended to produce a specific kind of reader with a specific form of subjectivity.[14]

Literature, reading and writing, requires and produces attention, and attention results in memory. According to French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, reading and writing in general generate what he calls *deep attention*.[15] Although one of the constants of (modern) literature is the never-ending questioning and subversion of its own premises,[16] it can be said that it only 'works' if the reader pays attention to plot, details, and nuances of language herself. Attention is one of the factors that produce individual and shared memory: memory of a specific text, and, through the workings of intertextuality, a whole universe of texts. This is the reason why literature and meta-literature in the form of

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histories of literature can become, in a specific historic situation, the vehicle of collective memory. Hence the national literary histories of the 19th and 20th centuries were 'institutionalized forms of national memory' (Ref. 1, p. 12). The onslaught on national literatures is also an onslaught on national identities and a levelling of the field for globalised forms of production.

Obviously the importance of attention and memory is even greater in the writer than in the reader. It is greatest in the work of students of literature and in literary criticism. Nobody has captured this better than Jorge Luis Borges in his short story 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', in which the protagonist, a French scholar and literary critic, dedicates his life to recreating Cervantes's masterpiece letter by letter, fashioning himself into the author of the *Quijote*.[17] The obvious objection to the claim that literature and literary criticism are under attack because they produce (now) counter-hegemonic attention, is that literary criticism in recent decades has abandoned traditional textual exegesis – philology – thus forsaking attention and memory in literature.[18] Arguably, historians today can make a more convincing claim of producing attention and memory. However, attention in literature is certainly not limited to a particular critical practice (philology). An anti-philological approach, like deconstruction for instance, has simply shifted its attention to other aspects of the textual fabric. I am convinced that the production of attention freed from the exigencies of immediate marketability is – or used to be – a characteristic of the humanities in general, whence comes the pressure to 'adjust' to the ideologically produced 'needs' of society or disappear.

Those dealing with literature today have to justify their choice. I have no intention of glorifying the past and denying that anti-intellectualism was always a reality. However, it seems to me that, not too long ago, literature was part of the (elites') *Lebenswelt* (Life-world), that is, that sphere of life experienced as the world of immediate phenomena and the things we accept as 'natural' elements of everyday life.[19] Paradoxically, the immediateness of literature and its 'natural', unquestionable relevance for our lives was the basis for the institutionalised reflection on literature and the subversion of the unquestionability of the Lifeworld. Today, institutional support for literature dwindles because literature has fallen out of the *Lebenswelt*. Antagonistic notions have conquered it: efficiency, marketability, relevance. Today, literature belongs to a 'residual' ideological formation that propagates 'humanism', which is gradually superseded by a 'dominant' ideology that re-mediates the human into human capital.[20] This means not only that 'society' has lost interest in literature; in fact, literature must be eradicated from the brave new world.

I have argued that the creation, reception, and study of literature are predicated upon attention and memory which, in turn, produce them. A form of subjectivity predicated upon memory and attention is a disruptive factor in our globalised, deregulated economy. Bernard Stiegler argues that televisual media produce a global attention deficit syndrome. The lack of attention and a structural amnesia produces a subject commensurate with today's hyper-consumerism: the perfect consumer. In Althusser's terms, this means that the new media interpellate the cogs in the wheels of a global economy, which requires a subject forever arrested in a state of infantile need for immediate gratification of its urges, oblivious to previous acts of consumption and incapable of conceiving alternative ways of organising society.

A look at some of the most influential publications in relation to the recent resurgence of World Literature indicate that this development is part and parcel of the onslaught on literature as a technology of attention. In 2000, Franco Moretti[21] identified the unmanageable mass of literary texts in the world as the fundamental problem of World Literature. In an attempt to make meaningful observations on literature as a global system, that is, the emergence of hegemonic forms and their evolution, Moretti proposes a 'distant reading' that relies on the work of specialists on national literatures, literary genres and individual texts. Although this method relies ultimately on 'close readings', it propagates a scholarly practice that avoids, if not counters, the attention required and produced by literature. Accordingly, Moretti's empiricist approach[27] transforms the masses of literary texts into graphical representations, appealing to the visual bias of today's culture and, at the same time, claiming the symbolic (and physical) capital usually reserved for the sciences.

In his 2003 *What Is World Literature*, David Damrosch subsumes under the term World Literature 'all literary works that circulate beyond their language of origin, either in translation or in their original language' (Ref. 22, p. 4). World Literature, then, excludes what is not worth translating or circulating, or what resists translation and circulation. It cuts a text out of its messy political and cultural context, sparing the readers the trouble of an attention-intensive disentangling of or self-involvement into these contexts. This emphasis on the mobility or translatability of texts is characteristic of other recent influential studies on World literature.[23] Pascale Casanova[24] conceives of a global literary space where the exchange value of literary work into cultural capital is determined by literary metropolises and their institutions (critics, publishers, translators). These literary capitals function as 'stock exchanges' for the trading of foreign and domestic assets in a global market. However, specialists in 'national' literatures often particularly value those texts that are so closely tied to a specific cultural or historical context that they cannot be easily circulated: they require archaeological work, a painstaking and time-consuming work that focuses on their significance for a local community, or, to use a trope Walter Benjamin has coined (see Ref. 29), acknowledges them as ruins: literary 'fragments' that are irrelevant for the present because they are melancholic vestiges of what could have been. The question is not an opposition between what can be translated, lifted into a unified globalised Life World, and pure alterity. The protracted exposure to alterity provides the reader, student and researcher with the possibility of becoming other. The project of World Literature understood as a globally circulating literature is essentially a utopia of texts sharing the same space. World Literature includes texts that are accessible – in more or less ready-made form – without the work of acquiring languages and being steeped in alterity. Of course, apologists of World Literature, such as Damrosch, do not make an explicit value judgement, but in a public discourse that glorifies and demands mobility and exchange value, translatability and instant accessibility, World Literature makes a claim to 'relevance' that translates into institutional support.

4. A modo de conclusión

In spite of the constant attack on the 'essentialist conception of national literature' (Ref. 26, p. 245), the idea that literature is tied to a linguistic community defined in

national terms in a given territory, I do not claim that the New World Literature is *per se* inimical to mono-lingual, 'national' literatures and their institutionalised study. As the example of Moretti shows, they rely on specialists on specific literary traditions and individual works in order to avoid amateurism. The theoretical and methodological reflections on World Literature are conscious of the possible complicity with a Western hegemony in the guise of globalism. However, World Literature's apologists' fatal mistake is working with the assumption that World Literature will be a paradigm within the limitations of a reformed comparative literature that is paralleled by or working together with language-specific literary criticism. As Djelal Kadir reminds us, 'comparative literature takes on its significance by what is done in its name and by how those practices become ascertained, instituted, and managed' (Ref. 8, p. 1). If we bring down the revival of World Literature as the latest thing in comparative studies from the level of lofty theoretical reflection to the basis of institutions and the management and distribution of resources, it becomes clear that it is related to the most fundamental changes in the fabric of our productive relations. The enthusiasm for World Literature neglects the fact that the logic of the market has already permeated education. In other words, the disciplines of the humanities compete with other branches of university training for dwindling resources – and lose. Within the humanities, literature competes with other branches of the humanities (for instance, cultural or media studies) for resources – and loses. Within the ever-shrinking field of literature, 'national literatures' compete with World Literature as a super-structure of sorts for the re-alignment of the interpellative regime of our society. If literature programmes in higher education survive, and there is good reason to doubt this, they will do so under the general label of 'Literature': instead of delving into the complexities of a literary system with all its open ends and discontinuities, the newly instituted departments will offer a unified image of European literature, readily available in the universal language English, training the next generation of producers and consumers.

From where I stand, it appears that the future holds a watered-down version of World Literature, possibly under a more or less arbitrary limiting label (European Studies, and the like): great works in translation, readily accessible and, due to their nomadic nature, easily translatable into cultural and actual capital. The current mode of production would even make a History of World Literature written by Pierre Menard unavoidably contribute to consolidating the process of eliminating attention and local memory – because it is inscribed in its ideology of form.

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5. Jameson elaborates here on Althusser's notion of the 'absent cause', which the latter had derived from Lacan's Real. For Jameson, History is the absent cause for the real conditions of our existence and the contradictions in a society. It is 'absent' because in its totality it is outside the realm of the expressible (the Symbolic).
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