

# Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature

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## Expansions Without Affect; Identities Without Globality: Global Novels in Dutch from an Agonistic Perspective

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### Agonistic global literature

The concept of world literature has been criticized as a 'one-worldist paradigm' or of 'one-worldedness', a literary monoculture homogenizing and absorbing difference (Apter 2013: 77, 83) so many times that by now one might shy away of these claims in fear of predictability. However, to merely acknowledge this threat, Shu-Mei Shih points out with regard to the specific oneworldliness of Eurocentrism, only displaces a problem that should be at the centre of any discussion of world literature. For her it should be 'a literature that critically examines its own construction by suspiciously interrogating all claims to universalisms, while acknowledging that any criteria emerging from these interrogations will be open to new questioning' (2004: 29). Shih's statement can be complemented by Djelal Kadir's focus on 'worlding' as it equally considers world literature less as an object than as an imputable practice: 'the locus where the fixed foot of the compass that describes the globalizing circumscription is placed' (2004: 2). Comparatists need to take into account the position from where they describe, analyse and thus design world literature in order not to produce

unwanted and unthought-of effects that confirm and reproduce particular power relations that assimilate and standardize singularity and difference.

We could theorize and organize this relation between the particular locus and the universal totality in the construction of world literature through a model of agonistics as it has been developed by the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (e.g. 2013) and has been adapted for literary studies by Sven Vitse and myself (Demeyer and Vitse 2014). Key terms in Mouffe's model, which elaborates on the theoretical framework she developed earlier with Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001), are 'antagonism' and 'hegemony'. The former points to the ineradicable dimension of negativity that pervades each society and that forecloses the possibility of a society beyond conflict and contestation – a society of harmonious totality based on a rational or liberal consensus. From this perspective any social order can only be the result of decisions over its organization. Those articulations that temporarily fix power relations and social meanings are what Mouffe calls hegemonic. Hegemony is accordingly described as the situation in which 'a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it' (x). This particular 'totality', a result of power relations, can always be contested and a healthy democratic society should recognize, legitimize and channel this conflict and pluralism into a democratic debate about society's organization: 'antagonism (struggle between enemies)' is thus transformed into 'agonism (struggle between adversaries)' (Mouffe 2013: 7).

An agonistic approach to literary studies does not only conceive of society as determined by this antagonistic dimension, but the literary field and literary studies as well. Furthermore it does not consider any hegemonic situation – within society, within the literary field – as a neutral situation and perceives of any literary phenomenon as an (implicit or explicit) intervention in that situation. The task of an agonistic literary study is to interpret this intervention with regard to the current hegemony: it can reproduce dominant opinions and political views, criticize them according to different degrees or do both at the same time (Mouffe 2013: 89–90). This analysis has likewise an agonistic character: it can never merely be descriptive or neutral, but is always beset by values and thus holds a particular relation to a social and literary hegemony.<sup>1</sup> Let me clarify these theoretical observations by means of several recurrent topics and dominant attitudes in the debate on world literature.

Within this discussion the hegemonic situation has been alternatively called 'Eurocentrism' or 'Westerncentrism'. Many criticisms of this hegemony are based on the premise that an on-going intercultural dialogue can foster a consensual totality in which particularities coexist without losing their uniqueness. Mariano Siskind identifies this structuring horizon as follows: 'world literature as a cosmopolitan project that aims at articulating cultural difference in order to foster emancipatory goals' (2010: 355). Therefore one needs to 'map the asymmetric interaction of hegemonic and subaltern cultural and economic forces' in order to arrive at the desired representation of 'a diverse globe as a reconciled multicultural totality' (358). From an agonistic perspective this 'reconciled multicultural totality' that is seemingly 'beyond hegemony' (Mouffe 2013: 19–41) is unattainable as it glosses over the antagonistic dimension of the political: the impossibility to reconcile different and

conflicting visions within an overriding ensemble; the denial that any identity can only be constructed through difference and that any collective identity ('us') needs another ('them') as its constitutive outside (4–5). This political dimension is lost as Siskind shifts from *socio-economic* inequality toward *cultural* universality: a politics of recognition takes over a politics of the distribution of power (Shih 2004: 22).

The loss of the political can be found as well in advocated modes of reading that revolve around detachment and distance. I think of Franco Moretti's 'distant reading' that wants to replace close reading by scientific data analysis, and Damrosch's understanding of world literature as a mode of disengaged reading: 'not one involving identification or mastery but the discipline of distance and of difference' (2003: 300). In both, although at different levels, there is a stress on disidentification and a turn towards differing degrees of objectivity that claim a certain level of neutrality. From an agonistic point of view, these models underappreciate the 'centrality of collective identities and the crucial role played by affects in their constitution' (Mouffe 2013: 6): attachments cannot be put aside that easily. The modes of reading proposed by Damrosch and Moretti do not acknowledge their own poetics as part of a collective identity in the construction of the (elliptical or world system) literary field in which they read.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter I would like to contribute to an agonistic study of world literature through an ideological critical reading. The ideological effect of a literary work is never determined – there is no strict relationship between an aesthetic technique and a political or ideological effect – and is thus bound to a contextual interpretation (Demeyer and Vitse 2014: 533–536). The aim of this interpretation is, as said, to demonstrate the way in which literary works intervene in a hegemonic situation. In my reading of two recent novels in Dutch, *Een vorm van vermoedheid* (*A Form of Weariness*, 2008) by the Flemish author Jeroen Theunissen and *Gebrek is een groot woord* (*Lack Is a Big Word*, 2018) by Dutch writer Nina Polak, their interventions show a disintegration between a Western identity and the (availability of the) global. Making use of Lauren Berlant's notion of genre as an affective contract, I discuss how both novels invoke the genre of the global novel but do not provide the expected affective confirmations. This is related to a more general affective crisis in Western identity.

## Genre of the global novel: Affect, historicity

My starting point is Lauren Berlant's definition of genre in *The Female Complaint*:

a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. (2008: 4)

I would like to highlight three elements. First, Berlant characterizes genre as an aesthetic way of knowing, a worldview or spirit that generates particular expectations. This definition does not only hold true for aesthetic practices but for

ordinary life as well: genre is both 'a mode of cultural creation and interpretation' as well as 'a shaping force in lived experience' (Jackson 2015). If genres function at the level of semiosis and constitute reality-effects (Frow 2015: 20), it is possible to understand that Berlant considers identity or gender as a type of genre. She writes: 'femininity is a genre with deep affinities to the genres associated with femininity' (Berlant 2008: 3). Genres thus become a mental category and offer the means by which people are able to interpret their own experiences and situate them within a meaningful script that creates the expectation that they will attain their goal.

Secondly, genres are collectively acknowledged forms of recognition: our shared classification of genres allows for easy identifications. Applied to everyday experience, this implies that the desire to meet genre expectations can beget a normative character. If women model themselves to dominant genres of femininity, they are performing normative ideas of femininity. Berlant rightfully points out how this normativity can be the central affective expectation as it promises ordinary comfort.

Thirdly, genres are not static but open to all sorts of modification and variation. Therefore, genre can become an 'alternative model for practicing historicism' (Martin 2017: 7). Despite their modifications genres remain identifiable: they offer recognition but at the same time adapt to new cultural situations. This way we can trace through genres tensions between the present and the past, between innovation and repetition. What Berlant's definition adds is a dimension of ideological critique: '[genre] locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated' (2008: 4).

Here the accredited influence of Fredric Jameson's work on genre in *The Political Unconscious* ([1981] 2002) is visible. There he famously states that 'the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions' (2002: 64). Genre thus becomes a diagnostic method: the analysis of genre is able to track social contradictions and as such offers a way to interpret a literary work's intervention within a hegemonic situation.

In my reading of the novels by Theunissen and Polak I will mostly focus on the work of affect in genre as a method to trace the social and the historical. In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant understands affect theory as a new development in ideology theory and claims that 'the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes' (2011: 16). Affect needs to be understood here as a proprioceptive and corporeal sensibility with which people mediate their relation to the world: how they respond to their environment, adjust themselves to the world and assess their belongings – attachments that need to serve the continuity between themselves and their surroundings and are negotiated through abstractions such as class, gender, race or nation. One way in which one can affectively mediate oneself in relation to the world is genre. Understanding it as an 'affective contract' (275), genres promise 'certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances' that may add to one's sense of belonging to a conventional and recognized (social) world (Berlant 2008: 4).

In discussions of world literature much attention has been paid to the globalization of a genre. Scholars such as Franco Moretti (2013b) and Wai Chee Dimock (2006) make use of genre instead of national literatures or distinct periods as a means to map the evolution, interconnection and movement of literary forms over the globe. In this chapter I would rather focus on genres of the global: not so much using genre as a totalizing concept over literary texts but to look at the aesthetic form of genre through which texts imagine the globe (Hoyos 2015: 11, 22). The genre of the novel has historically always invested in images of the global. Their subject is the '*bourgeois conquérant*' and they put 'into circulation effective accounts of the global reach of the bourgeoisie in terms of the production and reproduction of discourses of universal adventure, exploration, and colonial profit' (Siskind 2010: 343). Under the flag of modernity and the universal these novels represent travels and adventures after which newly discovered spaces across the globe are taken over in order to expand and confirm bourgeois universality. Through transforming the local experience into a global adventure, these novels offer the affective 'intensity and excitement available to those individuals willing to embrace their bourgeois subjectivity and explore its universalizing potential' (343).

Franco Moretti discusses how the pre-modern values of adventure stories are combined in the novel with the opposing bourgeois values of calculation, reasonableness and carefulness (2013a: 25–35). The latter are the values of work that legitimize the new social power (30), whereas the former are part of 'a trope of expansion: capitalism on the offensive, planetary, crossing the oceans' (2013b: 177). Both values are incompatible but nevertheless coexist in the novel without formal integration. For Moretti this points at a structural contradiction within the bourgeois soul between a rational and irrational impulse, a contradiction that will never be resolved (2013a: 35) and, as we will see, is still present as a problem in *A Form of Weariness* and *Lack Is a Big Word*.

In both novels the main characters experience a conflict between a rational impulse to build a home and lead a conventional life, and an irrational impulse to leave that home behind and travel the world. The protagonists suffer from detachment, indifference and weariness, an affective crisis they wish to solve through enacting the genre of the global novel, of travel and adventure. But their affective expectations about the global as 'a bourgeois playing field, ready and available for science, profit and amusement' are not met (Siskind 2010: 343); no assurance of belonging is given. This failure in affective fulfilment points to a historical shift in the hegemonic collective Western identity in relation to the global.

## A Form of Weariness

The form of weariness that affects Horacio Gnade, the main character in Jeroen Theunissen's second novel, can be read as an allegory for a form of weariness that characterizes the Western world. The novel presents a conflict between (rational) order and (irrational) romanticism. The desire for ironic distance and control is in a constant struggle with the

question of emotional and political engagement. This conflict is staged at the individual level when Horacio leaves behind his ordered and detached life to undertake a romantic flight of which it is unclear if it will lead to any sort of attachment. This is situated within a social and cultural constellation in which the contemporary globalized West implies order, whereas Latin America still symbolizes a romantic possibility. The individual and the global do however not match: globalization, its unequal effects and its resulting political struggles do not allow for an affectively satisfying integration.

Horacio is the prototype of the civilized world-citizen who has been able to achieve what many would consider the conventional good life fantasies that were promised by Western social democratic states after the Second World War. He was born in Argentina, but now lives with his wife and daughter in the German picturesque provincial town of Tübingen, where he is a professor in Spanish Literature. He values measurability and steadiness highly and is 'een burgerlijke man die probeert om werk, hobby's en financiële zekerheid belangrijk te vinden. Hij spaart voor zichzelf, voor zijn gezin en voor zijn kind' (a bourgeois man who tries to find work, hobbies and financial security important. He saves for himself, for his family and for his child) (11). Horacio *tries* – he is well aware that his identification with this perceived norm of normality is unstable and that irrationality is always a possibility: 'Hij is een normale man, maar heeft nu eenmaal chaos in zich. Hij ook, hij beseft dat, dus moet hij opletten voor romantiek' (He is a normal man, but it's so that he has chaos in him. He as well, is aware of that, so he needs to be watchful for romanticism) (9). He resists this tendency through irony and uses it to keep any emotional or political commitment at a distance. This irony betrays a more general detachment. Horacio only identifies with the *form* of the life patterns that he understands to be normal, but does not engage himself with their *content* and thus voids those forms of emotions, ethics or ideals: 'Hij is een man die niet gelooft, maar wel functioneert' (He is a man who does not believe, but does function) (11).

Horacio's domestication of excess returns at the social level. From his secure position in Europe the earth remains the bourgeois' playground:

Hij is iemand die wordt gebombardeerd met oproepen om op avontuur te gaan, om niet stil te zitten, om het leven op zich af te laten komen, om met overgave en met passie te consumeren, om kosmopoliet te zijn al weet hij dat kosmopolitisme vooral het provincialisme van de rijken is.

(He is someone who gets bombarded with summons to go on an adventure, to not sit still, to let life get at him, to consume with devotion and passion, to be cosmopolitan although he knows that cosmopolitanism is mostly the provincialism of the rich.) (143)

The scale of the globe becomes provincial. The West does not open its borders but incorporates the global within its own order. In this way it cancels the romantic desire for the unreachable and unattainable through its circulation and consumption of goods and through tourism: 'Toerisme is het einde van de romantiek' (Tourism is the end of romanticism) (10).

Horacio nevertheless does depart after a couple of eccentric events that he cannot rationalize (he shadows the same woman twice; he drunkenly beats up two young men). He claims to be somewhat tired (64), but he actually only experiences a *form* of weariness. It is an unspecified affective state of which he is unable to define the causes or to cure it. His flight is improvised, unsure of what it aims to escape and to acquire, and his inner conflict between irony and desire remains present throughout without arriving at a solution.

Before he left Horacio had counted all his belongings: 'Het is als structuur. Dus streeft hij extreme nauwkeurigheid na' (It is about structure. Thus, he strives for extreme accuracy) (64). This rational measurability is complemented by an irrational adventure, but in contrast to the global novel here this contradiction does not serve the expansion of identity. Its affective expectation is not met, as Horacio's expedition does not result in an accumulation of money nor in an affective fulfilment and accomplishment of an identity. There is no investment and consequently no return. Not surprisingly, the novel ends when Horacio has spent all his money.

The novel represents the other side of the totality of globalization when Horacio ultimately arrives in his home country and more specifically in Patagonia. There he might find what he desires: 'Hij wil alleen maar vermoeid zijn, hij wil rust, hij wil vast kunnen stellen dat hij niets meer na te streven, niets meer te kopen of te doen heeft' (He only wants to be weary, he wants peace, he wants to ascertain that he has nothing left to strive for, to buy or to do) (143). He is however confronted with the West's drive for expansion and investment and the ecological and political problems that creates. In Europe, globalization offered him a 'golden cage' (64); in Latin America globalization imposes a cage: '*La Jaula*', the cage, is the name the Mapuche use for the area that the multinational Grosso (based on Benneton) has (not entirely legally) acquired and fenced off with barbed wire (202). For the Mapuche Indians the land is a sacred area in which a divine creature resides, whereas for the multinational firm it is an investment for profit. These multinationals legitimize their actions in line with century-old practices: in the name of "voortgang", "beschaving" en "toekomst" ('progress', 'civilization' and 'future') the goals were to make 'de onbewoonde leegte bewoonbaar en exploiteerbaar' (the uninhabited emptiness inhabitable and exploitable) (149).

Horacio gets involved in the struggle against this exploitation of raw materials through his semi-girlfriend Valeria who shoots a documentary about the Mapuche. She is the one who most strongly challenges Horacio's inability to overcome his detachment. Against her rhetorical violence, in which she declares Grosso the enemy, Horacio emphasizes the need for nuance, neutrality and objectivity (205). Valeria responds that it is simply a battle between good and evil: 'en wij zijn verdomme de goeden. "Je gedoe over nuance is alleen maar een deel van je probleem" roept ze' (and we are the good ones for Christ's sake. 'Your going on about nuance is only a part of your problem' she shouts) (205). Because Horacio only responds to the form of Valeria's attack and does not take any political stance, his critique can only perpetuate the status-quo. He falls back upon a formal attachment to normality that continues the affective disconnection from his (global) environment.

## Lack Is a Big Word

The 30-year-old Nynke 'Skip' Nauta, the main character in Nina Polak's second novel, considers herself an outsider who likes to shrug off the question 'where is home' and to sail the oceans instead as a means to water down the past (2018: 28). When in Cannes she accidentally meets her 'second' family Zeno, she accepts their offer to return 'home' to Amsterdam. Throughout the novel, Skip reflects upon her lack of attachment and connection with a family, a home or a lover, and her desire to roam the earth freely. The novel explores this affective confusion tentatively in both a psychological and social manner, but I will focus here on those aspects that bear upon the relation between a home and the globe and how it constitutes (the affective lack in) Skip's identity.

In *Lack is a Big Word* the bourgeois soul is still torn between rationality and irrationality. Skip's environment takes her sailing mostly as an irrational adventure and tries to persuade her to make a rational choice: to start investing in the good life fantasies of creating a home, getting a mortgage, founding a family. Especially her former boyfriend Borg, with whom she has an adulterous relationship during her return, is prone on getting her to settle. Although Skip expresses at times a desire for peacefulness and order and feels herself for instance attracted to the peace and spaciousness of the Zeno family house, Amsterdam does however not constitute a home for her.

On the one hand she understands Amsterdam as a self-sufficient globe, similar to Horacio's Tübingen, that promises possibility and mobility: 'Waarom zou je, waarom zou *iemand* zo'n centrum van mogelijkheden eigenlijk verlaten, behalve misschien voor een lastminuteweekje magisch Dubrovnik van CheapHolidays.com?' (Why would you, why would *anybody* in fact leave such a centre of possibilities, except maybe for a last-minute week of magical Dubrovnik through CheapHolidays.com?) (34). On the other hand Skip's upbringing in both a working and well-educated middle class makes her attitude towards Amsterdam's cosmopolitan freedom ambiguous. Skip used to live with her ill and depressed mother in Osdorp, a working-class neighbourhood and described as 'de jungle buiten de grachtengordel' (the jungle beyond the Canal District) (119). For her family there has never been any 'CheapTickets.com' nor the realization that the world is available for exploration (224). Even before her mother's death she found a second home in the upper (middle) class area where the cosmopolitan Zeno family lives, but she is also in touch with a Turkish migrant family, which hints at another type of global mobility. This social stratification is not resolved in the personal sphere, and Skip never fully integrates with either one of those communities. At the wedding of the Turkish daughter, her observations move between an exaggerated sensation of collectivity and a faint sense of home, and a feeling of existential nausea and claustrophobia with regard to Amsterdam and a vague longing for the sea. She may participate but always remains a spectator as well. It is the use of theatre imagery that points to this passive and aloof stance.

Skip describes her 'schouwburggevoel' (theatre feeling) as 'alsof me daar in die donkere bonbondoos, in gecompriemeerde vorm het hele bestaan, de hele globe, werd voorgehouden, als een vers, warm koekje, net buiten bereik' (as if in that dark chocolate

box, in a compressed form, the whole of existence, the whole globe, was presented to me, like a fresh, warm biscuit, just out of reach) (96). The globe is almost *given* to her. Her desire to sail is not underpinned by an active project to conquer the seas and to beget a sense of identity, but to be passively led on by them: 'om het leven zijn gang met me te laten gaan' (to let life take its course with me) (131).

Already as a 10-year-old Skip was fascinated by the sea: 'dat de zee ook geeft en dat ze bovendien alles met alles verbindt, overal met overal' (that the sea gives as well and furthermore that it connects everything with everything, everywhere with everywhere) (179). Interestingly, this romantic image is replaced by a vaguely economic discourse in a class speech on sea-containers: they make the circulation of goods possible, and may create employment in other countries. In his novella, Borg's alter-ego criticizes the 20-year-old Skip's desire for the stories and adventures of those first Dutch explorers who were also violent colonizers: 'het kwam niet in haar op om een verbinding te zien tussen haar geromantiseer, haar exotisme en het brute kolonialisme, het paternalisme en de corruptie waarvan de geschiedenissen getuigden' (it did not occur to her to see a connection between her romanticization, her exoticism and the brutal colonialism, the paternalism and the corruption of which these histories testified) (158). In reality Skip is not insensitive to that history, but she remains nostalgically attached to the genre of the *bourgeois conquérant* as they offered and continue to offer her a substitute for the lack of connection she encounters elsewhere: 'alle vergane Hollandse glorie die ik me eigen heb gemaakt omdat ik me toch iets eigen moest maken' (all the lost Dutch glory that I have made my own because I had to make at least something my own) (204). Although sailing is a means to escape the question of a home, it is nevertheless attached to a national self-image and history.

The novel nevertheless does represent a break with these. One of the monuments in honour of this past and which Skip holds dear, the statue of the ship-boys of Bontekoe, after a famous early twentieth-century novel celebrating an early seventeenth-century voyage to the Dutch East Indies, on the quay of the Dutch city of Hoorn, is defiled by anti-colonial activists. This hurts her, although she recognizes the justice of the act:

Ik weet niet of het de door de activisten beoogde schaamte was, of irritatie omdat mijn geliefde symbolen nu besmeurd waren met een vermoedende gewetenskwestie. Het was de combinatie waarschijnlijk – hetzelfde verdrietige verzet, de vernedering, waarmee een kind aanhoort dat Sinterklaas een leugen is. Een absurd doodsbericht dat uiteindelijk slechts geaccepteerd en erkend kan worden.

(I do not know if it was the shame intended by the activists, or irritation, because my beloved symbols were now tainted with a tiring matter of conscience. It was probably the combination – the same sad resistance, the humiliation, with which a child hears that Sinterklaas is a lie. An absurd obituary that in the end can only be accepted and acknowledged.) (201–202)

The novel thus tentatively links this ideological failure of imperialism as a grand narrative with Skip's affective crisis (Vitse 2018). Her attachment is one with desire for the world, but it is unclear if her sailing can deliver upon the affective promises and can

confirm her identity. Rather than progressive, her movement is far more stationary: 'Van types zoals ik [...] zou je kunnen beweren dat we rondjes draaien om de illusie van vooruitgang te behouden. Maar het zijn toch zeker glorieuze rondjes. We bewegen, we gaan door' (Of types like me [...] you could claim that we are turning around in circles to maintain the illusion of progress. But they are all the same certainly glorious circles. We move, we continue) (28).

## To conclude: Growth without affect

In the opening section of this contribution I advocated reading a literary work as an intervention and I focused on the affective aspects of the global novel in which the local bourgeois experience is expected to be confirmed on a global scale. To conclude I now want to discuss the failure of this promise in *A Form of Weariness* and *Lack Is a Big Word* by situating it in its ideological and socio-economic context.<sup>3</sup>

In *Cruel Optimism* Lauren Berlant discusses how the good life fantasies of social democracy have dissolved along with the assurance and legitimacy of modernity as a project of socio-economic progress. It continues or finalizes the process that Jean-François Lyotard had previously described in *La condition postmoderne* (1979; *The Postmodern Condition*, 1984): the dismantling of the community and of modernist meta-narratives and the replacement of the true and the just with market efficiency. In a post-ideological context, it seems as if the quantitative accumulation of capital and the qualitative development of civilization now coincide in a dogma of growth – a growth that no longer serves circumscribed ideological needs or aims. As the ecological economist Herman Daly states: "Anything goes" is a convenient moral stance for a growth economy because it implies that anything also sells. Expanding power and shrinking purpose lead to uncontrolled growth for its own sake' ([1987] 2017: 34). This growth is nevertheless sold as our panacea, as the efficient allocation of accumulated capital through markets that will solve the problems of the world, even those created by the pursuit of capital itself.

At the level of the individual a similar shift has taken place. According to Alain Ehrenberg (1998) the sixties mark a change in our understanding of the individual: no longer constituted through discipline and circumscribed norms, the emphasis is now put on the individual's own responsibility and initiative to make life worthwhile and significant. In this project experience plays an important role. Mark Greif (2016) points at the use of a specific 'concept of experience' as the 'method of life' to render it meaningful (78). In this frame experience is something we desire: each moment needs to be lived to the fullest and experience can be acquired at any place and at any time. The subject amasses and accumulates them: their 'sheer quantity' ('had or missed') becomes more important than their quality (good or bad) (79). Because experience is strived for, however, this specific method creates loss and disappointment: 'The sense that each or any moment might be won for experience, but is lost to time instead, leaves a residue of perpetual loss' (84). This particular 'concept of experience' can thus lead to an affective crisis: the feeling not to exist (sufficiently), to exist without direction. The guilt one felt

when the expected norms were not met, Ehrenberg argues, has been replaced by a sense of failure when one feels incapable of taking responsibility for one's own happiness. This feeling of shortcoming can eventually lead to depression and weariness to become oneself.

These affective crises are apparent in Horacio's formal attachment to a form of normality that involves detachment from any system of values or beliefs and in Skip's difficulties to decide to which place and fantasy she wishes to attach herself in a metropolitan community that promises her that 'iedereen kan [...] zelf kiezen wie hij is' (everyone can [...] chose himself who he wants to be) (Polak 2018: 119). Because of the lack of a larger ideological narrative, their 'solutions' to these issues remain affective: the search for absolute weariness that would release Horacio from the bombardment of messages that tell him to '*Live the Life You Imagined*' (Theunissen 2008: 145) and Skip's nostalgic attachment to genres of world exploration in order not to come to terms with the past and future of her own life and those of the nation.

## Coda

In *An Ecology of World Literature* (2015) Alexander Beecroft rightfully points at the frequent use of 'economics as a controlling metaphor' to theorize world literature (18). From this perspective it is not difficult to see that a logic of growth and accumulation is implicitly at work in the model. No better example than Franco Moretti who not only wishes to broaden comparative literature's focus from the river Rhine to the globe, but who also wishes to expand the texts under scrutiny: to the canon should be added the 'Great Unread'. His aim is "'to make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper": historically longer, geographically larger, and morphologically deeper' (2013b: 161). But its logic is equally present in Damrosch's conception of world literature as 'writing that *gains* in translation' (2003): it accumulates value within the 'Great Conversation' of world literature (142).

In his polemical study *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017) Joseph North discusses the debate on world literature in terms of 'expansion excitement' (180–188). The enthusiasm specifically refers to a breakout from the specialized fields in literary studies narrowly defined by language, time and place to open up to the different periods and contexts that this new scholarly labour brings together and studies in their interconnectivity. Interestingly, North goes on to suggest that the collective work of world literature has 'the structure of a prisoner's fantasies: [...] the real investment has been in the breakout itself, rather than in any specific proposal about what we would do once we were free' (185). As if the quantitative growth in periods, places, literatures, languages is at the same time considered as a qualitative development towards an emancipation of which the aims are unspecified but which might be taken to be similar to the earlier discussed cosmopolitan horizon of a 'reconciled multicultural totality' (Siskind 2010: 358). I would like to suggest that this line of action is structured around the assumption that the development of knowledge and critical consciousness or dialogue is considered as a good in itself. In our post-ideological context the accumulation of this good is deemed positive without assigning it any circumscribed values of truth and justice. There is

however no reason to believe that there is a determinate relation between knowledge and righteousness as this depends on the political articulation within a hegemonic situation.

Beecroft suggests that we replace economy by ecology as controlling metaphor and to understand literature 'in an ecological relationship to other phenomena – political, economic, sociocultural, religious – as well as to the other languages and literature with which it is in contact' (2015: 19). From an agonistic perspective this metaphor is to be preferred to an economic one as the incorporation of these ecological dimensions more easily foregrounds difference and inequality across a global scale. These problematize the assumption of a global literary community and may allow for a map of different hegemonic blocks in which literature and knowledge intervene differently. With its emphasis on the mutually interconnected relations between different forms of input, this model also more insistently asks us to determine how we want our knowledge to interact and to make an impact. It foregrounds 'the inescapable moment of decision – in the strong sense of having to decide within an undecidable terrain' (Mouffe 2013: 3); a moment which the mere accumulation of knowledge if not disposes of then at least postpones indefinitely.

## Notes

- 1 The preceding two paragraphs summarize very briefly and translate several sentences from 'Revanche of conflict? Pleidooi voor een agonistische literatuurstudie' (Demeyer and Vitse 2014).
- 2 Moretti's background is obviously in Marxist poetics, but as Joseph North (2017: 109–116) points out, his arguments in 'Conjectures on World Literature' are only residually political. Shih furthermore questions Moretti's systematic approach that embeds the singular literary work too strongly within systematic laws. 'Although situated in a structure or a system, a literary text also always exceeds its structure or system in the power of its effect and affect,' she writes in terms that are in line with a consideration of the literary work as an intervention within a hegemonic situation (2004: 20).
- 3 The following repeats some arguments of 'De affectieve dominant: Een ideologiekritische lezing van recent Nederlandstalig proza' (Demeyer and Vitse 2018), but reframes them within a discourse of accumulation and growth. That discourse, which also informs the coda, is informed by a reading of Benjamin Kunkel on 'Steady-State Aesthetics' which can be listened to here: <http://theartistsinstitute.org/artists/sept-dec-2017/recordings/> (accessed 17 April 2018).

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