Reading World Literature within Its Institutions: An Interview with Professor Pieter Vermeulen

Pieter Vermeulen (Leuven University)

Haitao Jiang (Beijing Normal University)

Abstract:

In the interview, Prof. Vermeulen shared his ideas not only about how we read world literature with an awareness of the limitation of its institutions, but also about how we reaffirm literary writings and literary criticism as useful forms of thinking despite such limitations. He highlighted not only academic communities but also several market-based elements to explain the dynamics of the making of world literature, thus dealing with issues like historization of world literary learnings, commercialization of literary experiences, and linguistic hegemony in this field. The talk also featured entanglement of literary value with ethical, political, and other kinds of value. Furthermore, Prof. Vermeulen turned to the term *necessary misnomers* to illuminate the inexhaustible worldliness of some impossibly large terms like "world", "Anthropocene", and "planetary", as a way to keep the latter terms productive in literary research.

Keywords: institutions of world literature, Anthropocene, cosmopolitanism, Flemish literature, world literary market

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Jiang: Professor Vermeulen, thank you very much for accepting this interview. We know that as a professor of American and comparative literature, you take world literature as one of your research interests. It seems to me that your research in this field is such a comprehensive one that you do excellent work in making connections among discussions of literary form, affect, memory, Anthropocene, and the big theory of world literature. However, at first, would you please introduce to the readers your early academic and research background? I am curious about how you became interested in the topic of world literature.

Vermeulen: Thank you very much for this question and for inviting me to do this interview. I studied German and English literature and philosophy in Leuven and Vancouver and as a doctoral student I was very interested in literary theory. As I didn't really have a lot of inspiration to think of a doctoral project of my own, I followed the suggestion of my supervisor to focus my project on the work of the critic Geoffrey Hartman. Hartman was a massive figure in postwar literary criticism, working in fields such as romanticism, literary theory, especially deconstruction and psychoanalytical criticism, and later in his life, also trauma theory and Holocaust studies. For me, this was a fantastic opportunity to explore the whole history of literary criticism. Hartman was an extremely erudite scholar, who engaged with French literature, German philosophy, Jewish thought, and so on. And working on him forced me to also familiarize myself with that whole canon of work. I still think that for me this was an excellent advanced education in the field of literary studies. At that time in the 2000s, world literature was not really on my radar. Although my office was situated next to that of Theo D'haen, a prominent researcher in the field. But he was not my supervisor. It was really only when I had my first tenure-track job at the University of Stockholm—and by that time I had shifted my research focus to contemporary anglophone literature—that I really began to engage with world literature in a more or less systematic way. My colleague Stefan Helgesson was a huge inspiration, with his deep knowledge of African and lusophone literatures. He initiated the intellectual dialogues with the cultural anthropologists at Stockholm, people like the formidable Helena Wulff and others, who also happened to be very interested in forms of literary writing from an anthropological perspective that was totally new to me. So it is thanks to these colleagues that I realized that there was a huge gap in my education and that it was worthwhile beginning to fill it.

Jiang: Then I see that you started with contemporary anglophone literature, and one thing leads to another, and one day you find yourself working in world literature. You are coeditor of *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, a volume which is, in my opinion, one of the most important books in the field. As a whole, it develops diverse, practical, and effective approaches to world literature, most of which are also productive in theory. Could you give us some background and thoughts on editing the book?

Vermeulen: It is really my colleague Stefan Helgesson who deserves credit for this book. It was he who planned to organize a conference and was generous enough to take me as a junior colleague on board to help organize that conference and coedit the book based on this conference. So I really look back to the process

of editing the book as a huge learning process for myself, as I still think there is no better way to pick up new ideas than by editing or supervising or helping the work of other scholars with an expertise different than mine. As academics, we of course need to balance our desire to always learn new things with the duty to continuously publish our own research. I tend to think of my published work as a record of my own learning process, and that is very much the case for this book. I'm still very proud of that book. I think it really participated (in however minor a way, of course) in a shift in the discussion in world literature studies from the grand theories of the beginning of the twenty-first century to a more considerate and patient attention to the role that markets, institutions, and other mediations play in the production and circulation of literary texts. The importance of such mediations is something that I was not very much aware of at the beginning of my career, but it is a sociological dimension that has become increasingly prominent in the work I've done in the last decade.

Jiang: In the introduction of *Institutions of World Literature*, you and your colleague first made the point that "world literature is made, not found"(1).[1] I, for my part, would primarily connect this trait of world literature with the specific genres that Goethe, Marx, and Engels employed to propose "world literature," by which I mean it was in *Gespräche* (conversation) and *Manifest* (manifesto) that they promoted the seminal term, and you really see the performative significance of the forms. However, when you made the point, who is in your opinion the subject of this "making"? Writers? Readers? Critics? Publishers? Translators? Or even markets? All of them? Could you elaborate more on this proposition?

Vermeulen: The question of "who *makes* world literature?" is of course becoming an increasingly important one as literature continues to become an increasingly marginal reality in the world at large and in the university more specifically. A lot of my work is interested in the question not only of who *makes* world literature but also of who is going to *preserve* it. And there I think we need an alliance of what we could call the stakeholders in the persistence of literature. A community of readers, translators, critics, teachers, publishers, students, and so on. Consideration of these different actors is not only crucial for the survival of literature as a force in the world and as an academic subject, it is also crucial for understanding what literature is and has become. I see myself as a researcher very much as an interested participant in that community of the *makers* of world literature.

1 Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, "Introduction: World Literature in the Making," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, eds. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 12-31.

Jiang: On the one hand, you highlighted "the performative function of language" to "institute something," and on the other hand, you emphasized equally that "successful performativity does not emerge out of nothing," "it needs social recognition and sustenance" (2).[2] Then, how do you demarcate the subjectivity or agency of the making of world literature when you insist on the dialectic?

Vermeulen: I think it is an important methodological challenge to read text and institution dialectically, by which I mean, in a way that underlines how the two cannot exist in isolation from one another. It is always slightly frustrating to read the works of scholarship that offer a brilliant institutional account of literature but then fails to develop exciting and unpredictable textual readings. In the field of contemporary American literature, for instance, Dan Sinykin's *Big Fiction* is such a book—totally great in its historical and archival work and its sociological reflections, but not very original in its textual analyses. It is equally frustrating to see that books offer dazzling interpretations of individual works without really connecting them to the institutional realities through which literature functions today. My earlier work has definitely been guilty of the latter error, where I believe too much in what you call the performative function of language—the power of literary language to make something special happen. I believe more than ever that the combination of textual analysis and institutional account is the way forward for the study of also contemporary world literature—which does not mean it is easy, nor that I feel I have found a good way to achieve the balance in my own writing or teaching.

Jiang: I believe it's a challenging task for all of us. As you used the term "institution," is it the academic institution to which you mainly referred? Does the term also include "writing, translation, and markets"? Or did you use the term in a more abstract way to suggest a relationship between these differing fields?

Vermeulen: In the study of American literature, which is so much embedded in academic institutions, I would definitely say that the academy takes priority as the most important institution. But looking at Belgian literature, the literature in the country I live, it is clear that the situation is quite different, and that state-funded institutions, publishers, journals, and translators are at least as important as academic institutions. In Belgium, there is simply more government support for literature, and there are no real developed creative writing programs the way there are in the States. So it really depends on particular contexts.

Jiang: Yes, I see. I believed you historicized the collective undertaking of world literature in English academia over the past twenty years, and thus you saw that

2 Helgesson and Vermeulen, "Introduction," 1.

"the dominant, emergent, as well as residual modes of world literature as something made can be critically examined." Obviously, you located your own project in the third and critical mode of world literature. You also argued that before the critical phase, the second decade of the millennium has seen "consolidation" of the field, which means that "world literature de facto exists."[3] Should we really be that optimistic?

Vermeulen: I don't think me and my coeditor mean much more than to say that world literature had become a visible discipline within the larger discipline of literary studies. Whether world literature in the more substantial and utopian (so not just disciplinary) sense of Goethe or Marx can really be said to exist is a very different matter. Although even in that regard, I have become slightly more optimistic in recent years. While I see that the number of serious readers and serious students of literature is definitely not rising, I see that there is simply more exciting translation activity from world languages into English. And when I look at the Dutch and Flemish book markets, of which I am a big consumer, there are now exciting, small, and new publishers that take many more risks in publishing foreign literature than was available even ten or twenty years ago. So am I optimistic about world literature? I think I actually am, even though literature has, in the time that it has become *more worldly*, probably also become *much smaller* than it used to be. Life is probably too short to be too sad over that.

Jiang: It's interesting to think literature is more worldly but also smaller these days. Then, in the same introduction, I believe that you mentioned two "Holy Trinities" for the establishment of world literature, by which I refer to firstly Goethe, Marx (with Engels), and Erich Auerbach, and secondly Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch. For you personally, do you find anyone among them whose idea is most inspiring?

Vermeulen: For me personally, Auerbach has by far been the most inspiring. When writing my dissertation on Geoffrey Hartman, I came across the work of Auerbach, who was one of Hartman's admired teachers at Yale in the 1950s, after he had fled Germany and moved on from Istanbul, where he had written *Mimesis*. When I read *Mimesis* and his work on the notion of the *figura*, I found that work weirdly inspiring even though it dealt with a Christian and medieval literary tradition that I'm not particularly interested or knowledgeable in. But his reading of Dante at the heart of *Mimesis*, where he explains how literary realism emerges from Dante's effort to capture the embodied, fleshy reality of the afterlife, I have always

3 Helgesson and Vermeulen, "Introduction," 1.

found that extremely impressive. The combination of attention to literary style and larger historical ideas is something that is hardly possible today but which I found very inspiring. And I am still convinced that his idea of the *Ansatzpunkt*, basically the idea that it is important to find a particularly resonant element in the text or culture you want to discuss to launch your discussion, also points to something very essential in what it means to write good literary criticism.

Jiang: Everybody likes Auerbach and you give us a good explanation. Yet the next question is somehow related to the hardly possible combination today, as you just mentioned, of attention to literary style and larger historical ideas. In remaking Casanova's great attribution to this field, Christopher Prendergast mentioned that Casanova did have the merit to "put the question of literature back in the spotlight."[4] As the starting point of "new world literature," the international literary criticism that Casanova proposed aimed at overcoming "the supposedly insuperable antinomy" between internal criticism and external criticism,[5] which I find is befitting to characterize your literary criticism as well. As early as in your research on the romanticism of Geoffery Hartman, you paid special attention to his "deliberately minimal form of aesthetic," which "derives its performative power from its withdrawal from the available terms of debate" on contemporary culture.[6] Could we say that it is also your path to approach world literature?

Vermeulen: As I said, a totally convincing combination of internal criticism and sociological contextualization is extremely difficult to achieve. In the field of American studies for instance, Mark McGurl's book *The Program Era* offers an extremely powerful account of the forces that have reshaped the literary field since the end of the Second World War, and while he is a fantastic reader, you still feel that the strength of his sociological argument really harms some of his textual analysis, in the sense that he will read every novel as in some sense a campus novel or at the very least an allegory of the creative writing workshop. I just finished writing a review of another very brilliant book, Alexander Manshel's *Writing Backwards*, which analyzes the rise of historical fiction as the most celebrated and prized form of American literature in the last four decades. Now Manshel's readings are brilliant, but even a fantastic reader like him begins to produce unconvincing analyses when he stretches his argument too far in his final chapter, where he coins the genre

4 Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), vii.

5 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4-5.

6 Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffery Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust* (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 3.

of the so-called recent historical novel. So it's hard! There is also of course something to the fact that a long-form monograph forces you to sustain an argument beyond breaking point. In that sense I'm probably lucky that I was socialized in a system that for better or worse prioritizes article-length publications. I never felt forced to develop a theory I needed to sustain for, say, two or three hundred pages. If my work is sensitive to what actually happens in the texts I analyze, the fact that I have had to prioritize article publications definitely helps me remain flexible in the approaches I take.

Jiang: You make an interesting and surprising connection between the finitude of literary criticism and different forms of publication of literary scholarship, which I never realized before. I think you have a point. In your reading of Teju Cole's *Open City*, I find it quite interesting that, on the one hand, you pointed out that "aesthetic experiences fails to generate the intercultural associations that literary cosmopolitanism claims it can provide," and on the other hand, you wrote that "only the aesthetic or the literary can make apprehensible" a largely "virtual, non-dramatic, non-evental sense of unease" connected to the aforementioned fail.[7] I think it might be the reason why you keep working on the affect of literary form. Could you elaborate more on this?

Vermeulen: Since I first read it, *Open City* has been a consistently irritating and provocative novel for me. It is very attractive in its melancholy mood, its many cultural, musical, and literary references, and its depiction of New York. At the same time, it's quite clear to me that *as a novel*, it's not super successful. Cole to me is not really a great novelist, and his second novel, *Tremor*, which was published in 2023, confirms this sense. While it's very interesting in its range of references and formal experiments, it simply doesn't cohere like a novel. So when I started to write about *Open City* I wanted to come to terms with that. And since I published my first article on Cole, it seems like everybody has felt this need to write about *Open City*, making it still my most cited article. And I still stand by my earlier interpretation, that the novel is much less a celebration of the powers of literature than a critique of an exaggerated belief in the ethical power of literature to forge a kind of cosmopolitan connection across cultural borders. But as your question suggests, in that way I am of course still saying that literature is some kind of special ethically salient thing in that it has the power to self-reflexively critique its own ethical impulses, which might be giving it too much credit! This is the part of my earlier interpretation that I'm no longer really convinced of. When I read Cole's more recent novel,

7 Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 95-99.

the sustained ambiguity of the first novel has gone. It is clearly a novel that remains blind to its own weaknesses (more specifically, to the privilege of the narrator, who is a clear stand-in for the author). So feeding that back into *Open City*, I'm really no longer sure that that novel is a carefully crafted self-reflexive self-critique. To put this differently, I'm no longer sure that Cole is as intelligent as I gave him credit for. But what I do remain committed to is believing that the novel, and especially in the case of *Open City*, is smarter than both its protagonist and its author—if that makes sense!

I follow Timothy Bewes's idea that the novel *as such* is form of thinking, irrespective of what the author or reader thinks. I am aware that this sounds rather mystical, but for me it's one of the things that makes it rewarding to really try and follow a novel in the direction it takes you (which also means: writing about it; I don't think that *as a reader*, it is possible to push a novel that far, at least I can't, I am much too relaxed and uncritical a reader for that). It is an experience I've had several times, most recently when I was reading Hernan Diaz's novel *Trust*. Diaz is a very, very good novelist, unlike Cole, I would say, but when I read interviews with Diaz in which he talked about his novel, he made it sound like a very bland liberal novel in which the powers of literature can undo the violence of history by recovering lost voices. And when I then read the novel, it struck me that the novel is simply much smarter and more ambiguous and more complicated than even the author thinks—which is the main reason I find it rewarding to write about it!

Jiang: A novel is smarter than both its protagonist and its author. I like your phrasing especially because I know when you say it, you are not simply celebrating the power of literature to "undo the violence of history"; indeed, you want to remind me that literature is really unable to do that. Yet, as you convince me, as a good reader, maybe especially as a literary critic, one can still take a novel as a good form of thinking. As for the case of Teju Cole, what is relevant is the way in which you use the term "cosmopolitanism." I think you are always willing to endorse the universalism of cosmopolitanism, which is, in your words, "increasingly rooted in a commitment to human rights."[8] Yet you highlighted "the insufficiency" of a merely aesthetic cosmopolitanism at the same time. How could we, readers, understand the tension here better?

Vermeulen: I continue to struggle with this issue. It's simply the case that one of the best public defenses of the value of literature that we have is the contribution it can make to fostering empathy and furthering justice, including human rights.

8 Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel*, 85.

At the same time, of course, literary scholarship has for a long time indicated the limits of literature's capacity to foster empathy and has instead emphasized the ways in which it can confront us with an otherness that simply is not available for empathetic connection. When I was a master's student over twenty years ago, these two positions, one defending literature for its empathy-enhancing potential, the other deconstructing those claims and insisting on the radical otherness of literary form, were really diametrically opposed poles of the debate—one side humanist, the other deconstructionist. But I don't think they are any longer. A conference I co-organized about literature and ethics in the summer of 2024 in Stockholm set out to update that old opposition between empathy and otherness, but somewhat to my surprise, the debates took a very different turn and it seemed to me that, especially for younger scholars, that opposition doesn't really make much sense anymore. Today, it makes more sense to say that literature can enhance empathy, can do cosmopolitan work, can help people imagine each other's fates, while at the same time underlining that such empathy is never enough, that it never automatically translates into better world. So as long as we factor in the insufficiency of a merely emotional connection, I'm much more comfortable now defending literature in terms of the affective and empathetic work it can do.

Jiang: That's a good point. Let's turn to linguistic issues of world literature. As a professor specializing in American literature and world literature, it is absolutely fair that you always stay in the field of anglophone world literature. Still, I would like to ask whether you take that as a problem?

Vermeulen: Having grown up in a bilingual country at the periphery of the world literary system, issues of translation and multilingualism have of course always come very naturally to me. So while I mostly work on American literature and am very interested in the American literary field, I never address those fields as an insider, as someone who can hope to belong to that field (I have also not spent very much time in the States, I really approach them as an outside observer). At the same time, I do actually believe that because anglophone publishing and anglophone institutions are so central to the circulation of world literature, it is not impossible to develop a worldly perspective through a focus on the US. Of course, as in my response to the previous question, it's crucial to remain aware of your own limitations. To overcome those, world literature needs to necessarily be a collective endeavor, in which different kinds of linguistic expertise and different positionalities come together. But once you factor in such an awareness of multilingualism and plurality, focusing on American literature or the American literary field becomes a surprisingly worldly affair. In the book I'm writing now I'm mak-

ing a case that in order to understand twenty-first-century American literature, it's absolutely crucial to factor in the work of writers like Sebald, Bolaño, Ferrante, or Knausgaard, or the role of independent publishers translating exciting global work. And while there is this traditional image that the American literary system does not translate a lot of foreign literature into English, it seems increasingly clear that that perception is caused by the vastness of that system and that there is an increasingly vibrant translation culture, especially through independent publishers. There is a lot of exciting Latin American and Asian literature that is available in English even while it remains unavailable in European languages, for instance. Two decades ago, the idea of studying American literature as world literature was a fashionable idea, in the work of Wai Chee Dimock, for instance. In a sense my perspective is much more that of an outsider studying world literature as American literature, however perverse that sounds, but I do believe that we can rarely skip the role of American institutions when we try to understand world literary dynamics. All of that with the awareness, of course, that you very much need the expertise of other scholars to fill out the many, many blind spots that such a perspective leaves.

Jiang: I agree with your idea that until now we can rarely skip the role of American institutions when we try to understand world literary dynamics. However, specializing in anglophone world literature, you are still a Flemish comparatist. Would you like to recommend some Flemish writers and poets to our readers?

Vermeulen: I am hardly a specialist in Flemish and Dutch literature as I have never studied those literatures, nor am I a big reader of them; most of what I read in Dutch is translated literature. Among the major and most famous writers, I am a big fan of Gerard Reve, a postwar writer whose most famous work is called *The Evenings*, which describes the malaise of life after the war in a kind of deadpan humorous way. And I can really recommend Hugo Claus' *The Sorrow of Belgium*, which is in many ways the great Belgian novel dealing with Catholicism, nationalism, and the far from the heroic role that Flemish nationalism played during the Second World War. Among contemporary writers, I admire the work of Charlotte Van Den Broeck, which has been translated into English. She's written great nonfiction books about failed architects and about our obsession with the Tasmanian tiger. But again, I am a fan, not a specialist.

Jiang: Thanks. Let's return to the issue of anglophone world literature. One of your papers, "The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent Publishing and the World Literary Vernacular," challenges the simple "equation of commercialization, devernacularization, Americanization, and aesthetic diminish-

ment on both theoretical and empirical grounds."[9] And, in remarking on Emily Apter's proposal for a new comparative literature centering upon "the Untranslatable," you pointed out that "it undervalues the power of contemporary capital to convert singularities into marketable differences."[10] Would please you elaborate more on the relation between "Americanization" and these "marketable differences"? I find it interesting.

Vermeulen: For me, this is essentially a trade-off one has to make when one considers the place of global English in the world literary system. It is clear that you lose something by circulating and receiving text in English translation. Especially vernacular detail threatens to disappear. And I am sympathetic to scholars and readers who emphasize the loss involved in the domination of global English. At the same time, I believe that as readers or as teachers and researchers we simply cannot afford to look only at the losses involved. The spread of English also makes available a whole international library of texts to readers who could not otherwise dream of even accessing those texts written in languages they don't understand. So for me, the incredible reach of global English to a large extent compensates for the undeniable aesthetic diminishment involved. Americanization is real, and it is a mixed blessing, but it is not the end of literature; it is, if anything, perhaps the main future of it. What I mean by "marketable differences" is that even postures of resistance, uncompromising opposition to Americanization or to global English are themselves very much part of the system they oppose. So for me, as there is no real outside to this large world-literary system, the more interesting question becomes how to best and most productively inhabit that system in a way that makes the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Jiang: Again, that's a good point. You led the research project "Harlem, Capital of World Literature? James Baldwin's Posthumous Career and the Dynamics of World literature," which ran from 2021 to 2025. How does this fit in your interest into world literature?

Vermeulen: This project really ties in with my interest in processes of valuation in the ways that some forms of writing are endowed with world literary value and others are not. It also resonates of course with my interest in the work of Baldwin, who I think is a really fascinating writer. My intuition was that the return of Bald-

9 Pieter Vermeulen and Amélie Hurkens, "The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent publishing and the World Literary Vernacular," *Interventions*, 22:3, 435.

10 Pieter Vermeulen, "On World Literary Reading: Literature, the Market, and the Antinomies of Mobility," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, eds. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 80.

win to prominence in the literary domain but also in the broader culture and especially in political and online discourses was a perfect case study to investigate what practices and discourses participated in his return to world literary prominence, after he had really been a marginal figure for several decades. The doctoral researcher who worked on the project was able to discover very fascinating material, which really shows the extent to which literary value is entangled with ethical, political, and other kinds of value. But that is not the whole story, as we also noticed that there are still significant differences between the political Baldwin who we see being circulated on social media and the Baldwin we encounter in bookstores. Baldwin the activist and essayist is a somewhat different entity from Baldwin the queer novelist. Another takeaway from this research was the role that contingency, personal relationships between authors and translators or publishers, and occasional encounters play in the world literary circulation of even a very prominent writer like Baldwin. It is very tempting to have recourse to grand sociological theories to explain the dynamics of world literature, and while such large theories are obviously necessary for developing a general picture, the world of literature, even world literature, is sufficiently small for minor events, coincidences, and chance meetings to play a large role in shaping that world. Which of course means we need detailed historical and archival work and not just sociological reflection or literary analysis to really understand what makes literature into world literature.

Jiang: I believe so too. Then we have our final question. Let's say if there is a term that makes people more dizzying than "world literature," it is "Anthropocene." Prof. Theo D'haen suggests the possibility of integrating these two terms into another term, "planetary."[11] Would you take the same view? If so, how could you mediate the very longue durée of the Anthropocene and the presentism of world literature research?

Vermeulen: I have now been working on the notion of the Anthropocene for almost a decade. What remains very useful in that term for me is that it somewhat forces you to draw connections between the universal and the particular, between the general and the unique. It is a concept that almost automatically invites an interdisciplinary dialogue, a dialogue in which I firmly believe that literature can play a part but in which you know it cannot do all the work by itself. And as your question suggests, one of the productive aspects of the notion of the Anthropocene is that it forces you to think about time and history and temporality in more expansive terms, that it reminds you that not even the present can fully be taken for granted,

11 Theo D'haen, *A History of World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 218-37.

as there is a whole world out there, both spatially and temporally. As for "the planetary," I'm fully convinced that that term can do very similar work. With impossibly large terms like "world" and "Anthropocene" and "planetary," the key issue for me is not whether they adequately name a particular reality. As we are talking about extremely extended realities, those realities cannot possibly be named adequately by one simple word. I consider these terms as what I call *necessary misnomers*, terms that cannot possibly fit the larger reality that they refer to, but can, precisely because they *don't* fully fit, serve as a catalyst for debates, debate that is more important in itself than finding an answer that will never arrive. In a sense, those terms do what I also believe literature can do, that is, continue to generate questions and debates that are almost by definition inexhaustible.

Jiang: If I understand you correctly, "world literature" is also a "necessary misnomer," which is a catalyst for keeping our minds running. As usual, the way in which you dealt with all these issues I have raised today is very productive, and I myself learned a lot from it. Again, thank you very much!

Authors' Profiles:

Pieter Vermeulen is a professor of American and comparative literature at the University of Leuven who mainly works in the fields of contemporary literature, world literature, and environmental humanities. He is the co-editor of ten volumes, most recently on the methods and forms of world literature as in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets* (2016), and he is also a member of the editorial board of *Journal of World Literature* (2019-). He is the author of three books, *Geoffrey Hartman: Romanticism after the Holocaust* (2012), *Literature and the Anthropocene* (2020), and *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (2015).

Jiang Haitao is a PhD candidate at the School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University. His current research interests include world literature studies and the intellectual and academic history of comparative literature. E-mail: h.t.jiang@foxmail.com