

Who Worlds the Literature? Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and Globalization

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Abstract Some theorists claim that today's global world antiquates national literatures in the same way as did Goethe and Marx with their idea of *Weltliteratur* more than a century and a half ago. I contest this claim, showing, first, that Marx was ambivalent with regard to the formation of the world market, anticipating its compartmentalizing consequences. Second, I argue that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, far from being opposed to national literature, which in the Germany of the time was still in the process of self-finding, has to be regarded as an attempt to consolidate national literature against the homogenizing pressure of a world rapidly and superficially uniting. Goethe was resolutely against the brothers Schlegel's national exclusionism, but he was equally firmly against the gaudy flux, overall dilettantism, and bad taste of the culture emerging from the commercial and communicational uniting of the world. His *Weltliteratur* was conceived as an ongoing dialogue between distinguished national literatures from which German literature, which at the time was the weakest among them, was expected to benefit the most. It aimed at a consolidation of his disturbed personal and the shaky German self at the time and gradually turned into an imperial gesture.

Key words Goethe; *Weltliteratur*; globalization

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Comparative Literature as the Promoter of Globalization

If at the time of its establishment Goethe's *Weltliteratur* was indeed a "literary-political concept" (Günther 104), the same holds even more for its contemporary interpretations and appropriations.¹ We usually see them adapting the idea, in a more or less inconsiderate manner, to new political investments and compensatory reconfigurations. In an essay which caused a considerable stir in the academic enclave of comparative literature, Franco Moretti (2000: 54) took as a point of departure Goethe's famous remark to his secretary Eckermann of January 31, 1827 that national literature no longer meant a great deal (*will jetzt nicht viel sagen*) and that the epoch of world literature had arrived (*die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit*). Goethe's views (1987: 250)² were endorsed, as it were, some twenty years later by Marx's and Engels' adoption of the concept in terms of the emerging world market: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness (*Beschränktheit*) become more and more impossible, and from many national and local literatures, there arises a world literature (*bildet sich eine Weltliteratur*)" (Marx and Engels 1952: L, 421, Marx and Engels 1974: IV, 466). Taking these two sentences to be proclaiming more or less the same thing, namely the final revelation of literature in the shape of a "planetary system," Moretti puts forth the thesis that the discipline of comparative literature, having long been restricted to a very narrow international scope, "has not lived up to these beginnings" (2000: 54). It is not just that its focus has remained limited mostly to Western Europe and that it has failed to give equal consideration to everything published as literature throughout world, rather the principal shortcoming is that it has not addressed the *problem* or approached its object through an appropriate methodology. Citing Max Weber's maxim that "A new 'science' emerges where a new problem is pursued by a new method," Moretti proposes a return to Goethe's and Marx's vision of *Weltliteratur* as a systemic whole with closely interdependent constituents.

As is often the case when past thinkers are brought into play so as to legitimize present methodological revolutions, and Moretti is determined to introduce a completely new critical method to the field (2000: 55), they tend to be read one-sidedly and narrow-mindedly. Long ago, it was precisely Marx and Engels who rendered the narrow-minded treatment literature antiquated. Nevertheless, given that Moretti's new method openly dismisses so-called close reading as a technique that pertains only to canonical literary texts, the unilateral interpretation

of Goethe's views might come as no surprise. According to Moretti, "if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, world literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn't!) close reading will not do it" (2000: 57). As there is however always a point at which an examination of the texts of world literature must employ a close reading requiring linguistic competence, Moretti leaves this task to "the specialist of the national literature" (66). Although he considers all texts to belong to national and world literature simultaneously, there is an asymmetrical division of labor between them: "[Y]ou become a comparatist for a very simple reason: *because you are convinced that that viewpoint is better*. It has greater explanatory power; it's conceptually more elegant; it avoids that ugly 'one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness'" (68). He therefore supports and propagates distant reading in his more recent book *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (1) as well. But what is a comparative literature that, in order to create "authoritative totalizing patterns" (Spivak 108), leaves informed close reading to national literary scholars on the periphery (i.e. beyond the great Western languages that comparatist is expected to understand) and therefore depends on "untested statements by small groups of people treated as native informants" (108)? What is comparative literature whose fundamental division of labor amounts to the slogan "the others provide information while we know the whole world" (108)? What else can such comparative literature be but precisely a *one-sided and narrow-minded* discipline practiced by the scholars who are convinced they are in possession of the "better viewpoint"? If, in the envisioned division of labor, it creates the global methodological design as a technique of distant reading in order to "dominate the literary world system" (Apter 49) and relegates the dominated modest and restricted jobs to others, then ultimately it can be nothing other than "nationalism, U.S. nationalism masquerading as globalism" (Spivak 108).³

Goethe's and Marx's ideas of world literature, if we take a *closer* look at them, are deeply resilient to their deployment for such purpose. First of all, the very merging of these two figures into a homogeneous thesis of a substantially new world order is misguided. For Marx, world literature was an unavoidable corollary of the formation of the world market and as such an *instrument of the expanding bourgeois capital* which destroys national industries, economies and cultural self-sufficiency. Unlike Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, Marx's concept was directed against the nation-states by opposing a statist nationalism that was unknown to Goethe. But even though Marx was certainly critical of nationalism, associating it with the manipulative politics of nation-states, his stance on cosmopolitan world literature, as an instrument of the bourgeois suspension of all differences, was far from being

clearly affirmative (Cheng 28). The homogenizing pressure of this cosmopolitanism spawned the proliferation of nationalisms (as well as national philologies) in the second half of the nineteenth century and it is pretty obvious that today's globalization produces exactly the same effect. As a number of scholars who resisted the flattening of distinct literary traditions into a single "systemic rhythm" of world literature have noted, this legacy of the expanding cosmopolitanism, as disconcertingly manifested in today's global world, might be a more appropriate point of departure for the establishment of analogies between Marx's time and ours. One of the lessons that might be drawn from Marx's characteristic ambivalence regarding "globalization" is that the annihilating fragmentation follows the triumphant integration of the world like a shadow. Not long ago Derrida was warning that the "spectre haunting Europe" is a "dispersal into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable" (Derrida39). Such an unfortunate self-enclosure in untranslatability is, however, a direct response to the celebrated imperative of universal translatability.

As John Pizer (2006: 20) for example noticed, economic globalization disrespects popular ethnic sentiments, blindly trusting that rational politics can balance the interests of all parties. Yet, on the contrary, tribal solidarities fiercely react to the threat of such a globalized economy and the concomitant loss of distinct national identities by clinging to them with ever-greater tenacity. "Globalization puts us in a position to reflect on inequality all the time. [...] Inequality is not on the way out," remarks Haun Saussy (28). "The many states [...] fold [...] onto the one global economy; but the single economy divides up what it unites." This systemic misbalance might be the reason that the harsh critique of "nationalist ideologies and their imperial projections" in recent academic practice "has turned out to coexist quite comfortably with a continuing nationalism" (Damrosch 285). Nationalism is not an outdated or retrograde phenomenon to be downplayed, neglected and hushed up. Cosmopolitanism that argues in these terms is "all the more national for being European, all the more European for being trans-European and international; no one is more cosmopolitan and authentically universal than the one, than this 'we'" (Derrida48), no one is more particular than a 'we' that "specialize[s] in the sense of the universal" (74). Therefore, "it is the task of our transnational, diasporic, global times to rethink the national paradigm. On the other hand, it is imperative to understand the continued relevance of the nation-state form to the still unfinished project of decolonization" (Coopan 37). According to Stephen Greenblatt (1), the bodies of the deceased national identities refused to stay buried

and violently returned onto the scene of the contemporary world. Thus “mobility studies,” which were set in motion by the persistent colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination and métissage caused by globalization, “need to account as well for the fact that cultures are experienced again and again [...] as fixed, inevitable, and strangely enduring” (16).

However, contrary to Marx’s ambivalent stance on such a monolithic shaping of the world, Moretti, in a kind of better-knowing Marxism rather remote from the “father’s” reflectively undecided and cautious attitude (not to mention Derrida’s reading of Marx, with which both he and Pascale Casanova are quite unfamiliar), does not give the slightest account of these disturbing effects of globalization. Rather it places comparative literature, resolutely and unconcernedly, *at the service of its affirmation*. Like Casanova, who “wholly subscribes” to his clear-cut power opposition (ignorant of Foucault’s revision because it is shaped à la Bourdieu), he pretends to be in full possession of the analytical tool of the “literary system.” As opposed to him (her), all other literary agents, including the “specialist in national literature,” are doomed to blindness for this system’s surreptitious operations. The non-reflected legacy of the American and French Revolution seem to be marching hand in hand here. It is only an informed Marxist comparatist who, being properly instructed in world-system theory, is in a position to dismantle this all-pervading human astigmatism (Casanova 80, 82; Moretti 2000: 66). For Moretti and Casanova, the putatively discarded discipline of comparative literature, now refashioned into a revolutionary world literature, celebrates its heyday.

Goethe’s Detachment from Globalization

If we now turn to Goethe, who is Moretti’s second chosen foothold for the justification of his “literary world systems theory,” he is completely unambiguous with regard to the accelerated economic, traffic and communicational uniting of the world of his time. Far from offering praise, he is *deeply concerned* by it and thus develops a consistent *defensive strategy* against this abundance of superficial impressions. The result of “all possible facilities of communication,” he writes for instance to Zelter on June 6, 1825, is a generalization of a terribly mediocre culture (WA IV 39: 216).⁴ Already a quarter of a century before, in the Introduction to the first issue of the journal *Propyläen* (1798), he cautioned the young writer not to get lost in the gaudy flux of a world trivialized in such a manner. Far from being merely liberating (from the constraints of local cultures), the enormous variety of world literature is simultaneously overwhelming and dangerous. One cannot feel at home in every part of the world and every century and hence one

often falls prey to what seems natural in its respective context (letter to Friedrich von Müller on January 27, 1830; 1987: 287–288). Yet one should beware of such easy familiarizing projections, which are the usual business of the mob bereft of proper insight. Goethe interprets such a swift adoption of the foreign that unconcernedly accommodates its foreignness to one's petty domestic universe as vulgar cosmopolitanism, from which he clearly distances himself. His approach is similar to Plato's treatment of Athenian democracy in Chapter VIII of the *Republic* (562d–563d), in which he speaks of a chaotic reign of selfish individuals who do anything they please. Only through a heightened attentiveness for other cultures can a writer resist the overall dilettantism of the contemporary literary market that, because of the superficial and dispersive everyday habits of literary consumers, requires from literature nothing more than swift and powerful effects (1987: 173–175). Indifferent as listeners and readers usually are, writes Goethe (302–303) again in one of his late notes characterized by resignation and animosity to the “crowd,” they prefer to hear and read always the same thing, expecting the writer to treat them as one would a maid (*Frauenzimmer*), telling them only what they would like to hear.

Contrary to Moretti's and Casanova's claim, the restrictive rules of the emerging literary market tame and impede the emancipating nature of world literature. Whereas in ancient times such mechanical repetition was regarded as a rare illness, in modern times it instead became endemic and epidemic (304). But contrary to mere imitators who unquestioningly consent to the low taste of the ignorant crowd, the true artist is required to uncompromisingly adhere to the strategic task of a proper representation of nature beyond what just comes as natural, i.e., he must undertake meticulous comparative study of world-wide cultures and discover a deep unity beneath their confusing diversity. In short, a necessary departure from oneself toward the other must not amount to an all too easy self-abandonment but on the contrary, *improved self-acquisition on a higher level*. If one is too devoted to the admirable other, one loses one's own characteristic national nature (1987: 282), which is the only basis for the international recognition of a particular literature. Each product has first to display (*aufstecken*) its national symbol (*Nationalkokarde*) clearly, whereupon it will be accepted benevolently into the privileged circle of world literature (letter to Reinhard, June 18, 1829; 1987: 278). The final goal of Goethe's world literature is therefore a tireless *Selbststeigerung* or self-propelling. “You have to incessantly change, renew, rejuvenate yourself,” he confesses to Müller on April 24, 1830, aged no less than 80, “in order not to ossify” (291). Continuously at risk of falling victim either to

the aggressive pressure of worldwide uniformity or to the static provincial taste of his compatriots, a world writer, as Goethe understands him, bears responsibility to withstand and reject both. Always counteracting both inconsiderate all-equalizing cosmopolitanism and petty local nationalism, he is to be unremitting in his never-ending self-formation.

Faced with the worldwide vulgarization of literary taste, Goethe reacts to it by defending the exclusive right of the creative writer to speak in the name of the whole of humankind/humanity (*die ganze Menschheit*) against the grotesque distortion of its universal human substance (*das allgemein Menschliche*) carried out in the name of non-reflected elementary habits. Such a writer must engage humanity in its entirety, must go beyond his immediate neighbor who provides him the ready security of “house piety” if he wants to embrace the true amplitude of “world piety” (FA I 10: 514). In a letter to Carlyle from July 20, 1827 Goethe states that the endeavor of the best poets of all nations has for some time been concerned with that which is universally human while trying to transcend the selfishness and appease the bellicosity of earthly human creatures. It is exactly this uncompromising universality that in world literature shines and shimmers through the particular (1987: 265). Yet under the pressure of the mob that expects everything to fit its false concepts and prejudices and thus does untold harm (*großes Unheil*) to humanity, true works of art remain unrecognized and unacknowledged (1987: 303). Threatened by the “flood” of market-influenced literature as if it were about to swallow up his delineated elitist claim, towards the end of his life Goethe bitterly complained to Eckermann that barbarous times had come (March 22, 1831; 1987: 297). He was literally overwhelmed by that insight, helplessly acting out of the “poisonous knowledge” induced by it. New barbarians misapprehend true art as that which is exemplary (*Vortreffliche*) for humankind, i.e., precisely that to which he was at pains to remain loyal throughout his literary career (letter to Zelter on the same day; 1987: 297). If we take the tripartite process of a writer’s development outlined in his earlier essay *Simple Imitation of Nature, Manner, Style* from 1789 (BA 19: 77–82) as a criterion, Goethe obviously placed himself, in opposition to his German contemporaries, at the highest level of “style.” This level renders the writer capable of capturing the unique essence of the object represented unlike pure imitators, who simply reproduce its externally visible surface.

Getting Out of the Crowd: Goethe’s Elitist Cosmopolitanism

As a great admirer of ancient Greek culture, Goethe in the presented deeply frustrated considerations, deliberately or not, draws on the tradition of Greekelitist

cosmopolitanism directed against the narrow-minded plebs of compatriots. Such cosmopolitanism declared readiness to open the broadest possible dialogue among equals only on the condition that its distinguished participants are completely freed beforehand from the selfish interests of their inferior fellow citizens. The latter have to be kept at bay, as they care solely about enjoying rights and pleasures at the cost of others. Used to subordination, they are disqualified in advance from the intellectually free behavior of truly considering the otherness of the other and caring equally about his or her rights and pleasures (Arendt 41–45). Since one must achieve such freedom of thought through engaging bright-mindedness and courage, the Greeks reserve it for enlightened individuals, i.e., *agencies*, whereas the benighted crowd, i.e., *enablers* expected to provide through their persistent work all the necessary prerequisites for this remarkable achievement, is sentenced to compliance and delivered to its restricted habits. *Agencies are those who think and act, enablers those who work and produce.* The free democratic world, the Greek cosmopolitan argument goes, can be created solely through the well-balanced exchange of thoughts between agencies, who therefore expect their truth to be universally valid.

However, being established on the disagreement between two parties who, although seemingly speaking the same language, do not understand the same thing in what the other is saying (Rancière 1999: 10), the truth of the political elite can never gain universal validity. Its terms systematically prevent the subaltern from becoming legible by allocating these “dissimilar items” to the “pockets of disability,” “zones of indeterminacy” and “regimes of confinement” and by depriving them of all symbolic profits of the citizen status. In Greek democracy as well as in its neoliberal descendants, caesura separates agencies from enablers, the entitled “subject of” from the outlawed “subject to.” Enablers are sentenced to a subliminal, silent, and animal existence. The boomerang effect of such a hideous incarceration is a “systemic crisis” of democracy, “an ongoing activity of precariousness” within its established institutions, modes, and relationships (Berlant 10), the spreading of the fear into its grammar, the spectralization of its events, and the disaggregation of its political aggregate. This is why, the efforts of the agencies to impose their rule upon the enablers notwithstanding, the stubbornly reemerging split between them hinders the establishment of a harmonious democracy.

Therefore, when he founded his Academy as an isolated space of intellectual freedom in opposition to the false freedom of the polis that inflicts the opinion of the agora upon all citizens, Plato obviously realized the delineated restricted nature of the public truth. This insight into the limits of democracy induced his resolute

refusal of its universal claim that entitles everybody to partake in the business of rule. In his view, such an unnatural attitude was derived from the traumatic absence of the “divine shepherd,” the only authority naturally entitled to take care of the human flock. All the evils of democracy commence with the separation of the *human* principle of government from the *natural* law of kinship as well as the establishment of this principle on the elimination of the “family father.” Illegitimately usurping the natural rule of the “murdered shepherd” (Lévy 2002), democratic rulers falsify, invert and perturb his order. Instead of being based on the principle of *arkhé*, which lets the firstborn and the highborn rule, the democratic entitlement is based on the *anarchic* principle of the drawing of lots. Democracy is ruled by chance or chaos, an unbearable condition that it owes to the patricide. This crime lets the human orphans wander in the “empire of the void” whose “empty center” (Lefort 2000) persistently lures them into taking pleasure in its seizure, representation and dissemination, and they do not hesitate to disrespectfully enjoy this pleasure (Rancière 2006: 30–41).

However, through the founding of Academy, Plato opposed Athenian democracy by redeploying its own *maneuver of self-exemption from the deluded dominant opinion in the name of the forgotten divine truth*. He reintroduced this self-redeeming cosmopolitan maneuver because the shepherd’s archaic truth was in his opinion subjected to democratic perversion into the human anarchic truth. While the democratic government claimed to be the only authentic representative of God, beneath this appearance he discerned the egotistical individual with its quick and petty pleasures. Yet considering that Plato took recourse to the same maneuver of invoking the divine truth against the truth of blinded fellow citizens, must not the same critique, to which he exposed the Athenian democracy, necessarily undermine his own argument too? To counteract the selfishness of democratic individuals, Plato likewise holds on to the eliminated pastor, taking him as “the reference point by which an opposition between good government and democratic government is established” (Rancière 2006: 35). For Plato, we can rescue ourselves from the perils and crimes of democracy only by distancing ourselves from its anarchic multitude, turning back toward the lost family father, his golden law of kinship and the sheep’s (i.e. our) bond to him. Looking after both the whole flock and each its member, He alone neatly harmonizes the One with the multiple — and precisely this uniting is required of a good government. Confronted with Plato’s thesis based on such redoubling of the opponent’s argument, one can hardly resist the impression that it relies on the same human misappropriation of the divine truth that it fiercely condemns on its behalf.

I propose to take this as a welcome warning against Goethe's elitist cosmopolitanism. Yet an outright rejection of it, skipping the much-needed explanation for why Plato's argument stubbornly resurfaces in humankind's history, ultimately in Goethe's idea of world literature itself, would be of very little help. Whence this obstinate holding on to the (imagined) shepherd against his self-appointed false representatives, i.e., betrayers (Rancière 2006: 34–5) which in its turn runs the risk of repeating and being blamed for the same betrayal? We will not eliminate very influential ideological formations emerging from such "misplaced prejudices" by setting up a truth putatively superior to their blinded assertions. As no cosmopolitanism hitherto could pass judgments without recourse to a legitimating "higher truth," it could not but redouble nationalism's argument. Instead of raising absolute claims to the universal truth, it seems therefore advisable to uncover dissensual judgments underneath consensual prejudices (in Arendt's terms), or politics underneath the police (in Rancière's terms). "In the course of this replacement it is necessary to trace back these prejudices to the judgments inherent to them and to affiliate these judgments for their part to the underlying experiences which once gave rise to them" (Arendt 79).

The Acting Out of the Traumatic Experience

Taking up such an attitude to Goethe's elitist cosmopolitanism, in what follows I will affiliate it with the traumatic constellation of forces he had to cope with. Uncovering such a constellation as the mobilizer of Goethe's cosmopolitanism, I will not deny the legitimacy of the judgment generated by it, yet simultaneously, from the perspective it tried to obliterate, expose its claim to the universal truth as a prejudice. Hence the analytical objective is not to dispose with prejudices altogether because of their failure to realize the universal truth. The aim is instead to lay bare the claim of these prejudices to the status of universal truths as a pretension *unsuitable for the dissensus constitutive of democracy*. Democracy is not an accomplishable *state order* — which is precisely the main cosmopolitan *prejudice* to be dismantled — but rather an interminable *practice* of the incalculable human many carried out in the form of *judgments*. Provoked by the dissemination of various "zones of indeterminacy" into the established social aggregate, these judgments interrogate the political line separating "one life from the other" (Rancière 2004b: 303), life from inanimate matter (Hägglund 272–76) and persons from things (Esposito 209). Rather than an ultimate unification of this incalculable human many, the task of democracy is raising awareness of the violence inherent to such therapeutic cosmopolitan undertakings. In an attempt to remedy human

traumas finally, they give rise to more devastating traumatic experiences.

Before we return to Goethe by following this line of argument, let us recall that another important predecessor of his “Greek” cosmopolitanism alongside Plato, i. e. Voltaire, engaged the same nostalgic recourse to the forgotten divine truth so as to direct it against the dominant opinion of blinded compatriots. Each of these prominent intellectual figures operated as the author of a trauma narrative in their own right. In establishing his international Republic of Letters, Voltaire equally attempted to outmaneuver his ignorant aristocratic compatriots. Blindly attached to their inert and selfish habits as they were, they were suddenly exposed to critical observation by an international circle of intellectually mobile agencies. The latter conducted an emancipating dialogue with each other by distilling from it their growingly encompassing, convincing, and eventually binding truth. Once publicly recognized, however, Voltaire’s remedial narrative transformed the elitist *exemption* from its monarchic surroundings into the international *expansion* of the “republican” truth. Goethe’s trauma narrative undertakes the same cosmopolitan recalibration and sophistication of the local public truth, yet now distanced itself from the “idyllic,” i.e., the parochial and self-enclosed type of petty bourgeois readership (1987: 298) which, to Goethe’s deepest disgust, increasingly took command of the literary market of the time. To defend himself from this flood, in *The Epochs of Social Formation* (1831) he takes recourse to the unity of all educated circles across the globe. His intention is to write for this kind of readership.

Regarding a somewhat frustrated late remark, it makes a huge difference whether one reads instinctively for pleasure and reanimation (*Genuß und Belebung*) or reflexively for insight and instruction (*Erkenntnis und Belehrung*) (1987: 308), even if readers preferring the latter, profound benefit of literature are extremely rare. But only those who are able to enjoy this benefit can claim to be reading with regard to what is universally human (as one is obliged to read world literature) rather than reading in the leisurely manner of the most deluded part of humanity (as one normally reads trivial literature). Such capable (*tüchtige*) people who really care about “the true progress of humanity” by striving to shed their narrow intellectual skin are certainly few and far between, but in their rarity they are nevertheless scattered all over the world. Step by step, the initial distinction between the true (or world) and the false (national or trivial international) works, writers and readers turns into a harsh opposition. Along with its international position, Goethe’s literary oeuvre consolidates its pretensions to universality.

Ultimately, Goethe does not hesitate to introduce a *clear-cut division to literature*, placing the benighted majority of its agents on one side, and the select

minority on the other: "Yet the route they take, the pace they keep is not everyone's concern." Their sublime task is to rescue the world from descending into narrow-mindedness or barbarity. They belong to the "quiet, almost chastened church" (*eine stille, fast gedrückte Kirche*) of the serious-minded (*die Ernsten*) who, because it would be futile (*vergebens*) to oppose the wide current of the day (*die breite Tagesfluth*), must nonetheless "steadfastly (*standhaft*) try to maintain their position till the flow (*die Strömung*) has passed" (FA I 22: 866–67). Their solitary position, removed from the silly worldwide crowd orientated toward immediate consumption, is tantamount to "aesthetic autonomy." However, one might ask whether the aesthetically autonomous world literature, if it must be restricted to a "quiet church of the serious-minded," the initiated circle of agencies walled in against the masses of their enablers, really deserves the name of *world* literature. How encompassing can a literature that rests on the exclusion of those without whose persistent work it cannot possibly come into being be? In order to answer this question, one is well advised to recall the paradoxical character of the relation between agencies and enablers or freedom and coercion for that matter:

Wherever the few separated themselves from the many, they obviously became dependent on them, that is to say, in all those matters of coexistence which have to be really negotiated (*in allen Fragen des Miteinander-Lebens, in denen wirklich gehandelt werden muss*). [...] This is why the realm of the freedom of the few is not only at pains to maintain itself against the realm of the political determined by the many, but is dependent on the many for its very existence; the simultaneous existence of the polis is existentially necessary for the existence of the academy. [...] [I]t becomes a necessity that opposes freedom on the one hand, and is its precondition on the other. (Arendt 2010: 58–59)

As Dana Goodman convincingly demonstrated, all the prerequisites for the emergence of Voltaire's Republic of Letters, i.e., all the political, economic, educational, technological and institutional support necessary for its establishment and functioning, were provided by the same French monarchy which was ferociously criticized by him (Goodman 90–183, 233–80). Yet if his literary republic denied religious, national, linguistic and cultural barriers, it expected the reunion of people to take place on a culturally elevated basis, which relied on extraordinary linguistic and educational competences, finely tuned manners, and the refined skills of polite conversation, and from which the inert crowd of compatriot-

enablers was necessarily excluded. Exemplified in the line from Plato through Voltaire to Goethe, the self-redeeming reintroduction of freedom on an elevated level thus unavoidably implies a reintroduction of the others' bondage on the lower levels. It seems as if compliant enablers doggedly accompany free agencies, inducing ever-new attempts on the part of the latter to purify their freedom from pollution.

Goethe's personal investment in the Platonic antidemocratic and discriminatory reasoning can hardly be overlooked. Besides his narrow-minded provincial audience and the worldwide rise of bad taste, he had to fight fierce battles against the misunderstanding of his nationally inflamed Romantic German contemporaries (Mandelkow 57–65). Against all these bitter disappointments, he found a welcome consolation in the reception of his work by some distinguished French and English Romanticists once Mme de Staël's influential book *De l'Allemagne* was published in England (1813) and France (1814).⁵ Using categories like double force, double light, play and floating, the French exile writer portrayed him as a protean, mobile, contradictory and ironic poet who in the presentation of his self and others tends to maneuver incessantly back and forth, establishing and destroying identities in the same move. A couple of years later, structuring his *West-Eastern Divan* (1819; expanded second edition 1827) in a deeply polyphonic way, Goethe readily recognized himself in her categories in order to distance himself from and defend himself against his inimical and provincial German milieu (Koch 187).

Far from holding the representatives of this milieu in high esteem, he constantly expressed the opinion they might be crushed in their intellectual misery by such impressive foreign talents like Shakespeare or Calderón. Each of the latter "is too rich and too powerful" to be taken even as the mirror of their self-identification. Shakespeare for example forces the rising German talents to reproduce him mechanically while they falsely believe to be producing themselves (1987: 289, 282). "How many excellent Germans have been ruined by him and Calderón!" In the same conversation with Eckerman conducted on December 25, 1825, Goethe highlights the grotesque effect of Shakespeare's plays on his compatriots, who put their potatoes into his silver dishes (1987: 228). The magnificent Calderón drives the young Schiller into madness, threatening to erode his humble virtues while the unprecedented Molière becomes desperately weak in German treatment, he remarks to his secretary on May 12, 1825 (1987: 226). No matter how much German novels and tragedies imitate Goldsmith, Fielding and Shakespeare, they nonetheless pollute and pervert their models (December 3, 1824;

223). No wonder Goethe warns Eckermann himself, in a conversation conducted at the beginning of their acquaintance (September 18, 1823), to beware of great undertakings and inventions of his own: they are almost destined to fail! One cannot expect a real sense for what is true and capable (*echter Sinn für das Wahre und Tüchtige*) in German petty circumstances, he tells his secretary on October 15, 1825. The masses who dominate them abhor whatever is truly great, tending to banish it from the world (227) (including Goethe himself, we might add, to elucidate his obvious bitterness). “For, we ordinary people (*kleine Menschen*) are not capable of retaining (*bewahren*, also in the sense of “making true”) in us the greatness of such things...” (May 12, 1825; 1987: 226)

This is a simulated modesty of course: Goethe surely (and of course rightly) did not perceive himself to be an ordinary man, at least not of the sort to which he thought the majority of his compatriots belonged. He recognized himself much more in another “we” applied in a diary note from January 27, 1827, which enthusiastically comments on the rich French reception of his play *Torquato Tasso*. He famously writes, “a universal *world literature* is emerging in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans” (1987: 243). However, as in the letter to the editor Cotta the day before and the translator Streckfuß on the same day (WA IV, 42, S. 26–28), with this “us” he obviously means just himself, since no other German writer enjoyed comparable international attention at that time. Probably the most exemplary proof of this is the huge success of his *Young Werther* far across national borders.⁶ Lord Byron dedicated one of his works to Goethe, Manzoni adored him, Gérard de Nerval translated *Faust* and Delacroix illustrated it, Walter Scott translated *Götz von Berlichingen*, and there were much more fruitful refractions of and reflections on his work, for instance those of the French literary critic Jean-Jacques Ampère and the translator Albert Stapfer, not to mention Thomas Carlyle. Whereas contemporary British, French and Italian intellectuals accordingly *recognized themselves in Goethe*, other German writers recognized themselves in foreign writers and translated them passionately. With regard to these modest but diligent compatriots, Goethe found himself, along with for example Hegel in his impressively erudite contemporaneous *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in the comfortable position of being able to benefit, in the medium of the German language, from the extraordinarily rich and fruitful translation work of two previous generations (Günther 1990: 113; Wiedemann 1993: 545ff.). So despite the rhetorically or prudently deployed “we,” Goethe was clearly aware of the real division of labor and prominence among German writers and intellectuals of his time. The majority of them only provided the background and sources

enabling the expression of the whole splendor of the select few. Being regarded as too provincial, they were prevented from entering the latter's "hall of fame."

A Retroactive Reinvestment of Goethe's Cosmopolitanism

Surprisingly, this traumatically resonating antidemocratic stance of Goethe's escapes David Damrosch in the first chapter of his admirably knowledgeable book on world literature, in which he treats German identity in Goethe's age as a homogeneous body rather than, as I have tried to demonstrate, something internally divided and antagonistic. He certainly portrays Goethe in a historically more careful and adequate way than Moretti, but with the same restrictive aim of deriving his own recent design of world literature from this not exactly informed, if not biased, interpretation. Unlike Moretti, who complains that nobody can really master all that was ever written in the world — as if this is what Goethe meant with his concept of *Weltliteratur* and not the contrary — Damrosch clearly states that "world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works, but rather a mode of circulation and of reading" (Damrosch 5). This he presents, as it were, as the Goethean approach *from below*, a perspective that is, it would seem, engaged to circumvent the delineated perils of global designs *from above*. As I have tried to emphasize, Goethe does associate *Weltliteratur* with mutually enriching interaction, but he means an interaction among a number of initiated agents who exempt themselves from the mob at home and abroad. If one takes into consideration that this elitism induced by the aggressive pressure of common understanding and bad taste, more or less habitual in the select social circles of the day, is inherent in the idea of *Weltliteratur*; such a literature was anything but projected from below. Quite the opposite of being truly all embracing, in order to overcome the traumatizing effects of the surrounding ignorance, Goethe based it on the *retaliating exclusion* of this "ignorant crowd."

Goethe's argument is complex and sometimes contradictory, yet unambiguously directed against the domestic as well as the worldwide mob because of the latter's inability or unwillingness to engage in the spiritually capitalizing exchange. However, although Damrosch's reading emphasizes Goethe's "constantly shifting personality" of "a diamond [...] that casts different color in every direction" (1, actually quoting Eckermann's preface), he rejects the interpretation according to which Goethe's idea of world literature would amount to an "imperial self-projection" or a "self-confirming narcissism" of German literature. At that time, he remarks, German culture was lacking a great history, political unity and a strong literary tradition, having been unable to stand comparison with its French or

English counterparts, which were in sovereign possession of all these dimensions (2003: 8). Whereas the leading French critic of that time, Philarète Euphémon Chasles, in stressing the infinite receptiveness and sensitivity of French culture clearly displays triumphalist cosmopolitanism with imperial aspirations, Goethe's cosmopolitanism emerges from the "provincial anxiety" of a nation with "relatively weak culture" that strove for international recognition and political unity (2003: 9–13).

Curiously identifying Goethe with a nation from whose dominant public representatives he consistently remained aloof, Damrosch accordingly proposes that a "provincial writer," being "free from the bonds of an inherited tradition," "can engage all the more fully, and by mature choice, with a broader literary world." His intention would be "to seek out a variety of networks of transmission and reception" (2003: 13) for his or her literature. Yet of what use is this paradoxical *provincially anxious freedom* if, as Goethe demonstrated with the examples of his compatriots, including Schiller, it ultimately entails madness, weak imitation, grotesque distortions, vulgarizations and failures, in short the desolate bankruptcy of the great majority of German writers who searched for the secure abode of their selves in great foreign models? As Goethe untiringly pointed out, German writers resided in the small and self-enclosed world of "home piety" (*Hausfrömmigkeit*), taking care exclusively of their own individual security (*Sicherheit des Einzelnen*; FA I 10, 514): "German poetry offers, just look at the daily production, as a matter of fact only expressions, sighs and interjections of benevolent individuals. Every individual presents himself (*tritt auf*) by his natural disposition (*Naturell*) and formation (*Bildung*); hardly anything tends toward what is universal, higher..." (Letter to Hitzig, November 11, 1829; Goethe 1987: 285) In such depressing circumstances, where is the free ability and mature readiness for engaging with the broader literary world about which Damrosch boldly speculates?

It is not the freedom from national tradition, then, but the lack of recognition and overall misapprehension or the traumatic experience of undeserved isolation and the neglect of his work at home that motivates Goethe's enthusiastic engagement with world literature (Bohnenkamp 2000; Koch 2002). When read against its public presentation, his elitist choice uncovers a self-exempting, self-rescuing maneuver aimed at international self-expansion. He significantly hopes that "the differences which prevail within a given nation will be corrected by the perspective and judgment of others" (Letter to Sulpiz Boisserée from October 12, 1827; WA IV 43: 106). In the previous letter to Reinhard from June 10, 1822 we find the following remark: "I have a general impression that nations learn to

understand each other more than ever; misunderstandings seem to be residing within each of their own bodies” (WA IV 36: 61). This biting comment is clearly addressed at his compatriots after the publication of the four-volume French translation of his dramas (Bohnenkamp 197). Far from being a “provincial writer” (Damrosch 13), in the 1820s Goethe was, to his great personal satisfaction, a widely internationally acknowledged author. As a complete foreigner in the nationally inflamed petty German circumstances, he attentively and efficiently established numerous international coalitions and foreign alliances to outmaneuver homeland pressures and suppress domestic enemies.

Goethe’s Trauma Narrative: Repositioning German Literature

However, he simultaneously undertook the maneuver of the self-exemption of *German literature* from its dominant international surroundings, which instructively redoubles his cosmopolitan project. This consoling self-glorifying maneuver of turning the lack of an autochthonous literary tradition into an advantage in comparisons with France or England — characteristic of all trauma narratives — was almost a commonplace in the culturally inferior Germany around 1800 (Herder 1991: VII, 551; A. Schlegel 1965: IV 26; Wiedemann 1993, 545ff.; Koch 2002: 234; Albrecht 2005: 308).⁷ Following this domestic habit, Goethe wittily employed aslightly derogatory image of Germans as, from the French perspective, “a not complete, acknowledged, but vital neighboring people, striving and involved in controversies” (a typically multi-voiced commentary from the *Kunst und Altertum* (1826); FA I 22: 259) to counteract the French national-universal tendency to instantiate global cultural uniformity. Defending his Greek “cosmopolitanism against the inferior local others,” he resisted the French national universalism based on the model of Roman imperial “cosmopolitanism toward the inferior foreign others.” Yet as is often the case with such compensatory revolts, this initial opposition gradually turned into substitution. Invisibly, the German “bondsman” adopted the imperial behavior of the French “lord.” One inadmissible appropriation of the global truth substituted for another.

Let us examine this transformation of self-exemption into self-expansion, briefly exemplified above in Plato’s and Voltaire’s cosmopolitan arguments, in more detail. Already in a much earlier polemical reaction to the literary legacy of the French Revolution, significantly entitled *Literary Sanculottism* (1795), Goethe stated unequivocally: “We do not wish for the upheavals which could prepare classical works in Germany” (1987: 66). In other words, state revolutions established classical national literatures in France and England, which from his

perspective is unacceptable, as no single national literature deserves the status of the classic. This status seems to be reserved for the *pre- and transnational* literature of Greek Antiquity. For Goethe, any modern European nation making such universal claims is an improper usurper (Günther 1990: 109) in the same way as Plato blamed democrats for their inappropriate occupation of the divine shepherd's throne. Such *political* national sovereignty vainly pretends to erase the rich sediments of universal *cultural* memory inherited from Greek Antiquity because the latter's archive ultimately proves victorious (Koch 2002: 151–158). Considering the fragmentation and dispersion of this social and cultural legacy induced by modernity, it is no longer possible for any modern agency to be sovereign on its own terms. Literary sovereignty is therefore imaginable merely in terms of a "joint venture" of many agencies, which have to patiently learn to know each other in order to somehow put together these scattered fragments. Appropriating solely for themselves the universal Greek cultural legacy and occupying for their petty purpose its constitutively "empty throne," modern national agencies falsify its universality.

Even from the perspective of individual writers, Goethe admits to Eckermann on May 15, 1825 that it makes no sense speaking of someone's originality if one considers that the world leaves its imprints on the human being from his beginning to his end. "If I were able to mention everything that I owe to great predecessors and contemporaries, very few things would remain," i.e. beyond energy, power, and the will [to go through others in order to find out for oneself] (1987: 226–27). Indeed, as Goethe learns by reading his *Faust* in French translation, one cannot affirm the self without encountering the other, and the same goes for the reflections of German literature in the mirror of French or English criticism. "Like individual man, each nation also relies on what is ancient and foreign much more than what is its own, inherited or self-made," he writes in a letter to Carl Ernst Schubarth on November 3, 1820 (188). No modern national literature can erase the old Greek transnational fundament, which is why Goethe prefers a corporate aesthetic redemption of its cultural legacy. "In the evaluation of the foreign (literatures) we must not stick to anything specific in wishing to regard this as exemplary," he tells his secretary Eckermann on January 31, 1827; "if we need something exemplary, we must always return to the Ancient Greeks..."(250).

But the Ancient Greeks are gone forever. After their definite departure, their legacy lost its binding power, henceforth figuring merely as a regulating idea. As the Lord was now irrevocably absent, His throne became empty and up for grabs. In order to expose its improper usurpers after the historical dissolution of

the Antique pattern, Goethe invented *Weltliteratur* as a permanent *supervising negotiation* between them. Every modern writer must accordingly courageously confront the turbulent worldwide flux, expose his own body to its erasure, and stubbornly drive his spirit through its mess if he wants to gain the real overview and achieve representative status in the ongoing European competition. (As far as Goethe is concerned, the non-Europeans are involved not so much as distinguished competitors but rather as the not quite distinguishable sources for exploitation). Xenophobic self-isolation (which dominated the German Romantic scene) would not do. Contrary to recent quantitative interpretations of Goethe's concept (as if it comprises all literatures in their entirety) or the qualitative ones for that matter (as if it means "a symphony of masterpieces from different nations" like for example in Thomsen 2008: 13), one cannot overemphasize the importance of prominent international literary exchanges for Goethe's vision of world literature. It pushes all national literatures in the process of *making*, as testified by his constant concern for the participation of Frenchmen, Englishmen, Scots and Italians in the shaping of German literature (Birus 8; Günther 124).

The basic principle of self-propelling toward the common future ideal holds therefore not just for writers but national literatures as well:

Left to itself, every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the empathy (*Teilnahme*) of a foreign one. What nature researcher (*Naturforscher*) does not take pleasure in the wonderful things that he sees produced by reflection in a mirror? Now what mirroring (*Spiegelung*) in the field of morals (*Sittliche*) means, everyone has experienced in himself if only unconsciously, and once his attention is aroused, he will understand how much in the formation of his life he owes to this mirroring. (Goethe 1987: 245)

Not everybody, though, was in a position to capitalize on the proposed process of mutual mirroring, as in order to participate in it one first had to be legitimized as an agency. In his essay *Shakespeare without End* of 1816, Goethe (1987: 135) pointed out that only an author equipped with self-consciousness (i.e. in the final analysis Goethe alone!) can properly understand foreign tempers and mentalities (*Gemütsarten*); others are too frightened by them to explore them carefully. In the same manner, heterogeneity of other literatures can be profitable only if a national literature confronting them has already established its own aesthetic credentials and identity (1987: 243, 280). In Goethe's understanding, world literature implies an ongoing dialogue of equals. Far from being a universal concern, equality requires

merits. Unlike the French or the English, the Germans of Goethe's time had not yet succeeded in accomplishing this equality; they were the only nation-in-the-making among the prominent Europeans.

In proposing a world literature based on the German future-oriented pattern of becoming, Goethe allocated to the Germans a completely different role from being just one of its national participants. To avoid misappropriations, his *Weltliteratur* refuses to adopt the national model as the basis of its identity but searches instead for its identity in an open process of permanent mediation, exchange and negotiation. As among the select few only the shaky German identity was at that time engaged in such a self-finding process, Goethe ultimately *expands the ongoing German search for identity to the dialogic becoming of world literature*. Other nations were thus expected to participate(or, in the case of non-European or less-than-European literatures: to serve)with their particular national currencies in an open exchange set up on the German identity pattern permanently on the move. In such subtle fashion, *elitist self-exemption* turned into *democratic expansion* not only on the individual (i.e., Goethe's personal) but also on the collective level: the Germans were surreptitiously appointed as the only legitimate guardians of the Greek transnational legacy. Developing his idea of *Weltliteratur*, Goethe invented a reconfigured cultural space, which allocated to his compatriots the prestigious role of the custodians of the Holy Archive. Additionally, they were presented as self-denying agencies acting in the name of the forgotten Shepherd who, beyond any selfish interest typical of the French and English pretenders, merely foster a reunion of fractured literatures and cultures. The media of this mutually (yet substantially unequally) enriching and empowering intellectual trade between accredited European literatures that were expected to spawn the consolidation, improvement and final triumph of German self-understanding were "journals and books, correspondence, and translations, the journeys and encounters of writers as well as an expanding book market" (Meyer-Kalkus 106).

As John Pizer (2006: 22–24) has rightly pointed out, "impersonal" German literature could not produce a typical classical author infused by a national spirit. It was bereft of recognizable national agency, decentered through its enduring exposure to foreign influences, marked by sub-national disunity and a lack of cohesion and, still in the dialogic process of national self-finding, internally heterogeneous and contradictory. Yet precisely this set of features made it suitable as the *open dialogic model* for the establishment of world literature and world classical authors. This German pattern of subtle mediation and negotiation was directed against the bellicose competition between the strong, nationally infused

French and British literatures. Not that Goethe was hoping the world will by means of literature achieve “a universal peace” — he was no less sceptical than Kant in this regard — but he was confident that “the unavoidable quarrel will gradually subside and the war will become less cruel, the victory less imperious (*übermüthig*)” (FA I 22: 433–34). Of course, nobody can expect that nations will suddenly reconceive themselves, “but they must become aware of one another, grasp each other, and if they are unwilling to love one another (*wenn sie sich wechselseitig nicht lieben mögen*), learn to tolerate each other” (FA I 22, 491). For “if we have to communicate in our everyday life with resolutely other-thinking persons, we will find ourselves moved to be on the one hand more cautious, but on the other more tolerant and lenient” (FA I 22: 868). Nevertheless, a core motivation behind these scattered remarks is not so much “the desire for productive and peaceful coexistence among the nations of Europe,” as Pizer (2006: 21) surmises, incautiously taking Goethe at his word. Rather, beneath Goethe’s cosmopolitan proclamations there lurks a compensatory raising of the German national pattern of becoming into the sovereign moderator of international intellectual traffic. Germany is envisaged to become the *divine shepherd of world literature*.

In this regard, Goethe was, after all, just a loyal inheritor of a number of his reputed domestic predecessors. In 1793, Herder had stated that Germans should “appropriate the best of all the peoples and in such a way become among them what man became among his fellow creatures (*Neben- und Mitgeschöpfe*) from which he learned his skills (*Künste*). He came at the end, took from every one of them his art and now *he surpasses and rules all of them*” (Herder 1991: VII, 551 [emphasis mine]). Several years later, Novalis, in the equally cosmopolitan project *Christendom or Europe* (1799), put forth the thesis that, while other European countries are “occupied by war, speculation and partisanship (*Parthey-Geist*), the German makes himself with all diligence into an associate (*Genosse*) of a higher epoch of culture. This preliminary step *must give him, over the course of time, a large predominance* (ein großes Uebergewicht) *over the others*” (Novalis 1983b: III, 519 [emphasis mine]). In the same vein, Goethe entrusted the German language with the role of the medium of permanent translation or commerce of one with another literature. German is called upon to set the course for everybody’s national currency (*Münzsorten*) “not by repelling the foreign but devouring it” (1987: 243). What Goethe ultimately envisaged was “the take up and complete appropriation (*das völlige Aneignen*) of the foreign” (1987: 238), which is tantamount to the complete denial of the foreignness inherent to Roman imperial “cosmopolitanism toward the inferior foreign others.”

From Exemption to Expansion: Toward the Roman Imperial Cosmopolitanism

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans refused to acknowledge the other in his or her otherness, regarding him or her as a mere extension of their own noble breed. They simply could not imagine that there existed anybody who could be equal to them in terms of greatness and still be different from them (Arendt 121). By tacitly shifting from the Greek elitist attitude to this Roman imperial one, Goethe ultimately disqualified, or at least disregarded, any individual or collective identity reluctant or unable to persistently enrich itself, i.e., to adopt his and the German self-propelling behavior and standards. In the famous letter to Thomas Carlyle from July 20, 1827, he states:

The Germans have long contributed to the mediation [*Vermittlung*] between individual and national particularities [*das Besondere der einzelnen Menschen und Völkerschaften*] and their mutual recognition. Whoever understands the German language finds himself in a market where every nation displays its merchandize, plays the translator while enriching himself. (1987: 265)

Being himself an internally dialogic author whose consciousness was able of devouring an incredible polyglossia,⁸ Goethe wanted to transfer the vivid spiritual cohesiveness of individuals characterizing the French *esprit général* and the English *public spirit* from the national to the world literary level. However, in so doing he also wished to open the *historical stream of the entire human community* engendered in such a way, by applying to it the German “dialogic principle” of self-finding.⁹ In an address to the society of nature researchers and physicians from 1828 he stated that what is of real concern in world literature is that “vivid and striving men of letters become acquainted with one another and find themselves stimulated for social action through their mutual inclination and common sense” (*Neigung und Gemeinsinn*, FA I 25: 79). The works of world literature concern us only inasmuch as they concern each other (Günther 124). It is only if they create such select common sense, caught in the unlimited process of perfection, that they substitute, to deploy Thomas Mann’s apt opposition, what is possible or valid for the world (*Weltfähige* or *Weltgültige*) and characterized by a true world horizon (*Weltbezug*) for what is at present simply the way of the world (*Weltläufige*; Birus 16).

Given Germany’s own lack of a strong, immanent, infrangible national identity

in his time, it is not surprising that Goethe was particularly aware of and open to the possibility of a super- or transnational literary modality. Perhaps Goethe's insights into the contemporary impossibility of creating a "classical" (national) German literature made the formulation of a *Weltliteratur* desirable as the only possible alternative to cultural fragmentation. (Pizer 2006: 24)

Goethe's *Weltliteratur* was undoubtedly a *trauma narrative* in the meaning Jeffrey Alexander attributed to this concept: coming up "from below" (i.e., both from an unrecognized Goethe in the German literary space and from an underrated Germany in the European political and cultural space), it therapeutically reconfigures the existing political, literary and cultural space. The *Weltliteratur* narrative, in a word, works through and acts out both a personal and a collective traumatic experience. Yet no trauma narrative can achieve necessary public recognition without instigating "new rounds of social suffering" (Alexander 2012: 2). At the very moment at which it predicates the equal dignity of all its imagined worldwide community's invited participants, it proves unable to remove the gap, which produces "the part that has no part" in it.

This essential simultaneity of the narrative's *construction* and *destruction* of community accounts for its slide from emancipation to supremacy. Undertaken under the pressure of deprecation and humiliation, it gradually rises to the status of an international intellectual agenda and thus, if only with delays and hesitations, becomes a powerful "multidirectional" platform for the recovery of various traumatized collectivities. This is what had happened meanwhile to Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, whose global impact increased in an almost daily rhythm. Yet without denying its politically intended integration of political and cultural fragmentation at home and abroad, his trauma narrative of world reconciliation (*Weltversöhnung*) was basically structured on the German *Einheit-in-Vielfalt* model of steady self-expansion: *The greater your diversity, affiliates of Weltliteratur, the more magnificent grows my dialogic unity in becoming!*

Having been initiated in the form of Greek elitist "cosmopolitanism against the deluded fellow citizens," that is to say, Goethe's idea of world literature tacitly perverted into Roman imperial "cosmopolitanism toward the inferior foreigners" open to the inclusion of any agency able and ready to comply with the set rules of exchange. According to Costas Douzinas (2007: 159), "[...] cosmopolitanism starts as a moral universalism but often degenerates into imperial globalism. [...] The continuous slide of cosmopolitan ideas towards empire is one of the dominant motifs of modernity." It is significant that, following this same path, Voltaire's

project of the world literary republic underwent a comparable “perversion” of its envisaged inclusiveness into an intolerant exclusiveness. It finally asked “those nations which are not French [...] to become French” (Lyotard 147) and thus turned its initial war of liberation into the war of conquest. No wonder then, the same imperial model already defined the true, albeit hardly deliberate agenda of the famous manifesto of Weimar Classicism, composed by Schiller but subscribed to by Goethe. It set its sails, in the interest of “pure humanity” (*rein menschlich*), to “unite again the politically divided world under the banner of truth and beauty (*die politisch geteilte Welt unter der Fahne der Wahrheit und Schönheit wieder zu vereinigen*)” (Schiller 1991: XXII, 109). After all, aesthetics in the service of Germany’s own political recalibration and reconfiguration was, as Joseph Chytry (1989) has convincingly demonstrated, the main agenda around 1800. Put in the “obvious” terms of the untiringly self-propelling German spirit, world literature community was hoped to eventually become an “expanded fatherland,” according to Goethe’s own formulation in the essay on Carlyle’s translation of Schiller (FA I 22: 431–34). Accordingly, the entrance to this expanded fatherland was surreptitiously supplied with an invisible “garbage disposal.” Not everybody was equally welcome within the family.

Translating the “IronLaw of Kinship” into the “Free Competition of Values”

This undermines the enthusiastic reading of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* proposed by the Moroccan *Germanist* Fawzi Boubia (1985, 1988). Unreservedly endorsed by Pizer (2006: 27–28), he refutes the charges against its Eurocentric character. Goethe respects the particularity of non-European “others,” the argument goes, advocating the movement toward the non-European Other and not a dominion over it or its levelling to European dimensions. This thesis finds a supporter in David Damrosch (2003: 13). Damrosch, quoting a passage from Eckermann in which Goethe dismisses medieval Germanic and Serbian poetry by treating both as “barbaric popular poetry” of only provisional interest for the serious writer, regards this to be “not, or not primarily, Eurocentrism,” since elitism and Eurocentrism strike him as partly “competing values.” The problem is, unfortunately, that in Goethe’s argument they go strictly hand in hand, making a quite inseparable couple. The incessant normative activity of passing judgments and correcting aberrations — disciplining the most diverse participants to comply with the set rules of participation by abandoning their “inherited identity garbage” — transforms *Weltliteratur* tacitly from an emancipating agency into one which is oppressive. Being constitutively dependent on *verification* by its manifold adherents, the cosmopolitan operation of

trauma narratives cannot avoid perversion into an instrument of their *colonization*. The same “democratic malformation” happened, after all, to Herder’s *Weltpoesie* based on *Naturdichtung* as well as to August Schlegel’s *universal poetry* (canon of masterpieces, A. Schlegel 1965: IV, 14) and Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* proves, albeit long after his death, unable to escape it, — all the advertent or inadvertent “makeup” applied by his domestic and international interpreters notwithstanding. Yet Goethe himself, being a well-trained pupil of Plato, was terrified by this sinister prospect of an idea, which was forged to circumvent it. This is why he tirelessly, albeit ultimately vainly, reaffirms its elitism.

In the famous conversation of January 31, 1827 (1987: 249–50), for example, he firstly shares with Eckermann the democratic thought that poetry is a common good of humankind in which some are a little bit better, swim a little bit longer at the top than the others, and that’s all. As poetry is a universal human matter, nobody should delude himself he is a great poet just because he has written a good poem. Yet he was at that time already frightened by the consequences of this initially Herderian literary doctrine to which he subscribed in 1773, when he edited a collection of Alsatian folk songs together with Herder. In the meantime, this early democratic initiative of hugely expanding the idea of literature gave rise to the neo-German religio-patriotic art (*neu-deutsche religiös-patriotische Kunst*) which he now abhorred (Meyer-Kalkus 2010: 101). What was once intended to be broadly democratic was thus turned into the self-enclosed national-conservative opposite. With his *Weltliteratur*, Goethe pretended to obviate this destiny of *Naturdichtung*, which is why he could not permit everybody to usurp it. It had to be saved from such vulgarization by its uncultivated consumers in the same way as the restriction of the Greek *nomos* to a small circle of domestic agencies tended to prevent the (forthcoming Roman) evaporation of the political in an incalculable system of imperial expansion (Arendt 119).

He therefore immediately, in the continuation of the same conversation, returns to the Greek elitist cosmopolitan position: Such universal poetry certainly concerns Chinese, Serbian poetry or the *Nibelungenlied*, which are exclusively of a transitory historical interest, but not Greek Antiquity, which is of an immortal aesthetic interest. In the slightly later notes from the *Makariens Archiv* (1829, 1987: 284) he is even more unambiguous: “Chinese, Indian, Egyptian antiquities are always just curiosities; it is recommendable to make oneself and the world acquainted with them; but they would be not especially fruitful for our moral and aesthetic education/formation (*Bildung*).” This is the reason why “Orientals” can never stand comparison with the Greeks and Romans or the *Nibelungen* with the

Iliad for that matter (174); they simply belong to different categories, since the first represent false or transient values and the second those that are true or deep. Because of the “Oriental predilection” to lump together what is most remote, contradictory and incommensurable (169), Goethe also rejects the literary work of his younger contemporary Jean Paul (175–77). Instead of trying to distill from the world’s diversity its underlying true equivalent (*wahres Äquivalent*) patterned according to the Ancient Greek model, Jean Paul uses this diversity as a coin for momentary rhetorical effects. Such “Oriental” literary rhetoric only degrades poetry, bereaving it of its true substance (178). Poetry is therefore no longer a universal human matter: all Oriental literatures, the Serbian and the old Germanic epic as well as Romantic mannerists like Jean Paul are expelled from its blessing.

They are not completely inapplicable, admittedly, but of restricted use in the envisioned world literary community of elective affiliates. Oriental culture can be used just as a “refreshing source” to “strengthen the peculiarity of our spirit,” but certainly not as its law-giving pattern (FA II 6: 642). “Goethe has never abandoned Shakespeare in favor of Nizâmî” (Birus 1995: 19). The same holds for *Naturdichtung*: original but primitive, it can be reasonably exploited only as a raw material. Even if Goethe urges his compatriots to apply the Herderian *Einfühlungsvermögen* (empathic ability) in their approach to Serbian folk poetry, when he accordingly advises them to pay the Serbs a “personal visit” he describes the Serbian “rough land” as if it lay somewhere far behind, “several centuries ago” (FA I 22: 686). And when he was indeed once invited, during his journey through Italy, by the Prince of Waldeck to cross the Adriatic Sea and pay the “Morlacks” a “personal visit,” he declined with uneasiness, “distinctly not interested in travelling across the Adriatic” (Wolff 2001: 192). The imagined geography, pleasing by its self-complimenting operations, refuses to be embarrassed by the real one. Even if he recommended “to read every poet in his own language and the peculiar district of his time and habits” (FA I 3: 270) and “to strive to approach the foreign as closely as possible” (FA I 3: 293), he himself read the Chinese novel of manners *Yü-chao-li* — a “marginal Chinese literary work of minor importance” (Wang 2011, 296) — in a free French translation and adaptation (*Le deux cousines*, 1826). In the same way, he retranslated the Serbian epic from the poor Italian translation. Recalling this episode fifty years later, he even claims he translated it from the accompanying French in Countess Rosenberg’s *Morlackische Notizen*, which were not published until 1788, i.e. too late to be used for his translation (Wolff 2001: 192) — a neat example of how unconcerned he was about translations of “barbaric” literary products. It seems he did not exactly expect the translation of

such marginal literary works to be of the highest sort — according to his typology (1987: 181–185) — that gives up its own language in order to closely stick to the original; an informative, plainly prosaic translation, which is the lowest sort in his hierarchy, completely suffices. The “heightened attentiveness” that protects one from “easy familiarizing projections” practiced by the ignorant mob is not exactly necessary here. Oriental non-European or indeed European literatures all serve merely for rude orientation. From the Western perspective, they make up “the rest” which “we must look at only historically; appropriating for ourselves what is good, so far as we can” (1987: 250). The non-European or less-than-European literatures and cultures, in a way, remain up for arbitrary grabs for their prominent European counterparts; what counts are their motives, certainly not language, discourse or style.

The great West European literatures, on the contrary, serve Goethe as highly important refracting mirrors that, unlike the Oriental ones, fully deserve the attentiveness of Kantian *Hineinversetzen* or Herderian *Einfühlungsvermögen*. If one wants to truly understand them, meticulous and patient translation of their genuine otherness has to penetrate what is untranslatable in them (*Beim Übersetzen muß man bis ans Unübersetzliche herangehen*, 308). Goethe does not fear to be crushed by them like his modest compatriots, since the French, British and Italians were the first to acknowledge and invite him into their international company and not vice versa. His almost imperially self-confident *Weltliteratur* therefore does not emerge from German literary and cultural inferiority as Damrosch claims. At stake is an initiative not merely richly prepared by numerous domestic translations, as indicated above, but also powerfully corroborated from abroad. Nobody comes upon the idea of forging global designs without such accreditations. Because of outlined interferences between these cultures, Damrosch’s clear-cut opposition between French cosmopolitanism “from above” and German cosmopolitanism “from below” has to be substantially revised, i.e., reintroduced within each of these respective corpuses. They are far from being as robust as Damrosch (along with many others) portrays them for the polemical purpose of defending his own argument. As cosmopolitanism splits into agencies and enablers, those who speak for it and those in the name of whom it speaks — and this not only along national but also economic, social and gender lines, — it necessarily contains an *internal redoubling*. Underneath its “elitist” face, the “democratic” element is submerged, underneath its “mind” its “body.” No external opposition or “blaming of the ignorant” can cancel out this constitutive gap. No “subject of” exists without a “subject to” that persistently undermines its sovereignty. Rather than

being consistent and continuous, cosmopolitanism is a split and discontinuous undertaking.

As the Goethe specialist Anne Bohnenkamp was the first to notice, his idea of world literature was “directly connected with *his perception of the international reception* of his own works” (2000: 187 [emphasis mine]). It was not that he initially and anxiously *looked after* the foreign mirrors but instead, in a creatively sovereign reaction, *reflected* on their mirroring, mirrored their refractions back, retransferred their transfers, received their reception, retranslated their translations. In sum, he creatively enhanced and propelled the process of literary exchange, and precisely this is how his equivocal narrative of world literature came into being. In the final analysis, all this consolatory acceptance, praising, translating, staging, reviewing and censoring of his work (Goethe 1987, who here again “modestly” speaks of “us”) enormously contributed to Goethe’s imperial self-understanding (Meyer-Kalkus 2010: 105–106). As the refractions “from one mirror to another do not fade but ignite each other” (FA I, 17: 371) the wide world suddenly became an “expanded fatherland,” i.e. a substantially improved version of what he was desperately missing at home. After all, a number of his distinguished contemporaries such as Novalis, the brothers Schlegel, Fichte, Jean Paul, and Mme de Staël were also firmly convinced that the moment had come for Germans to take command of the world partition of symbolic values. They were expected “to unite all the advantages of the most varied nationalities” in order “to create a cosmopolitan midpoint for the human spirit” (A. Schlegel 1965: IV, 36). To reiterate “[...] cosmopolitanism starts as a moral universalism but often degenerates into imperial globalism. [...] The continuous slide of cosmopolitan ideas towards empire is one of the dominant motifs of modernity” (Douzinas 159).

Thus the conclusion would be that, opposite to Damrosch’s consistently one-dimensional reading in favor of the “free competition” of cultural values, Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* nonetheless amounts to an imperial “system of self-securing” of his and the German shaken self in the sense defined by Barbara Herrnstein Smith (quoted by Damrosch, 8). This *imperial self-securing system of world literature*, “in enlarging its view ‘from China to Peru,’ may become all the more imperialistic, seeing in every horizon of difference new peripheries of its own centrality, new pathologies through which its own normativity may be defined and must be asserted” (Smith 54). Smith’s characterization neatly harmonizes with Arendt’s description of Roman “cosmopolitanism toward the inferior others,” which regards the other as a mere extension of the noble Roman breed (Arendt 120). In Roman imperial terms, the other was saved from annihilation not “out of mercy,

but for the sake of the expansion of the polis, which from now on was expected to include even the most foreign members in a new alliance of comrades” (116). Far from being a firm and enclosed canon (as was the contemporary Romantic *Universalpoesie*), Goethe’s adaptable and steadily contextually fed movement of world literature that swallows up ever-new participants thus gradually, despite his reluctance, acquired the Roman profile. Goethe as the engineer of world literature and the Germans as its collective beneficiaries systematically capitalized the “reiterated mirroring” and “mutual illuminations” (Bohnenkamp 202–203) provided by its numerous adherents. According to a lucid early remark by Ernst Robert Curtius, world literature was from the very beginning meant as a “meeting point of many references, a center of diverging perspectives: formulated as a mission” (*ein Aufgegebenes*; Curtius 1954: 46; Bohnenkamp 2000: 202), it accumulated profit as capital does by its very definition. Being shaped as steadily agglomerating symbolic capital — and note that without exception recent German interpreters also avoid this point — it was meant exclusively for *agencies* in the globalizing operations of circulation. The remaining unfit candidates (like the non-European, less-than-European, pre-modern or indeed Romantic mannerist literatures for that matter) were expelled in advance from the international circulation, transformation and translation that enables the symbolic enrichment of its participants — as Damrosch (4–5) significantly circumscribes the essence of world literature. Being rejected by a fine-tuned “garbage disposal” that hideously supervised its normative procedure, they were relegated to the category of *enablers*, the “working and producing” residue of all compensatory trauma narratives. This amorphous surplus follows the triumphant rise of world literature like an uncanny shadow.

Systematically stamped, marginalized, and excommunicated by the relentless normative work of this global system, these enablers were captured in the immobile, restricted and benighted realm of national literatures (Damrosch 6). Locked in such a way, they were prevented from gaining and benefitting from cultural exchanges and concomitantly bereft of any chance to function as the prestigious exchange value for all the others. Destined to be deployed at best selectively, partially and occasionally as raw material, rather than permanently exchanged, differentiated and refined in the ongoing globalizing operations, they were condemned to the status of local and anonymous use values devoid of global identity, relevance and acknowledgement. If the production and proliferation of such telluric, indistinctive, non-exchangeable and untranslatable “pockets of disability” is an unavoidable corollary of the self-propelling system of world literature, then the habitual attitude of the inhabitants of these pockets to world literature has to be re-examined. The

enthusiastic endorsement of its operations, feverishly trying to scratch and crawl the enablers' way into their "blessed realm" at the cost of thereby being denigrated to the status of a temporally anterior and spatially exterior object with regard to the systemic mainstream (Shih 17), risks the elimination of these "systemic outputs" from the field of political attention. Are we therefore not better advised to raise the question as to who in the last analysis is authorizing, promoting, and canonizing this imperial system, and with what motivation, purpose and benefit?

In other words, the relation of global domination based on the imposition of common law, as represented in the existing projects of world literature, must confront continuous disagreement rather than be smoothly perpetuated. If world literature does indeed want to be democratic, then it has the task of highlighting the irresolvable conflict that underlies its cosmopolitanism rather than the task of persistent suppression of this conflict for the benefit of a supposed "unity-to-come." In lieu of being an "unfinished project" that has to be brought to its harmonic completion, world literature is a project *never to be finished* because of the split inherent to it. Maintenance of its democratic character, not its celebrated "dialogue of equals" but its neglected constitutive disagreement between agencies and enablers has to be consistently practiced.

Notes

1. This article presents a part of the fifth chapter of my forthcoming book *Tracing Global emocracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, January 2016).
2. My translation of this passage from *Conversations with Eckermann* slightly differs from both the American translation by John Oxenford (San Francisco, 1984: 132) used by Damrosch 2003 and Moretti's own translation. All following translations from German will be mine if not otherwise indicated.
3. If I am here siding with Spivak's critique of Moretti, this does not mean that I endorse her own revision of comparative literature. With its opposite privileging of native informants and comparatists (2003: 14, 22), it overemphasizes the particularity of languages and cultures in a typically liberalist, multiculturalist spirit.
4. I will be quoting, in the following, various critical editions of Goethe's works (*Weimarer, Berliner, Frankfurter Ausgabe*) according to the following principle: division (here IV), volume (here 39), page number (here 216).
5. This might be one possible answer to the "rarely asked" but fundamental question from Thomas Beebee's illuminating discussion of Nietzsche's skeptical stance to world literature:

“[W]hat kind of consolation can the teaching and propagation of world literature provide?” or, even more specifically, “[W]hom is world literature consoling, and in what way?” (Beebee 2011: 367, 376) Goethe himself found in *Weltliteratur* a consolation for his traumatic situation at home in the same way as, to take up Beebee’s examples, the students in Kathleen Komar’s class in Los Angeles or Roberto Bolaño’s character Urrutia did. Yet if Goethe’s specific traumatic experience effectuates world literature’s ability to console, then Michael Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg 2009) might be an apt instrument for specifying this ability. *Weltliteratur* is always responding to a nationally situated traumatic experience but possesses the ability to work through the remote affiliate traumatic experiences as well. Such elective affinities among the injured are however always established at someone’s cost and it is precisely this “side effect” of world literature’s “therapy” that must not be forgotten. Its politics must not degenerate into policing.

6. I thank Galin Tihanov for this reminder.

7. An American philosopher, having researched the German intellectual corpus around 1800, had this impression: “There is, so to speak, quite a promiscuous theoretical as well as stylistic dependence of one writer on another. [...] In this climate of in- and cross-breeding of citations and cross-references, one writer being quite dependent upon others in the trading of ideas and authorities...” (Eze 1997: 6–7)

8. As regards Goethe’s overarching creative consciousness, it strikes his attentive readers as “‘what we Germans call spirit [*Geist*], which is predominant in an upper leader (*das Vorwaltende des oberen Leitenden*)’ (FA III 1, 181), a weightless, on-hand intelligence that ‘especially belongs to a man of age or an aging epoch’ and qualifies itself through a ‘worldwide overview, irony’ and ‘free use of talents’” (Koch 2002: 201).

9. I deliberately deploy this famous concept of Mikhail Bakhtin’s literary and linguistic theory to indicate the importance of his in-depth reading of Goethe for its shaping. However, unlike Pizer, who enthusiastically endorses Bakhtin’s empathic understanding of Goethe, I interpret the dialogic principle — in both cases — as an operation of imperial self-empowerment that aims at the establishment of a supreme authority or what we, using Bakhtin’s own terms, could dub the “authorial self.”

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