Goethe’s “World Literature” Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization

IN A RECENT ARTICLE on the relevance of Goethe’s concept of “world literature” for contemporary comparatism (and, to a lesser degree, for Germanics), Hendrik Birus argues that Goethe’s notion can help the discipline of comparative literature to recognize both the limits and possibilities of its field of inquiry. Extensively drawing upon twentieth-century interpretations of Weltliteratur, he shows that this concept demonstrates how individual comparatists can construct discrete domains of inquiry that acknowledge both the world’s unity and an irreducible variety that forces us to make choices with respect to the texts we teach and research: “a systematic situating of comparatism and, thereby, of world literature as its object of inquiry cannot, in spite of a necessary cognizance of universalization, do without a counter principle of restriction” (444).

Birus’s essay is one of the most cogent of several recent analyses that draw on the world literature concept to reexamine issues such as canonicity and cross-cultural literary interchange and to show that comparatists must regard the entire world as their homeland in coming to grips with the “necessary but endless task” of treating the globe’s imaginative texts in a comprehensive context (457). Unfortunately, however, these analyses treat only tangentially the fact that literature is becoming immanently global, that is, that individual works are increasingly informed and constituted by social, political, and even linguistic trends that are not limited to a single nation or region. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to regard contemporary texts as simply the products of, for example, German, Nigerian, or Chinese writers, or even of European, African, and Asian authors. With the globalization of the world economy, a true world literature, which is to say a global literature, is being created. The present essay seeks to explore how Goethe’s concept both anticipates and helps us to examine this trend. Just as this paradigm provided the basis for past and current comparative methodologies, so it also helps us to understand how works of the postcolonial age are not simply intertextual, but supranationally textual as well. As the title of the 1999 conference of the American Comparative Literature Association—“Comparative Literature and Cultural Transnationalisms: Past and Future”—and some of the papers read at the conference suggest, we might call this new field of inquiry “transnational literary studies.” Such a domain would enhance, rather than re-
place, traditional comparatism. In addition, I will argue that Goethe’s concept allows creative writers themselves a way to counteract the confusions that this transnationalism and a concomitant loss of discrete national-cultural identity bring in their train.

Certainly, almost all studies of comparative literature’s history as a discrete field of scholarly inquiry recognize Goethe’s Weltliteratur paradigm as seminal to the discipline’s development. In Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, Ulrich Weisstein finds the concept “extremely useful,” “because of its stress on international contacts and fruitful literary interrelationships” (20). François Jost’s Introduction to Comparative Literature argues that Goethe’s concept is a “prerequisite” for our discipline; indeed, for Jost, comparative literature is an “organic Weltliteratur,” providing the basic materials that the discipline must organize critically and historically (21). Claudio Guillén not only notes the historical significance of Weltliteratur for the emergence of the discipline of comparative literature, but also finds that the local-universal “dialogue” inherent in the paradigm as Goethe conceptualized it “has continued to breath life into the best comparative studies” (40). Gerhard Kaiser situates this dialogic component of world literature within a national-international dialectic stemming from Enlightenment and Romantic discursive formations, a study of which is essential for understanding the prehistory of comparatism (13), while Gail Finney claims that Goethe “in essence invented comparative literature” through his Weltliteratur formulation (261).

However, I believe Goethe’s musings on world literature also anticipate, and could thereby help to define, “transnational literary studies” in the present, just as they helped to define “comparative literature” in the past. Transnationalism in the cultural sphere implies the collapse of discrete, self-contained, national traditions, a collapse brought on mainly by the globalization of the literary marketplace, and thus signifies multiculturalism on a universal scale. As Fritz Strich maintained in Goethe und die Weltliteratur, Goethe recognized the birth of the “Weltsmarkt” (44), which, no longer limited by competing economic superstructures such as Soviet Communism and capitalism, continues to establish the monetary, material, and communicative conditions underlying cultural transnationalisms. In a letter to Sulpiz Boisserée dated 12 October, 1827, Goethe noted that world literature would come into existence when national particularities were balanced and leveled through international interchange (qtd. in Strich, Weltliteratur 398). While Goethe disapproved of the sort of global cultural uniformity he called “sansculottisme” (see Weisstein 19), scholars who have wrestled with Goethe’s world literature concept have increasingly articulated its relevance within the globalized literary context implicit in the term “cultural transnationalism.” Thus, this paper will not only analyze Goethe’s discussions of his formulation with respect to their relevance for defining transnational literary studies, but will also examine how subsequent investigators of the construct, such as Georg Brandes, Fritz Strich, Erich Auerbach, and, more recently, Sarah Lawall and Homi K. Bhabha come to the (sometimes unhappy) realization that cultural transnationalism has been an emerging trend for some time. This is a trend some critics believe to be quite in line with Goethe’s world view, but which others find distinctly ungoethean.
Goethe introduced the term “world literature” in an 1827 issue of the journal Über Kunst und Altertum, while responding to discussions of his oeuvre in French newspapers. After translating a passage from a favorable review of a French edition of his drama Torquato Tasso (1790) in the Paris Globe, Goethe notes that the extensive quotation is not merely intended to call attention to his own work:


(I have something higher in mind, which I want to indicate provisionally. Everywhere one hears and reads about the progress of the human race, about the further prospects for world and human relationships. However that may be on the whole, which it is not my office to investigate and more closely determine, I nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that I am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans.)

Goethe’s vision of a new literary modality emerging from the progress generated by the increasingly international nature of discursive interchange reflects the holistic perspective that guided his forays into the natural sciences. However, while Goethe’s personal authority is strongly projected into much of his scientific writing, he deliberately masks the discrete, subjective component of his announcement concerning world literature through the use of the subjunctive case and the impersonal pronouns “es” and “man.” Goethe as an individual does not perceive what he describes; rather, one sees and hears of progressive globalization, and one experiences this trend everywhere. Even when Goethe expresses in the first-person a conviction that a universal world literature is in the process of forming, he uses the indirect discourse subjunctive “sei.” It is as though Goethe wishes to disappear into the background so that the impersonal, universal essence of a world literary scene can be foregrounded. This is an initial, subtle hint at the death of the author as an independent literary “agent” in both senses of that term (as producer and marketeer), Goethe’s perhaps unintended way of predicting that world media (and, by extension, world markets) will weave a writer’s products into a transindividual, indeed transnational grid, a grid Goethe terms “world literature.”

To be sure, Goethe’s discovery of an emerging world literature is not an announcement of the demise of discrete national literatures. Indeed, he states in the same sentence that Germans will play an important role in its formation. However, he goes on to note that German literature is constituted from so many heterogeneous and contradictory elements that only a common language makes it a coherent field (JA 38, 97-98). This view of German literature is consistent with remarks Goethe set down in a much earlier essay, “Literarischer Sansculottismus” (1795), where he makes Germany’s fragmentary political construction, its Kleinstaaterei, responsible for the nation’s lack of “classical” authors. A truly classical author must be infused by a national spirit, and both internal

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1 The interconnection between Goethe’s world literature concept and his natural scientific principles is adumbrated by A.K. Hohlfeld (349).
factiousness and a concomitant overabundance of foreign influences makes such an infusion impossible in Germany. Although Goethe does not wish for the political upheavals that would make such classicism possible, he bemoans the lack of a political-cultural center where German authors would be freed from subjection to the highly variegated whims and influences of their individual homelands (GA 14, 179-85). Given Germany’s 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 transnational literary modality. Goethe’s resignation to the impossibility of creating a “classical” (national) German literature may have made the formulation of a “world literature” the only possible alternative to cultural fragmentation.6

Another important political factor underlying Goethe’s enunciation of a world literature concept was his experience of the Napoleonic Wars. As René Wellek has noted, Goethe believed the desire for greater literary traffic was rooted in “the weariness of strife” after these wars (221).5 a weariness that may have led Goethe in 1829 to call the world simply an “expanded fatherland” (“erweitertes Vaterland”) (JA 38, 203). In the wake of the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), and prior to new nationalistic outbursts in the 1830s, Europeans could reasonably sense a decline in the significance and autonomy of the individual nation-state, much as the “new world order” continuing to emerge in the wake of Soviet Communism’s collapse has led to a globalization of economics, politics, and culture. Thus, if Goethe’s world literature concept anticipates current cultural transnationalism, an important parallel between the geopolitics of the last phase of the “Goethezeit” and those of the contemporary age is, in some measure, responsible, though such trends in Goethe’s age were restricted to Europe. Indeed, Goethe specifically equated “world literature” with “European literature” (GA 14, 907). Nevertheless, he also commented that world literature is a domain being constituted by the ever increasing rapidity of (transnational) interchange and traffic (“Verkehr”), noting that what is popular among the masses will spread out into all zones and regions, a tendency serious-minded thinkers (“Die Ernsten”) would strive in vain to resist. Such individuals must therefore form their own modest “church” (JA 38, 202-203), presumably in order to attain an “aesthetic autonomy” that would resist, as Martha Woodmansee has recently shown, nascent literary mass marketing strategies.5 Again, Goethe’s remarks anticipate

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5 According to Peter Weber, Goethe developed his world literature concept specifically in opposition to a program of national literature. Goethe, in Weber’s view, saw national particularities as just a “cover” for the “universally human” (“allgemein Menschliches”) configurations he would call forth (133-35).

6 Cf. Strich, who argues that Goethe developed the notion of world literature to counter nationalist trends in German Romantic circles (Weltliteratur 46). However, as Finney has indicated, German Romantics such as the Brothers Schlegel positively contributed to the growing interest in world literature in the early nineteenth century (290-61).

5 As Finney points out, this metonymic conflation “significantly differentiates” Goethe’s world literature “enterprise from the discipline of comparative literature today” (261). This reservation must be applied ipso facto to the relationship between world literature as Goethe understood it and the emerging field of transnational literary studies.

both the postmodern mass global marketing of culture and conservative reaction against this trend, though here too Goethe’s thinking is primarily informed by European rather than truly global tendencies.

Despite Goethe’s somewhat antipathetic response to the mass market aspect of world literature, his attitude toward what he articulated as an unavoidably emerging paradigm was generally positive. In 1828, after noting the friendly foreign reception of his world literature notion, a discursive formation he hopes will soon emerge through improved communication, Goethe elucidates the benefits of such inter-national literary interchange: “Eine jede Literatur ennuyiert sich zuletzt in sich selbst, wenn sie nicht durch fremde Teilnahme wieder aufgefrischt wird. Welcher Naturforscher erfreut sich nicht der Wunderdinge, die er durch Spiegelung hervorgebracht sieht?” (JA 38, 136-37). (“Every literature dissipates within itself when it is not reinvigorated through foreign participation. What researcher into nature doesn’t rejoice at the marvelous things which he sees brought forth through refraction?”) In addition to confirming the “scientific” perspective that permeates Goethe’s world literature articulations, this passage adduces a dynamic quality inherent in the world literature paradigm, a quality that is essential to the preservation of individual (national) literatures. World literature is thus “an ideal of the unification of all literatures into one literature where each nation would play its part in a universal concert” (Wellek 221). Wellek’s description captures the cosmopolitan spirit of the Weimar Classical milieu in which Goethe coined the term Weltliteratur, while emphasizing the status of “world literature” as, in part, a teleological projection, a future goal. Certainly, Goethe was not in a position in the early nineteenth century to foresee the potential effects of the vigorous conmingling taking place in the current age of multicultural exchange on a global scale. However, his emphasis on “foreign participation” within and among the discrete nation-states certainly expands the geographical and historical reach of the “hybrid cultural space” Bhabha sees inscribed in postcolonial literature (7). This is one reason why, as we will see, Bhabha finds Goethe’s world literature formulation a particularly valuable paradigm.

While the geopolitical homogenization that emerged in the wake of the Congress of Vienna, a dawning international mass market system, increased translation activity, and crossnational media coverage encouraged Goethe to sense the onset of world literature, he of course recognized that the constellation of a truly transnational literature, marked by thematic, stylistic, and even linguistic features drawn from the world and not anchored primarily in the traditions of individual nation-states was at best, as Wellek puts it, “a distant ideal” (221). In spite of his conflation of “world literature” with “European literature,” and in spite of a belief that early works of Egyptian, Indian, and Chinese literature could only be viewed as “curiosities” that lacked the potential to enhance the modern European’s ethical and aesthetic acculturation (“Bildung”) (JA 38, 278), Goethe’s

6 Bhabha uses this term specifically in connection with the work of Pepon Osorio (7-8).

7 Goethe somewhat contradicted this perspective in one of his conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann (on 31 January, 1827), where he states that in Chinese novels characters act, think, and feel like the characters in European novels, except that the Chinese protagonists act more ethically and with greater clarity and purity (GA 24, 227).
own poetic effort to approximate the ideal of hybridity in world literature is most evident in his poetic cycle Westöstlicher Divan (1819), a cycle inspired by his reading of the medieval Persian poet Hafiz. Drawing on both topical and structural features in the Persian’s poetry, and even striving to appropriate certain features in his language, the Divan represents Goethe’s attempt at the “completion and confirmation” of the poetic self, a self enacted through a “return” to the Orient as a locus of both difference and origin, as Edward Said notes in Orientalism (167-68). This, in turn, points to another reason a concept of world literature as transnational interchange appealed to Goethe: it allows the development of the poetic self to the fullest possible degree, enabling it to approach a personal totality that finds its objective corollary in the ideal of a universalized poetic framework.

Yet Goethe remained ambivalent throughout his career about the formation of a “world” literature—and not simply because of his antipathy toward globalized mass marketing. Thus, he could, on the one hand, tell his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827 that Germans will slip into “pedantic darkness” if they don’t attempt to look beyond their narrow geographic confines and embrace the impending arrival of the epoch of world literature (GA 24, 229) and then, on the other, argue only two years later that Germans have the most to lose from this dawning age (Strich, Weltliteratur 399). When he made his original pronouncement concerning world literature in 1827 Goethe assumed the Germans were assured of an “honorable role” in its formation due to current universal (that is, European) fascination with German literature (JA 38, 97). But if the remarkable achievements of German writers in Goethe’s age created the possibility that German arts and letters could play a substantive role in the nascent formation of a world literature, the particularisms that imbued German literature throughout its history (in contrast, for example, to French literature) made it doubtful that German literature would be able to retain its unique, specific character as it became constellated within a world literary process (Kaiser 12). Here, once again, Goethe’s concerns seem to anticipate our own, for the increasing globalization of commerce and culture at the present time is beginning to render the notion of a national literature obsolete by creating a transnational body of work on a truly worldwide scale.

Contemplating the problematic of subjective identity in the postcolonial age, Homi Bhaba examines globally the same problem of national spiritual fragmentation in the face of all-encompassing cultural border crossings that Goethe perceived as a purely domestic difficulty for his people:

How do we conceive of the "splitting" of the national subject? How do we articulate cultural differences within this vacillation of ideology in which the national discourse also participates, sliding ambivalently from one enunciatory position to another? What are the forms of life struggling to be represented in that unruly “time” of national culture, which Bakhtin surmounts in his reading of Goethe . . . What might be the cultural and political effects of the liminality of the nation, the margins of modernity, which come to be signified in the narrative temporalities of splitting, ambivalence and vacillation? (147)

These are precisely the issues that troubled Goethe as he wrestled with the concept of world literature—issues that were for him the result of Germany’s “liminality,” a liminality that had its basis in Germany’s political fragmentation, regionalism, and “unruly” (intellectually incoherent) national culture. Goethe
recognized the concomitant impossibility of even arriving at a truly “national discourse” through which a somewhat unified response to the trends generating a world literature paradigm could be brought to bear. Furthermore, if Goethe was objectively unable to overcome the “unruly time” of his national culture, and if Bhabha has correctly ascertained that such fractionalism and instability are general characteristics of our age, it becomes a matter of some interest to investigate why Bhabha believes Bakhtin transcended this volatility through his reading of Goethe.

According to Bhabha, Bakhtin was able to articulate an ambience of stable, phenomenally manifest national temporality in Goethe’s narratives by demonstrating how Goethe invests the most regional, local spaces in his work with a highly visible historical synchronicity (Bhabha 143). Indeed, in the essay to which Bhabha refers, “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel),” Bakhtin demonstrates that there is a dialectic interaction at work in Goethe’s oeuvre between temporal plenitude and concrete localized spatiality, a dialectic which allows Goethe to imbue world history with a rich, lived fullness, and, thereby, with an atmosphere of holistic and teleologically anchored stability. According to this view, in Goethe’s prose historical time becomes necessary time. Bakhtin even suggests that Goethe was the first author to evoke a sense of the “world” in its entirety through his spatio-temporal dialectics:

The locality became an irreplaceable part of the geographically and historically determined world, of that completely real and essentially visible world of human history, and the event became an essential and nontransferable moment in the time of this particular human history that occurred in this, and only this, geographically determined human world. The world and history did not become poorer or smaller as a result of this process of mutual concretization and interpenetration. On the contrary, they were condensed, compacted, and filled with the creative possibilities of subsequent real emergence and development. Goethe’s world is a germinative seed, utterly real, visibly available, and at the same time filled with an equally real future that is growing out of it. (50, Bakhtin’s italics)

If, as Bhabha suggests, Bakhtin was able to overcome the flux and indeterminacy of national culture when viewed from a diachronic perspective through his analysis of Goethe, it seems equally plausible to suggest that Goethe’s own telos in striving toward the evocation of a comprehensive and stable geographic matrix rooted in the local was triggered by the desire imaginatively to compensate for the genuine instability, fragmentation, and lack of cohesiveness that characterized German politics and letters in his time. If Germans in fact had the most to lose in the dawning age of world literature because of the country’s geopolitical and cultural particularisms, then Goethe could only configure the world and conjure stability and plenitude within the regional and the particular in his narratives. Furthermore, if we believe Bakhtin’s elegant argument that Goethe succeeded in doing just that, then the sage of Weimar might be plausibly suggested as a role model for authors in our own time who seek to come to grips with the demise of their national identity in a transnational, multicultural age.

German national identity began to coalesce once again in the 1830s and 1840s, just as it had during the wars of liberation against Napoleon. The political quietude and war weariness marking the Restoration period in the 1820s when Goethe
evolved his world literature concept created the intermediate lull between phases of intense nationalism in Germany and in Europe in general. This brief epoch was thus marked by an ambience of internationalism that formed the natural political environment in which the Weltliteratur paradigm could emerge. As a result, in the Young Germany age of the 1830s, leading cosmopolitan representatives of the Weltliteratur movement, such as Karl Gutzkow, had to argue that it was consistent with and even guaranteed the preservation of German nationality and the German spirit. Literature written in Germany continued to be acclaimed as German literature in the world at large while being castigated at home, and this world-literary condition provided a primary impetus and justification for a German national-cultural identity, in Gutzkow’s view. However, the more xenophobic and virulent form of nationalism which overtook Germany and most of Europe after the failed 1848 revolutions soon created a decisive break with any idealist, transnational, or crosscultural concept of world literature.

The term thus began to take on the associations with which it is still imbued today. It became synonymous with a collective reservoir of all texts from all places and all times, or, more narrowly, with canonical works that putatively represent the highest achievements of the Western tradition. As we are all aware, this latter view of world literature remains dominant in the United States today. Although Goethe’s notion of Bildung as the transcendence of one’s own narrow framework, as a widening of one’s own horizons through exposure, via travel and reading, to the thought and culture of other times, continued to exert a strong appeal for the nineteenth-century liberal German bourgeoisie, the so-called Bildungsbürgertum, it lost its natural, if tacit, association with Weltliteratur as the sage of Weimar envisioned it. Perhaps the last direct investment of the Weltliteratur paradigm with a cosmopolitan transnational spirit in the nineteenth century occurred in the 1848 Communist Manifesto, where Marx and Engels wrote: “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature” (qtd. in Lawall 20).

Indeed, contrary to the predictions of Marx and Engels, narrow-minded nationalism became more and more predominant in Europe after 1848. Thus, as Kaiser notes, Goethe’s world literature concept was drained of its historical-philosophical-humanistic substance and came to signify canonicity or comprehensiveness (18). To be sure, comparative literature as a crossnational discipline began to take shape in Germany late in the nineteenth century, and a lively debate began at that time on the relationship between Goethe’s notion of Weltliteratur and the new discipline of comparative literature (see Weissstein 191-94), a debate carried on well into the twentieth century. However, the nuance of global transnationalism inherent in Goethe’s articulation of his construct rarely if ever came to the fore in these fin de siècle discussions. Even the eminent and still influential Danish critic Georg Brandes, who wrote in 1899 a brief essay entitled “Weltlitteratur” for the periodical Das litterarische Echo at the behest of its editors,  

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*For an overview of world literature’s development as a discursive formation in Germany from Gutzkow and Young Germany through the later nineteenth century, see Kaiser 16–19. On the continuing tendency in the United States to link this paradigm with canonicity, see Lawall 20–32.*
provides a “great works” oriented definition. Admitting at the outset that he has forgotten the context in which Goethe used the term, Brandes argues that only a handful of authors “belong” to world literature; Shakespeare is a member of this exclusive club, for example, while Marlowe and Coleridge only possess the status of “English” authors (1-2). Nor does Brandes assume an automatic connection between inclusion and literary merit. Thus, his fellow Dane Hans Christian Andersen attains a membership denied more deserving countrymen such as Johan Ludvig Heiberg solely because of Andersen’s worldwide popularity (4). Clearly, Brandes’s notion of world literature, a notion not uncommon among his contemporaries, has only a tenuous connection to the paradigm as Goethe understood it.

Ernst Elster’s influential 1901 essay “Weltliteratur und Litteraturvergleichung” (World Literature and Literary Comparison) provides a somewhat more accurate—if one-sided—view of the world literature paradigm. According to Elster, world literature signified for Goethe only the expansion of literary interests beyond the confines of national borders, a circumstance created by a broader sphere for literary commerce. Elster argues that Goethe did not intend his term to signify crossnational influences among the world’s authors, nor to foreground how literary wheat is separated from literary chaff and exerts an influence beyond the time and space of its origin. According to this view, Goethe’s term even excluded the impact of past works; Weltliteratur subtends only the present, and Goethe “only wants to emphasize that the international market is open” (35-36). Comparative literature, on the other hand, involves juxtaposing works (usually marked by temporal and spatial proximity to each other) and, through determining their differences and concordances, comprehending the “great current” of literary life (39). Though Elster’s conceptualization of how Goethe understood his own term is overly narrow in scope, his recognition that the internationalization of the literary marketplace is central to Weltliteratur as a discursive formation again suggests that even at its origin this concept has a closer structural affinity with what we now call “transnational literary studies” than does “comparative literature.”

Another scholar who emphasized the international marketing element central to Goethe’s construct was Fritz Strich, perhaps Weltliteratur’s greatest twentieth century adherent, as well as its most prolific investigator. At a relatively early stage in his career, Strich followed the lead of Elster and other turn-of-the-century analysts in examining the interrelationship between “Weltliteratur und vergleichende Literaturgeschichte” (World Literature and Comparative Literary History) in an essay with the same title, published in 1930. At the outset of this piece, Strich rejects the assumption that “comparative literary history” should be equated with the study of international relationships among the world’s literatures, since literary studies confined to a single nation also inevitably resort to comparisons between different authors and works in that one country (422). He proposes the term “world literature” to signify what we continue to call “comparative literature.” Strich’s essay was progressive for its time in stressing that “world literature” was not to be equated with “European literature,” and in promoting a belief that renewed attention to “world literary science” („Weltliteratur-
Wissenschaft") (439, 440) could build bridges of understanding, tolerance, and productive exchange among diverse populations. However, the article is generally rooted in a Geistesgeschichte mentality common to the 1930s. As such, it is obsessed with differentiating between discrete national spirits and insists throughout that the unique mentality of a “Volk” is always reflected in literary production and in the dynamics of cultural interchange.9

Strich’s magnum opus, Goethe und die Weltliteratur, reflects similar predilections with respect to distinguishing between world literature and comparative literature, and to articulating the spiritual essences of European nations, the Far East, and America. However, because the book appeared in 1946, not long after the end of World War II, it also reflects the same somewhat prophetic ambience of collapsed cultural borders, of an emerging internationalization of the literary marketplace, and of transnational aesthetic exchange on a universal scale, present both in Goethe’s own world literature paradigm (a century earlier) and in our own contemporary articulations of postcolonial, post-Cold War hybridity. Of course, Strich’s global vision—like Goethe’s for the most part—is Eurocentric with respect to center and origin: “A European literature, thus one between the literatures of Europe and which mediates and is exchanged between the European peoples, is the first stage of world literature, which, beginning from here, will continue to spread and will develop into a complex which finally encompasses the world” (27). Like Goethe before him, Strich is also wedded to the notion of discrete national literary identities. Nevertheless, the comprehensive world-embracing complex he envisions subtends a globalization of the forces driving literary production, marketing, and interchange.10

An even more powerful sense of actualized contemporary globalization than is evident in Strich’s study is manifest in the essays included in Weltliteratur, a 1952 Festschrift in his honor. In “Die Entfaltung der Weltliteratur als Prozess” (The Development of World Literature as a Process), Anni Carlsson argues that Goethe signified through his neologism those works that transcend national, temporal, and linguistic borders and address a universal audience by means of an ever more comprehensive communication network mediating a world literary discursive formation (51-52). Erich Auerbach bemoans the same trends in his “Philologie der Weltliteratur” (Philology of World Literature), for he believes they will lead to a homogenization destructive to all distinct cultural traditions. He even envisions a rapidly approaching age when only a handful of literary languages, perhaps just one, will be in evidence—an event that would constitute, he argues, both world literature’s ultimate realization and its destruction. Writing in the coldest phase of the Cold War, Auerbach indicates that such standard-

9 In this preoccupation with putative national-spiritual attributes, Strich was undoubtedly influenced not just by contemporary trends, but by Goethe as well. In adumbrating his world literature paradigm, Goethe resorted to discussing the “particularities” ("Eigentümlichkeiten") of certain European peoples whom he believed were closely involved in the dawning world literary discourse (JA 38, 204-205 and GA 14, 905-907).

10 The equation of world literature with cultural borderlessness is even more strongly evident in Strich’s brief monograph Goethe und die Schweiz (Goethe and Switzerland). Strich maintains there that Swiss literature in its multilingual totality can be regarded as a microcosm of world literature, and that Switzerland’s “indivisible” (transcultural) “unity” had a formative impact on Goethe’s thought (14).
ization inevitably bears “European-American” and “Russian-Bolshevik” imprints (39). Given this dual context of uniformity and enmity, he believes that the utopian notion of reconciliation through world literature is out of date (42), and he concludes that the imbrication of Goethe’s paradigm in the 1950s with necessity and the imprimatur of mass movements is in fact highly ungoethean (40). In both Carlsson’s rather positive and Auerbach’s highly pessimistic vision of world literature at mid-century, we can glimpse the onset of a cultural globalization mediated by transnational marketing and rapid worldwide communication.

Among American critics, the association of world literature with canonicity and masterworks became so persistent in the 1940s and 1950s that the authors of “The Levin Report” (1965), the first of three reports submitted to the American Comparative Literature Association on professional standards in the field, articulated a fundamental opposition “between Humanities or World Literature or Great Books at the undergraduate level and Comparative literature as a graduate discipline” (23) in order to distinguish the critical practices of comparatists from a “great books” approach that had proved particularly congenial to practitioners of the New Criticism. Thus, for example, in his 1940 Preface to World Literature, Albert Guérard had credited Goethe with coining the term “World Literature” and praised his cosmopolitanism, while simultaneously expressing a concern that Goethe’s authority in this domain might cause world literature to be regarded as an all-too “formidable subject, fit only for such a titan of culture as he, or, at second-hand, for his learned disciples” (3). On the contrary, Guérard reassured his readers, world literature arises in the nursery and not in graduate school (4), for there is a clear distinction between comparative literature as the study of crossnational literary relations and world literature as “the body of those works enjoyed in common, ideally by all mankind, practically by our own Western group of civilization” (16).

This linkage between world literature and the “great books” tradition has subsequently been challenged by several critics during the past quarter century. Robert J. Clements, for example, asserts in Comparative Literature as Academic Discipline (1978) that world literature is “a much abused term in America” (7) and calls the definition of world literature contained in the first ACLA report a “sanction to a misnomer invented largely by textbook publishers” that was finally corrected in a second ACLA report issued ten years after the first (28). 11 Clements defines world literature “as the maximum geographical dimension of comparative literature” (26) and argues that its realization as a discipline cognizant of a still developing age of cultural globalization should be the goal toward which contemporary comparatists strive (26-28).

Today, a postmodern literature marked by a blend of national identities, cultures, and even languages, suggests that an artistic transnationalism propelled by

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11 Indeed, “The Green Report” (1975), noting an increasing interest in non-Western cultures, advises that we must never again conflate “world literature’ with the literature of our inherited culture” (36). However, this report continues to associate world literature courses with undergraduate offerings requiring no foreign language training, and tacitly assumes that its “equation” with comparative literature is unfortunate (30). Given the reality of world literature classes as they are taught even today in this country, the report’s perspective in this regard seems to me altogether reasonable.
globalized marketing, worldwide communication networks, and literary interchanges unimpeded by political and linguistic borders is no longer merely “at hand,” as Clements, following the lead of Goethe, suggested in 1978 (26). Though the term “multiculturalism” signifies for many an ideal still to be crystallized (or, for conservatives, avoided) through critical studies and classroom praxis, it is in fact a reality. Furthermore, the role of world literature as a paradigm within the multicultural matrix continues to be debated by leading scholars. At the outset of his 1987 essay “World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism,” a slightly revised version of an article first published in 1986 under the title “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson notes: “In these last years of the twentieth century, the old question of a properly world literature reasserts itself.” Distancing himself from conservative social critics such as William Bennett, who continue to equate this term with a Western canon composed of “Graeco-Judaic” masterworks, Jameson asserts “that the reinvention of cultural studies in the United States demands the reinvention, in a new situation, of what Goethe long ago theorized as ‘world literature’” (139). This reinvention entails coming to grips with what Jameson calls Third World literature, about which he makes a series of broad generalizations, arguing, for example, that Third World writers consistently strive to produce national allegories grounded in a materialist perspective. Although Aijaz Ahmad has rightly criticized Jameson’s reliance on a “Three Worlds” model—a model that, because of the recent collapse of the “Second World” and increasing cultural hybridization on a global scale, now seems completely anachronistic—Jameson nevertheless demonstrates, as did Clements before him, that, correctly understood, Goethe’s paradigm can be employed to promote critical engagement with previously ignored bodies of work.

In the summer of 1987, an NEH-sponsored workshop was held at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst on the “Theory and Teaching of World Literature.” The report generated by this institute argued that a world literature curricula should ideally revolve around textual clusters marked by diversity with respect to nationality, culture, and genre. It also stressed the need to avoid conflating world literature with a purely Western canon (1-3). The institute’s director, Sarah Lawall, elaborates these points in her introduction to the collection Reading World Literature, which she edited. There she stresses that the world literature paradigm was not initially marked by a canonic approach that valorizes the study of a narrowly defined list of “great books.” Instead, it needs to be understood within the context of Goethe’s efforts to bring to the fore the humanity of Germany’s neighbors after the Napoleonic Wars, and to enhance European intercourse of all kinds. Goethe’s notion of world literature, Lawall continues, is thus imbued by a strong openness to, and provides a basis for interchange with, the cultural and linguistic Other. It is temporally dynamic and oriented toward the future rather than the past (12-20). Homi Bhabha is equally positive about the possible contemporary application of Goethe’s paradigm:

Goethe suggests that the “inner nature of the whole nation as well as the individual man works all unconsciously.” When this is placed alongside his idea that the cultural life of the nation is “unconsciously” lived, then there may be a sense in which world literature could be an emergent, prefigurative category that is concerned with a form of cultural dissensus and alterity, where non-consensual...
terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma. The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of “otherness.” Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature. (12)

While Lawall draws on the Goethean origins of “world literature” to highlight and help justify the need for moving beyond the cultural narrowness and temporal stasis now associated with the paradigm through its conflation with canonic models of teaching and critical research, Bhabha focuses on its potential for recognizing the cultural identity of oppressed groups through examining the self-Other dialectic articulated in their literatures. Both eloquently demonstrate the value of this concept for the postcolonial, transnational age in which we live.

Clearly, the world literature paradigm has undergone a number of major transformations since its inception in the 1820s. Originally conceived by Goethe as a way of signifying the creation of supranational cultural interchange through improved communication, marketing, and media networks in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, during the first three quarters of the twentieth century world literature came to be associated with timeless masterpieces by Occidental thinkers and with “great books” courses and textbooks designed for beginning undergraduate study. In the 1980s and 1990s, Goethe’s concept has been employed by scholars who wish to challenge these canonic traditions, in spite of the term’s Eurocentric roots. Today, when the very notion of a “national” literature is being called into question,12 “world literature” as a discursive formation can continue to play a productive heuristic role. Emily Apter has recently argued that “one of the obvious imperatives of the future is to continue reinventing world literature with a concern not to warehouse theoretical culture” (94). At the outset of the new millennium, such a reinvention must subsume the immanent character of world literature, the circumstance that cultural globalization is informing the structure, content, and even language of individual works themselves. This is largely due to the increasingly globalized character of literary marketplaces and to the capacity for instantaneous worldwide interchanges. However, “world literature” may concomitantly articulate a counter trend: as superstructural improvements in communication and globalized capitalism threaten to make culture ever more universally homogeneous, a more focus on the subnational—the particular, local, and regional—dimensions of social life may become more and more attractive to authors seeking to establish a distinct identity, a discrete voice. Here, too, Goethe’s experience and his paradigm may serve as a role model.

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12 See, for example, Rey Chow, who argues that comparative literature’s critical efficacy in undermining the idea of national literatures as self-contained fields could be applied ipso facto to world literature as a contemporary discursive formation: “Instead of reconsolidating the boundaries of nations through the study of national languages and literatures, comparative literature should remain the place where theory is used to put the very concept of the nations in crisis, and with that, the concept of the nations as the origin of a particular literature” (112).
Works Cited


Chow, Rey. “In the Name of Comparative Literature.” Bernheimer 107-116.


