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David Damrosch: What Is World Literature?

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Goethe Coins a Phrase

“I am more and more convinced,” Goethe remarked, “that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men. . . . I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” Speaking to his young disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827, the seventy-seven-year-old Goethe used his newly minted term *Weltliteratur*, which passed into common currency after Eckermann published his *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* in 1835, three years after the poet’s death. The term crystallized both a literary perspective and a new cultural awareness, a sense of an arising global modernity, whose epoch, as Goethe predicted, we now inhabit. Yet the term has also been extraordinarily elusive, from the moment of its formulation onward: What does it really mean to speak of a “world literature”? Which literature, whose world? What relation to the national literatures whose production continued unabated even after Goethe announced their obsolescence? What new relations between Western Europe and the rest of the globe, between antiquity and modernity, between the nascent mass culture and elite productions?

If we look to Goethe for guidance, the perplexities only multiply, fueled by his constantly shifting personality—his unstable mix of modesty and megalomania, cosmopolitanism and jingoism, classicism and Romanticism, wide-ranging curiosity and self-absorbed dogmatism. Eckermann’s account is both a portrait of the great man and the record of his inability to grasp his subject; Goethe is a diamond, Eckermann tells us, that casts a different color in every direction. Eckermann, on the other hand, is a diamond in the rough: of humble origins, largely self-taught, an aspiring poet and dramatist, he seeks to model his life and work on Goethe, whom he knows

he can never measure up to. Both *Bild* and *Bildungsroman*—objective portrait of Goethe and subjective autobiography of Eckermann himself—the *Conversations with Goethe* is a gallery of scenes of instruction, seduction, influence, and transmission, all of which have much to tell us about the worldliness of literature. Looking at Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* within the multiple frames Eckermann provides, we can already find all the major complexities, tensions, and opportunities that we still encounter today as we try to grasp our rapidly expanding world and its exfoliating literatures.

Indeed, for Eckermann Goethe is the living embodiment of world literature, even of world culture as a whole. Late in his account, he records Goethe’s remark that “the daemons, to tease and make sport with men, have placed among them single figures so alluring that everyone strives after them, and so great that nobody reaches them”; Goethe names Raphael, Mozart, Shakespeare, and Napoleon as examples. “I thought in silence,” Eckermann adds, “that the daemons had intended something of the kind with Goethe—he is a form too alluring not to be striven after, and too great to be reached” (271).

Even to be as close to Goethe as he is, Eckermann has come a long way. Raised in rural poverty, he had managed to find a clerk’s job at the local court. “At this time I heard the name *Goethe* for the first time and first acquired a volume of his poetry. I read his poems, and constantly reread them, with a pleasure that no words can describe. . . . it seemed to me that in these poems my own hitherto unknown essence was reflected back to me [*zurückgespiegelt*]. . . . I lived for whole weeks and months in these poems. . . . I thought and spoke of nothing but Goethe” (*Gespräche*, 21).¹ Friends at court arranged a two-year scholarship for Eckermann to study law at Göttingen. His fellowship ending, he could not bear to pursue a legal career. Living penuriously on the last remains of his fellowship, he wrote poems and composed a work of literary criticism, *Contributions to Poetry, with Particular Attention to Goethe*, and sent the manuscript to Goethe, hoping he would recommend it to his publisher. Some weeks passed; hearing nothing, Eckermann decided to risk everything and go see Goethe in person. It took over a week to walk to Weimar. “Along the way, often made wearisome by hot weather, I kept repeating to myself the comforting feeling that I was proceeding under the special protection of benevolent spirits, and that this journey might have important consequences for my later life” (*Gespräche*, 30).

This is an extreme understatement. Eckermann at this point had no

¹ In general I will be quoting from the English translation of Eckermann’s book, but that translation is incomplete. Passages I’ve taken directly from the German will be labeled *Gespräche*.

resources whatever, no prospects; he could only hope that Goethe—one of the most eminent writers in Europe and subject to an incessant stream of visitors, pleas for assistance, requests for references and reviews—would take a special interest in him and help him to some sort of literary career. Cast in the fairy-tale role of donor figure, Goethe does all this and more: he strides into the room, an impressive figure “in a blue frock-coat,” Eckermann says, oddly adding, “and with shoes.” He sits Eckermann on a sofa and says the magic words: “‘I have just come from *you*,’ said he; ‘I have been reading your writing all morning; it needs no recommendation—it recommends itself’” (*Conversations*, 1). Not only does he arrange immediately for the book’s publication; at their next meeting, a few days later, he takes over Eckermann’s life. Speaking with “the impetuous and decided manner of a youth” (2), Goethe enlists Eckermann to organize and assess an archive of his early notes and manuscripts, and commands him to move to Jena, where Goethe will be living in the fall.

Goethe’s reaction was, in fact, a little less surprising than Eckermann’s account suggests. Discussing the book’s genesis in an afterword to her definitive edition of the *Gespräche*, Regine Otto notes that when he sent Goethe his manuscript in May, Eckermann had written a cover letter detailing his administrative abilities and indicating his availability for a post as personal secretary, should Goethe have need of someone deeply acquainted with his works and sympathetic to his views (*Gespräche*, 686). As Eckermann reports it, though, Goethe’s response is not only spontaneous but magically swift: “I have already written about a lodging for you and other things necessary to make your stay pleasant,” Goethe tells him, including letters of introduction to close friends of his in Jena. “‘You will enjoy their circle,’ said he; ‘I have passed many delightful evenings there. Jean Paul, Tieck, the Schlegels, and all the other distinguished men of Germany have visited there, and always with delight; and even now it is the union-point of many learned men, artists, and other persons of note’” (*Conversations*, 3). The fairy tale is coming true.

Eckermann’s admission to this charmed circle is his introduction to the world of world literature as Goethe practices it: less a set of works than a network. As Fritz Strich has observed, this network had a fundamentally economic character, serving to promote “a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange” (*Goethe and World Literature*, 13). In 1847 Marx and Engels adopted Goethe’s term precisely in the context of newly global trade relations: “The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cos-

mopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed" (*Communist Manifesto*, 421). The paragraph that begins with these sentences ends with the lines that form the first epigraph to this book: "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature." For Marx and Engels, as for Goethe, world literature is the quintessential literature of modern times.

The dramatic acceleration of globalization since their era, however, has greatly complicated the idea of a world literature. Most immediately, the sheer scope of the term today can breed a kind of scholarly panic. "What can one make of such an idea?" Claudio Guillén has asked. "The sum total of all national literatures? A wild idea, unattainable in practice, worthy not of an actual reader but of a deluded keeper of archives who is also a multimillionaire. The most harebrained editor has never aspired to such a thing" (*The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, 38). Though it has a certain surface plausibility, Guillén's objection is hardly decisive; after all, no one denies that the term "insect" is viable, even though there are so many billions of insects in the world that no one person can ever be bitten by each of them. Still, the sum total of the world's literatures can be sufficiently expressed by the blanket term "literature." The idea of world literature can usefully continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature. I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe). In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base, but Guillén's cautionary focus on actual readers makes good sense: a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture.

A viable concept when delimited in this way, world literature still consists of a huge corpus of works. These works, moreover, stem from widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference, and poetics. A specialist in classical Chinese poetry can gradually, over years of labor, develop a close familiarity with the vast substratum beneath each brief T'ang Dynasty poem, but most of this context is lost to foreign readers when the poem travels abroad. Lacking specialized knowledge, the foreign reader is likely to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work, and even careful scholarly attempts to read a foreign work in light of

a Western critical theory are deeply problematic. As A. Owen Aldridge has said, “it is difficult to point to remarkably successful examples of the pragmatic application of critical systems in a comparative context. The various theories cancel each other out” (*The Reemergence of World Literature*, 33). Or as the Indian scholar D. Prempati has pointedly remarked, “I do not know whether the innumerable Western critical models which, like multi-nationals, have taken over the Indian critical scene would meaningfully serve any critical purpose at this juncture.”²

Some scholars have argued that literary works across cultures do exhibit what Northrop Frye thought of as archetypes or what more recently the French comparatist Étiemble has called “invariants.” In his lively polemic *Ouverture(s) sur un comparatisme planétaire*, Étiemble argued that common literary patterns must provide the necessary basis for any truly global understanding of literature. Yet such universals quickly shade into vague generalities that hold less and less appeal today, at a time when ideals of melting-pot harmony have faded in favor. Scholars of world literature risk becoming little more than the literary ecotourists described by Susan Lanser, people “who dwell mentally in one or two (usually Western) countries, summer metaphorically in a third, and visit other places for brief interludes” (“Compared to What?” 281).

A central argument of this book will be that, properly understood, world literature is not at all fated to disintegrate into the conflicting multiplicity of separate national traditions; nor, on the other hand, need it be swallowed up in the white noise that Janet Abu-Lughod has called “global babble.” My claim is that world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. This book is intended to explore this mode of circulation and to clarify the ways in which works of world literature can best be read. It is important from the outset to realize that just as there never has been a single set canon of world literature, so too no single way of reading can be appropriate to all texts, or even to any one text at all times. The variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features—one of its greatest strengths when the work is well presented and read well, and its greatest vulnerability when it is mishandled or misappropriated by its newfound foreign friends.

² “Why Comparative Literature in India?” 63. Both Aldridge and Prempati were reacting against efforts, popular in the seventies, to “apply” structuralist and other Western methods directly to foreign works. A cogent critique of this practice can be found in Pauline Yu, “Alienation Effects: Comparative Literature and the Chinese Tradition,” though Yu herself holds out hope that more nuanced studies may still be productive.

A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. A given work can enter into world literature and then fall out of it again if it shifts beyond a threshold point along either axis, the literary or the worldly. Over the centuries, an unusually shifty work can come in and out of the sphere of world literature several different times; and at any given point, a work may function as world literature for some readers but not others, and for some kinds of reading but not others. The shifts a work may undergo, moreover, do not reflect the unfolding of some internal logic of the work in itself but come about through often complex dynamics of cultural change and contestation. Very few works secure a quick and permanent place in the limited company of perennial World Masterpieces; most works shift around over time, even moving into and out of the category of “the masterpiece,” as we will see in the third chapter below.

As it moves into the sphere of world literature, far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways. To follow this process, it is necessary to look closely at the transformations a work undergoes in particular circumstances, which is why this book highlights the issues of circulation and translation and focuses on detailed case studies throughout. To understand the workings of world literature, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of the work of art: a literary work *manifests* differently abroad than it does at home.

The rich variability of world literature is already fully evident in Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann. Goethe had a lively sense of the ways his own books could benefit by translation, even as he himself read voraciously in a surprisingly wide range of foreign literatures. Having found in Eckermann the perfect middleman for his own literary trade, Goethe arranged for his disciple to settle into lodgings near him, first in Jena and then permanently in Weimar. There Eckermann met many of Goethe’s visitors from all over Europe and began to take part in the network’s activity. He published poems, collaborated on opera libretti, made translations from French, read widely, at Goethe’s request, so that he could bring significant new writers to Goethe’s attention, and kept a detailed journal recording his conversations with Goethe, with an eye toward eventual publication.

Through these conversations, we gain a nuanced picture of Goethe’s manifold encounters with foreign texts. He constantly recommends to Eckermann books he has been reading, in English, French, Italian, and Latin, and he reads translations as readily as originals, even in the case

of his own works. “I do not like to read my *Faust* any more in German,” he remarks at one point, but in a new French translation he finds his masterwork “again fresh, new, and spirited”—even though the translation is mostly in prose (276). Eckermann’s initial response to Goethe’s poetry, of finding his own essence reflected back to him, thus parallels Goethe’s experience of the international circulation of his work, which he regularly describes in terms of “mirroring” (*Spiegelung*). Goethe reads English and French commentaries on German literature with great avidity, finding the foreign perspective sharper and clearer than German criticism can be. As he wrote in an article for his journal *Kunst und Alterthum*, “Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one. What naturalist does not take pleasure in the wonderful things that he sees produced by reflection in a mirror? Now what a mirror in the field of ideas and morals means, everyone has experienced in himself, and once his attention is aroused, he will understand how much of his education he owes to it” (“Some Passages,” 8).

Goethe is particularly intrigued when the foreign press reflects his own work back to him, and in his first published use of his new term *Weltliteratur* he sees this process as less a matter of individual than of national pride. Late in January 1827, Goethe wrote an essay on two French reviews of a new play, *Le Tasse: Drame historique en cinq actes*, by the playwright Alexander Duval, a work closely based on Goethe’s own play *Torquato Tasso*. Goethe quotes at length from the two reviews, both of which note Duval’s dependence on Goethe’s play (what one reviewer calls “felicitous borrowings,” we would now call plagiarism). The two reviews give diametrically opposed assessments of the two *Tassos*: one sees Duval as a pale imitation of Goethe, in whose inspiring philosophical discussions “we encounter a full and deep meditation which perhaps the masses have not been able to grasp,” whereas the other reviewer sees Duval’s play as a marked improvement on Goethe’s (“the monotony of its dialogue seems completely unbearable to us”).

Quoting evenhandedly from both reviews, Goethe declines to respond in his own defense, apart from an ironic aside at foreigners who show their appreciation of German works “by borrowing from us without thanks, and making use of us without acknowledgment.” His chief purpose is to stimulate his countrymen to follow the international circulation of works, and he encourages his readers by appealing to their—and his own—national pride: “there is being formed a universal world literature, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. All the nations review our work; they praise, censure, accept, and reject, imitate and misrepresent us, open or

close their hearts to us. All this we must accept with equanimity, since this attitude, taken as a whole, is of great value to us.”³ From this point of view, the world beyond is only a larger and better version of the world at home. As he wrote elsewhere, in an essay on a German translation of Carlyle’s life of Schiller: “The wide world, extensive as it is, is only an expanded fatherland, and will, if looked at aright, be able to give us no more than what our home soil can endow us with also” (“Some Passages,” 10).

To some extent, Goethe’s views show the imperial self-projection that Barbara Herrnstein Smith sees in *Contingencies of Value* as a danger lurking within major-power cosmopolitanism: the imperial self’s “system of self-securing,” she says, is not necessarily “‘corrected’ by cosmopolitanism. Rather, in enlarging its view ‘from China to Peru,’ it 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” (54). Goethe, however, lacks the secure cultural standpoint that could allow his imperial view to collapse into a self-confirming narcissism. For all his pride in his own achievements and those of friends like Schiller, Goethe has an uneasy sense that German culture is provincial, lacking a great history, lacking political unity. He can’t afford to grant “national literature” too much meaning, since he doesn’t even live *in* a proper nation at all.

Despite the strategic sincerity with which he appeals to German national pride in his article on the *Tasso* reviews, Goethe begins that very article by noting that it is France whose stages command “a decisive supremacy” (*eine entschiedene Oberherrschaft*) in the theatrical world. Paris is the cultural crucible in which even German plays must strive for recognition and in which their strengths and weaknesses will most clearly be revealed. It is far from certain, moreover, that the provincial work will manage to meet French and English standards. Lacking a strong literary tradition at home, how can a German writer ever live up to the great models of wealthier traditions? “Shakespeare gives us golden apples in silver dishes,” he tells Ecker-

³ The conclusion of Goethe’s article is given in Hans-Joachim Schulz, “Johann W. von Goethe: Some Passages Pertaining to the Concept of World Literature,” 5. The full article appears in Goethe’s *Schriften zur Literatur* 2:171–74, and its composition history is lovingly rehearsed in the extensive apparatus—twice the size of the article itself—given in 5:237–43, where the interested reader can trace the article’s evolution from Goethe’s first draft through its subsequent emendations in pencil, black ink, red ink, and pencil again. This sumptuous edition, published in 1980 under the auspices of the Akademie der Wissenschaft der DDR, testifies to lasting national pride in Goethe—a pride only heightened by the need of what was then East Germany to assert its cultural identity over against West Germany.

mann, adding ruefully, “We get, indeed, the silver dishes by studying his works; but, unfortunately, we have only potatoes to put into them” (99).

Goethe’s stance is thus very different from the triumphalist cosmopolitanism with which a leading French critic, Philarète Euphémon Chasles, introduced a new course, “The Comparison of Foreign Literature,” in Paris in January 1835. Opening his lecture with the figures of Cervantes and Shakespeare, poorly understood by their own contemporary countrymen, Chasles announces that his course will study the influence of great minds beyond their own borders—and above all, in France. This focus, he tells his students, simply reflects the fact that “France is the most sensitive of all countries,” receptive to the passionate advances of all nations. Contemplating his homeland’s charms, Chasles falls into an extended erotic reverie:

She is a sleepless and restless country that vibrates with all impressions and that palpitates and grows enthusiastic for the maddest and the noblest ones; a country which loves to seduce and be seduced, to receive and communicate sensation, to be excited by what charms it, and to propagate the emotion it receives. . . . She is the center, but the center of sensitivity; she directs civilization, less perhaps by opening up the route to the people who border her than by going forward herself with a giddy and contagious passion. What Europe is to the rest of the world, France is to Europe; everything reverberates toward her, everything ends with her. (“Foreign Literature Compared,” 21–22)

And so on. Infinitely receptive as Chasles’s France is, however, she carefully controls her own borders: she will go out for a mad fling when and where she pleases, but foreigners should not expect to move in with her. A green card is not in the cards, and her rejuvenating forays may open up no new routes at all for the suitors ringing her borders.

The writer from a marginal culture is in a double bind. With little to go on at home, a young writer can only achieve greatness by emulating desirable foreign models—“the need for an intercourse with great predecessors is the sure sign of a higher talent,” Goethe says. “Study Molière, study Shakespeare” (150)—yet these models can have a crushing weight. Within their own cultural context, this weight may be bearable: working among great contemporaries like Ben Jonson and Marlowe, Goethe remarks, Shakespeare was like Mont Blanc, only the highest of a range of great Alps. But if Mont Blanc were set down amid the flat fields of the Lüneberg Heath in Lower Saxony, “you would be rendered speechless with astonishment at

its immensity” (26). Looking at a set of engravings of scenes from Shakespeare’s plays, Goethe cannot repress a shudder:

“It is even terrifying,” said Goethe, “to look through these little pictures. Thus are we first made to feel the infinite wealth and grandeur of Shakespeare. There is no *motif* in human life which he has not exhibited and expressed. And all with what ease and freedom! . . . He is even too rich and too powerful. A productive nature ought not to read more than one of his dramas in a year, if it would not be wrecked entirely. . . . How many excellent Germans have been ruined by him and Calderon!” (99)

If Goethe’s provincial anxiety provides one counterbalance to his imperial acquisitiveness, his extraordinary writerly receptivity provides another. He loves foreign works as much for their ineradicable difference from his own practices as for their novel employment of themes and strategies that he finds familiar. These two sides to his response can be seen in his shrewd appraisals of two foreign works, a Serbian poem and a Chinese novel, that he shows Eckermann in the very days he is formulating the term *Weltliteratur*. On 29 January 1827, Eckermann records a conversation that includes discussion of contemporary French poetry, allusions to Horace and to the Persian poet Hafiz, and discussion of Goethe’s own just-completed drama *Helena*, a work that begins as a classical tragedy and ends as a modern opera. Turning from the perusal of this hybrid, Goethe picks up a different kind of work. “Here you have something new;—read it,” he says:

He handed to me a translation by Herr Gerhard of a Serbian poem. It was very beautiful, and the translation was so simple and clear that there was no disturbance in the contemplation of the object. It was entitled *The Prison-Key*. I say nothing of the course of the action, except that the conclusion seemed to me abrupt and rather unsatisfactory. (131)

Eckermann is displeased with the poem’s abruptness, its violation of neo-classical canons of balance and harmony, but Goethe disagrees: “That,” said Goethe, “is the beauty of it; for it thus leaves a sting in the heart. . . . that which is set forth in the poem is really new and beautiful; and the poet acted very wisely in delineating this alone and leaving the rest to the reader” (131).

Two days later, Eckermann comes to see Goethe again, and now Goethe’s reading has ranged still farther from Western Europe:

Dined with Goethe. “Within the last few days, since I saw you,” said he, “I have read many things; especially a Chinese novel,

which occupies me still and seems to me very remarkable.”

“Chinese novel!” said I; “that must look strange enough.”

“Not so much as you might think,” said Goethe; “the Chinese think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, except that all they do is more clear, pure, and decorous, than with us.

“With them all is orderly, citizen-like, without great passion or poetic flight; and there is a strong resemblance to my *Hermann and Dorothea*, as well as to the English novels of Richardson.”

(132)

Goethe—who himself is writing a novella at this time and struggling to find an appropriate ending—sees in the Chinese novel a version of his own ideal, as much social as literary: “It is by this severe moderation in everything that the Chinese Empire has sustained itself for thousands of years, and will endure hereafter.” This elevated moderation, moreover, gives him a welcome counter to the dissolute poetry of a leading contemporary French poet, Pierre-Jean de Béranger, whom he is also currently reading (brothels and bars are Béranger’s settings of choice): “I find a highly remarkable contrast to this Chinese novel in the *Chansons de Béranger*, which have, almost every one, some immoral licentious subject for their foundation, and which would be extremely odious to me if managed by a genius inferior to Béranger.”

Even as he takes heart from the kinship he senses with imperial Chinese prose writers, Goethe acutely perceives a range of distinctive features of Chinese literary practice. Legends, he remarks, are constantly alluded to, forming a running commentary on the action; nature is not realistically presented but is symbolic of human character (“There is much talk about the moon, but it does not alter the landscape, its light is conceived to be as bright as day itself”). Even furniture serves to illustrate character: “For instance, ‘I heard the lovely girls laughing, and when I got sight of them they were sitting on cane chairs.’ There you have, at once, the prettiest situation; for cane chairs are necessarily associated with the greatest lightness and elegance” (132).

These observations show a fascinating mix of elements. Goethe is partly responding to cultural difference (the weight given to exemplary legends), partly projecting his own values outward (he takes the cane chairs to signify what *he* would have used them to mean), and partly finding in the foreign text a middle quality, a distinctive novelty that is like-but-unlike practice at home (the intimate connection of character and landscape had been a staple of intensely subjective Romantic poetry, but Goethe sees the connection in the Chinese novel as showing a more restrained and ordered universe of correspondences). Any full response to a foreign text is likely to

operate along all three of these dimensions: a sharp *difference* we enjoy for its sheer novelty; a gratifying *similarity* that we find in the text or project onto it; and a middle range of what is *like-but-unlike*—the sort of relation most likely to make a productive change in our own perceptions and practices.

Eckermann seems resistant to finding so much of interest in so foreign a text. He interposes a skeptical question, apparently hoping that at least he won't have to read *too many* Chinese novels: "‘But then,’ I said, ‘is this Chinese novel perhaps one of their most superior ones?’" It is in reply to this reservation that Goethe shares with him the concept of *Weltliteratur*:

“By no means,” said Goethe; “the Chinese have thousands of them, and had when our forefathers were still living in the woods.

“I am more and more convinced,” he continued, “that poetry is the universal possession of mankind. . . . the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.” (132)

Goethe is no multiculturalist, however: Western Europe remains the privileged modern world of reference for him, and Greece and Rome provide the crucial antiquity to which he always returns. No sooner does he tell Eckermann to strive to hasten the epoch of world literature than he adds a limiting, or delimiting, condition:

“But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to some particular thing, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the *Nibelungen*; but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes.” (132)

Thinking always as a practicing writer, Goethe responds most of all to what he can appropriate in anything he reads, and he shares with many of his contemporaries a sense of classical antiquity as the ultimate treasury to plunder for themes, formal models, and even language. Indeed, he actually prefers a Latin translation of one of his own works to the original: “there it seems to me nobler, and as if it had returned to its original form” (67).

In the variability of Goethe's valuations of the foreign, we see a crucial feature of the system of world literature: on examination, it resolves always into a *variety* of worlds. These different worlds vary by region, audi-

ence, and cultural prestige. Moreover, the impact of a given world can change for us over time, and it can be strongly affected from the start by the age at which we first encounter it. Goethe's devotion to classical antiquity can be so heartfelt and unambiguous in large part because it developed once he had reached a substantial maturity as a writer. This is a lesson he often forgets when telling young admirers to "study the old Greeks, and only the Greeks": he himself actually benefited, he now feels, by growing up amid the relatively weak culture of the Germany of his youth, which allowed him more freedom to strike out on his own, only discovering Greek literature once he was sure of himself as a writer. "Had I earlier known how many excellent things have been in existence for hundreds and thousands of years, I should not have written a line" (104).

The provincial writer is thus at once cut off but also free from the bonds of an inherited tradition, and in principle can engage all the more fully, and by mature choice, with a broader literary world: Joyce and Walcott are far more cosmopolitan writers than Proust or Woolf. Whether of provincial or metropolitan origin, in fact, a given writer or reader is likely both to inherit and to seek out a variety of networks of transmission and reception, engaging differently with works from each world. These worlds will be variously delineated by different observers, and even by the same person in different moods. While in January of 1827 Goethe is praising the artistic refinement of Serbian poetry to a dubious Eckermann, a year later we find him dismissing Serbian poetry out of hand, lumping it together with medieval Germanic poetry as emblems of barbaric crudity: "'From these old-German gloomy times,' said Goethe, 'we can obtain as little as from the Serbian songs and similar barbaric popular poetry. We can read it and be interested for a while, but merely to cast it aside and to let it lie behind us'" (213).

This is not, or not primarily, Eurocentrism; here Goethe is discussing a modern French poet's unsatisfactory attempt to place a tale in Germany during the days of the Minnesingers. An elegant Chinese novel can find a more secure place within Goethe's gallery of world masterpieces than the *Nibelungenlied*. His Eurocentrism is highly permeable, in part because of a competing value: his elitism. It is popular poetry, of whatever origin, that has only limited appeal for Goethe, and the world literature he prefers is the production of a guiding elite whose international brotherhood compensates for their small numbers and neglect by the masses. As he wrote on Carlyle's life of Schiller:

What pleases the crowd spreads itself over a limitless field, and, as we already see, meets with approval in all countries and regions.

The serious and intellectual meets with less success, but . . . there are everywhere in the world such men, to whom the truth and the progress of humanity are of interest and concern. . . . the serious-minded must therefore form a quiet, almost secret, company, since it would be futile to set themselves against the current of the day; rather must they manfully strive to maintain their position till the flood has passed. (“Some Passages,” 10)

Goethe is uncomfortably aware that there is a form of world literature flooding over “all countries and regions” that does not include his work or similarly elite productions, and that even threatens to submerge him altogether. Goethe was far from alone in this concern: already in 1800, Wordsworth had used similar flood imagery in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, warning darkly that serious English poetry was being drowned in a rising tide of “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies”—surely not Goethe’s—“and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (Preface, 449). The worlds of world literature are often worlds in collision.

Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann signal a major shift in the range of what could be taken seriously as world literature. In this book, I will have relatively little interest in attempting any firm definition of literature as such, since this is a question that really only has meaning within a given literary system. Any global perspective on literature must acknowledge the tremendous variability in what has counted as literature from one place to another and from one era to another; in this sense, literature can best be defined pragmatically as whatever texts a given community of readers *takes* as literature. Even within the Euro-American tradition, there has always been considerable variety in what counts as literature, including that foundationally canonical work the Bible. In 1862, troubled by his difficulties in translating the Scriptures into Zulu, Bishop John William Colenso was moved to write *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, in which he shocked many readers by treating the Flood story as a literary legend rather than as the unmediated word of God, a dispute that inspired enormous public interest a few years later in the recovery of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, as I will be discussing in my first chapter.

The Bible’s status has not been questioned only in earlier eras: as recently as 1982, Northrop Frye gave his book *The Great Code* the subtitle *The Bible and Literature*, arguing in his preface that to work on “the Bible as literature” is to make a category error. Less canonical works, of course, fig-

ured prominently in the culture wars of the eighties and early nineties: in 1991 Dinesh D'Souza attacked *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as unworthy of inclusion alongside European masterworks, while in *Against Literature* (1993) John Beverley championed Burgos and Menchú's book precisely for its exploding of traditional definitions of the literary.

This sort of variability involves constantly competing ideas of literature, and our contemporary definitional debate can be seen as an episode in the shifting relations among three general conceptions. World literature has often been seen in one or more of three ways: as an established body of *classics*, as an evolving canon of *masterpieces*, or as multiple *windows on the world*. The "classic" is a work of transcendent, even foundational value, often identified particularly with Greek and Roman literature (still taught today in departments of Classics) and often closely associated with imperial values, as Frank Kermode has shown in his book *The Classic*. The "masterpiece," on the other hand, can be an ancient or a modern work and need not have had any foundational cultural force. Goethe clearly considers his own best works, and those of his friends, to be modern masterpieces. The "masterpiece," indeed, came into prominence in the nineteenth century as literary studies began to deemphasize the dominant Greco-Roman classics, elevating the modern masterpiece to a level of near equality with the long-established classics. In this literary analog of a liberal democracy, the (often middle-class) masterworks could engage in a "great conversation" with their aristocratic forebears, a conversation in which their culture and class of origin mattered less than the great ideas they expressed anew. Finally, Goethe's disquisitions on Chinese novels and Serbian poems show a nascent interest in works that would serve as windows into foreign worlds, whether or not these works could be construed as masterpieces and regardless of whether these differing worlds had any visible links to each other at all.

These three conceptions are not mutually exclusive, though sometimes people of decided taste champion one or another and even attempt to portray their favored mode as the one form of literature worth serious attention. Goethe, however, holds all three conceptions together, as have many readers since. There is really no good reason why we shouldn't allow all three categories their ongoing value, particularly as a single work may effectively be classified under two or even all three headings. Virgil's *Aeneid* is the very type of a timeless classic, but it is also a masterpiece of its genre, registering one stage of development in the long series of works from *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* up to Joyce's *Ulysses* and Walcott's *Omeros*. Equally, the *Aeneid* is a window on the world of imperial Rome; though it is set before Rome's

founding and treats legendary materials, in its underworld scenes and epic similes it opens out with unconcealed directness toward Virgil's contemporary world.

In the nineteenth century, devotees of the classics were distressed that modern European masterpieces were displacing Anacreon, Statius, and even Virgil. In recent decades, lovers of the European masterpieces have felt a comparable alarm in turn, as literary studies in an increasingly multicultural North America have opened the canon to more and more works in the third category: hence D'Souza's outrage—and Beverley's satisfaction—at the widespread adoption of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in many world literature and "Western Civ" courses. In an influential 1993 report to the American Comparative Literature Association on the state of the discipline, a committee chaired by Charles Bernheimer urged that comparatists should be actively engaged in reconceiving the canon, paying particular attention to "various contestatory, marginal, or subaltern perspectives" (*Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 44). Introducing the report and a set of responses to it, Bernheimer emphasized the contemporary relevance of comparative study: "In the age of multiculturalism," he concluded, "the comparatist's anxiety has finally found a field adequate to the questions that generated it" (16).

The Bernheimer report was intended as a call to expand rather than abandon the older canon, and in the last decade there has been a growing consensus that all three categories of world literature are still viable. Equally important, but perhaps less widely recognized, is the fact that world literature is multitemporal as well as multicultural. Too often, shifts in focus from classics to masterpieces to windows on the world have underwritten a concomitant shift from earlier to later periods. John Guillory has remarked that the traditional European canon has been a white male affair in large part because, until fairly recently, few women and minority writers had access to literacy, much less publication. He goes on to say that

obviously in order to "open" this canon, one would have to *modernize* it, to displace the preponderance of works from earlier to later. And there are of course many good reasons to do so. The pressure to modernize the curriculum has succeeded again and again despite the inertial conservatism of the educational institution, and it is this pressure which is largely responsible for many historically significant *exclusions*: The fact that we read Plato but not Xenophon, Virgil but not Statius, has nothing to do with the social identities of Xenophon or Statius . . . but the

necessity of choosing between them has everything to do with the modernization of the curriculum, with the imperative of *making room* for such later writers as Locke or Rousseau. (*Cultural Capital*, 32)

Though this modernizing tendency has been widespread, it need not and should not entail the sheer overwhelming of the past by the present. All too often, students of imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, and globalization do indeed define their topics in such a way as to restrict their investigations to just the last five hundred years of human history, or the last hundred years, or even the last few years. If we do so, however, we reproduce one of the least appealing characteristics of modern American—and global commercial—culture: the insistent *presentism* that erases the past as a serious factor, leaving at best a few nostalgic postmodern references, the historical equivalent of the “local color” tipped in to distinguish the lobby of the Jakarta Hilton from that of its Cancún counterpart.

Not only does this presentism deprive us of the ability to learn from a much wider range of empires, colonies, polities, and migrations; it also leaves out of account the dramatic ways in which the canons of the earlier periods themselves are being reshaped through new attention to all sorts of long-neglected but utterly fascinating texts. The following chapters will treat materials written as far back as four thousand years ago and as recently as the late 1990s, and will include discussions of the current reshaping of our understanding of Hellenistic Egypt, thirteenth-century Europe, and seventeenth-century Mexico. One of the most exciting features of contemporary literary studies is the fact that all periods as well as all places are up for fresh examination and open to new configurations.

This is not to deny that the contemporary world offers an extraordinarily vibrant and varied literary landscape, and several of the following chapters will focus on work written across the span of the twentieth century. Yet the tremendous and ongoing expansion of the field of contemporary world literature raises serious questions as well. It is not only cultural conservatives like Dinesh D’Souza or William Bennett who have expressed qualms about the opening of so many windows onto such disparate parts of the world: many scholars to their left are deeply ambivalent about this whole process. Are these brave new texts a testimony to a wealth of cultural diversity, or are they being sucked up in the Disneyfication of the globe? The problem here is partly one of reception. Masao Miyoshi (in *Off Center*) and Lawrence Venuti (in *The Scandals of Translation*) have shown how the post-war reception of texts from Japan or from Italy often had more to do with

American interests and needs than with genuine openness to other cultures. Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question.

The problem of reception is compounded today by questions of production as well. In recent decades a growing proportion of works has been produced primarily for foreign consumption—a process that will be the focus of the final third of this book. This is a fundamentally new literary development: for the first time in history, authors of highly successful works can hope to have them translated into twenty or thirty languages within a few years of publication, and foreign countries may even provide the primary readership for writers who have small audiences at home or who are censored by their governments. In earlier centuries, writers like Dante rarely thought of themselves as writing anything resembling this kind of “world literature”; though they might hope to be read abroad, their patrons and most immediate audience were at home. Dante, indeed, wrote his *Commedia* in the vernacular precisely in order to be read by the widest possible audience in Italy, instead of using Latin to reach a large European public.

Writing for publication abroad can be a heroic act of resistance against censorship and an affirmation of global values against local parochialism; yet it can also be only a further stage in the leveling process of a spreading global consumerism. According to Tim Brennan:

Several younger writers have entered a genre of third-world metropolitan fiction whose conventions have given their novels the unfortunate feel of ready-mades. Less about an inauthenticity of vision than the context of reception, such novels—typically grouped together in the display cases of library foyers—unjustly come off as a kind of writing by numbers. . . . Placed in the company of other hybrid subjects, they take their part in a collective lesson for American readers of a global pluralism. (*At Home in the World*, 203)

This is almost the opposite of the long-recognized problems of cultural distance and difficulty: these new globally directed works may be all too *easy* to understand. Brennan places the blame chiefly on distributors and readers, but others have criticized the writers themselves. According to Tariq Ali: “From New York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television, and, increasingly, read the same junk novels. . . . Instead of ‘socialist realism’ we have ‘market realism’” (“Literature and Market Realism,” 140–44). Non-Western works from

earlier periods have often been excluded from world literature courses on the grounds that they are too difficult to understand and absorb in the time available. Now the converse fear is often expressed: that contemporary world literature isn't worth the effort it doesn't require.

Brennan and Ali tactfully avoid mentioning any new-global-economy writers by name, but others have been less discreet. The prominent Sinologist Steven Owen provoked a severe reaction when he advanced a comparable critique of contemporary Chinese poetry, in a 1990 review essay significantly titled "What Is World Poetry?" Owen's occasion was the publication of *The August Sleepwalker*, the collected poetry of the prominent dissident poet Bei Dao. Writing for nonspecialist readers in the *New Republic*, Owen argued that third-world poets are increasingly running afoul of the literary hegemony of the major Western powers, with the result that they begin to write a "world poetry" that is little more than a watered-down Western modernism:

Poets who write in the "wrong language" (even exceedingly populous languages like Chinese) not only must imagine themselves being translated in order to reach an audience of a satisfying magnitude, they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it. And, although it is supposedly free of all local history, this "world poetry" turns out, unsurprisingly, to be a version of Anglo-American modernism or French modernism, depending on which wave of colonial culture first washed over the intellectuals of the country in question. This situation is the quintessence of cultural hegemony, when an essentially local tradition (Anglo-European) is widely taken for granted as universal. (28)

In Owen's view, this surrender to Euro-American modernism—often introduced into China in the form of mediocre translations several decades ago—entails the erasure of local literary and cultural history, leaving the writer with no vital tradition to work from. This new world poetry floats free of context, merely decorated with a little local ethnic color. Though such poems lack real literary power, Owen says, "it may be that the international readers of poetry do not come in search of poetry at all, but rather in search of windows upon other cultural phenomena. They may be looking for some exotic religious tradition or political struggle. These Western fashions in exotica and causes are ephemeral things. Who now reads Tagore? He is a bargain that fills the shelves of poetry sections in used book stores" (29). Having established this broad, depressing framework, Owen proceeds to discuss

Bei Dao's poetry as a secondhand American modernism, given momentary currency thanks to its author's close involvement in dissident activities leading up to the massacre in Tiananmen Square. Owen sees Bei Dao's lyrics as sporadically vivid but ultimately empty: "most of these poems translate themselves. They could just as easily be translated from a Slovak or an Estonian or a Philippine poet. . . . The poetry of *The August Sleepwalker* is a poetry written to travel well" (31).

Owen's position has been widely criticized, most notably by Rey Chow, who opened her 1993 book *Writing Diaspora* with a wholesale attack on his essay. Calling Owen's views orientalist and even "racist" (2 n. 2), Chow argued that the problem is not with the poetry but with the Western critic's loss of authority:

Basic to Owen's disdain for the new "world poetry" is a sense of loss and, consequently, an anxiety over his own intellectual position. . . . This is the anxiety that the Chinese past which he has undertaken to penetrate is evaporating and that the Sinologist himself is the abandoned subject. . . . Concluding his essay sourly with the statement, "Welcome to the late twentieth century," Owen's real complaint is that *he* is the victim of a monstrous world order in front of which a sulking impotence like his is the only claim to truth. (3–4)

The problem for a nonspecialist reader—apart from the danger of the critical prose bursting into flames in your hands—is that Chow is so deeply committed to her position that she doesn't see any need to combat Owen's views by discussing a single line of Bei Dao's poetry. Owen's article does give some brief quotations, but he spends little time on them. Further, having taken the position that Bei Dao's poems "translate themselves," he says little about the work of the poems' actual translator, Bonnie McDougall. Readers unable to consult Bei Dao in the original may wonder how we can possibly assess these radically differing views.

We can make some headway by looking directly at *The August Sleepwalker*, and if we do so, we can find verses that show Bei Dao's own acute awareness of the difficulties his poetry faces abroad. Thus his poem "Language" begins by saying that

many languages
fly around the world
producing sparks when they collide

sometimes of hate
sometimes of love

(121)

Appropriately enough, I first encountered this poem in Jayana Clerk and Ruth Siegel's 1995 anthology *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*, whose back-cover copy (no doubt written by the HarperCollins marketing department rather than by the editors) positions the collection as just the sort of literary jet-setting that Owen condemns: "Travel to 61 countries and experience a vast selection of poetry, fiction, drama, and memoirs," the cover urges us; "make stops in Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. . . . Your passport? *Modern Literature of the Non-Western World*." Bei Dao's own poem, however, ends by deconstructing this very process of circulation:

many languages
fly around the world
the production of languages
can neither increase nor decrease
mankind's silent suffering

Bei Dao seems less confident of his work's value abroad than Chow herself is; at the same time, he may have a more thoughtful, ironic stance toward home tradition and foreign audiences alike than Owen allows. To pursue this question in detail, it would be necessary to look at a range of issues: the ways in which Chinese poets in the generation before Bei Dao translated American and French poets as a form of self-expression as they sought new resources to revitalize the ancient classical repertoire; the ways in which midcentury American and Chinese poets alike were influenced by translations of earlier Spanish-language poets like Rubén Darío and Federico García Lorca; the ways in which the surface simplicity of Bei Dao's prosody may be subverting Maoist calls to abandon the complexities of aristocratic poetry and return to the purity of the old *Shih Ching* (*Book of Songs*), that ancient folk classic marked, as Eugene Eoyang has said, by simple diction and "intensely commonplace sentiments, with a universality which the song does not try to hide" ("The Many 'Worlds' in World Literature," 249).

Such investigations could take us deep into specialist territory, but it is important to realize that we don't face a strict either/or choice between total immersion and an airy vapidity. A full appreciation of world literature

requires us to see it as at once “locally inflected and translocally mobile,” as Vilashini Cooppan has said (“World Literature and Global Theory,” 33). Our reading of Bei Dao, or of Dante, will benefit from a leavening of local knowledge, an amount that may vary from work to work and from reader to reader but that will remain less than is needed for a full contextual understanding of a work within its home tradition. As such, world literature can be aligned with the nuanced, localized cosmopolitanism championed by Bruce Robbins: “No one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere. . . . The interest of the term *cosmopolitanism* is located, then, not in its full theoretical extension, where it becomes a paranoid fantasy of ubiquity and omniscience, but rather (paradoxically) in its local applications” (“Comparative Cosmopolitanisms,” 260). Far from being a rootless cosmopolitan, Bei Dao is doubly or multiply linked to events and audiences at home and abroad; indeed, as an exile since the early nineties, he has occupied an increasingly multiple relation to the very terms “home” and “abroad.”

To read Bei Dao’s poems in English we should be alive to relevant aspects of the context of their production, but we don’t finally need the Chinese context in all its particularity. When all is said and done, Bei Dao in English *isn’t* Bei Dao in Chinese, and Steven Owen is really describing the life of any work of world literature when he asks, “Is this Chinese literature, or literature that began in the Chinese language?” (“What Is World Poetry?” 31). Owen means to express the poet’s limitations by this formulation, but the criticism only partly holds, even if Bei Dao’s poetry is in fact superficial in the original. Not only is this something that those of us who don’t read Chinese cannot judge; it is actually irrelevant to the poem’s existence abroad. *All* works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only “began” in their original language.

The crucial issue for the foreign reader is how well the poems work in the new language; such cultural information as may be practical to acquire and relevant to apply must still make sense in the translation if it is to be useful at all. Here we can gain in understanding by looking at different translations of Bei Dao’s work. Thanks to his global popularity, he has already been translated by a number of people, and even individual poems can be found variously translated. Here, for example, are two versions of the opening stanza of his most famous poem, “The Answer,” which became a rallying cry for the Tiananmen protestors:

Debasement is the password of the base.
Nobility the epitaph of the noble.

See how the gilded sky is covered
With the drifting twisted shadows of the dead.

(McDougall tr.)

The scoundrel carries his baseness around like an ID card.
The honest man bears his honor like an epitaph.
Look—the gilded sky is swimming
with undulant reflections of the dead.

(Finkel tr.)⁴

McDougall's translation clearly tries to convey an underlying word play in the original, but the result is stilted and unpoetic English; Finkel's translation is freer but also more readable, and without the constraint of making the end of the opening lines echo the beginning, he is able to set up a more effective contrast of identity card to epitaph. Further, his version plays with modernist shifts of verbal register: the stanza opens with prosaic, even clunky, language to describe the bureaucratic "scoundrel," and then moves to the poetic eloquence of the "undulant reflections of the dead."

As the poem continues, Finkel also brings out uses of modernist motifs that aren't visible in McDougall's version. Where McDougall has "I don't believe in thunder's echoes," Finkel has "I don't believe what the thunder says," ironically recalling the heading in Eliot's "Waste Land" when the speaker turns to the East for timeless wisdom to refresh his dried-up Western roots. In Bei Dao's concluding stanza, a group of stars that McDougall renders as "pictographs" becomes in Finkel "that ancient ideogram," using Ezra Pound's term of choice for Chinese characters. These echoes assort well with the debt to American modernism that Owen and others have identified in Bei Dao's work. Rather than connecting the poem to modernism in this way, McDougall continues to do her best to suggest Chinese theories of correspondence and history, as in her version of the concluding stanza:

A new conjunction and glimmering stars
Adorn the unobstructed sky now:
They are the pictographs from five thousand years.
They are the watchful eyes of future generations.

Compare Finkel:

The earth revolves. A glittering constellation
pricks the vast defenseless sky.

⁴ McDougall's version is from her translation of *The August Sleepwalker*, 33; Donald Finkel's is from *The Splintered Mirror*, 9–10.

Can you see it there? that ancient ideogram—
the eye of the future, gazing back.

Compared to McDougall's cautious and literalistic renderings, Finkel's version is at once more eloquent and more creative in holding Chinese and modernist contexts together in view. The prosaic prosody and lurking sentimentality that Owen dislikes in Bei Dao's poetry are much more evident features of McDougall's translations than of Finkel's, which actually gain in poetic effect by emphasizing the modernist connections that Owen regrets and McDougall plays down.

This brief look at Bei Dao can suggest what I will be exploring in detail in the chapters to follow: works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large, and to understand this new life we need to look closely at the ways the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts. Translation is always involved in what Fernando Ortiz described in 1940 as *transculturación*,⁵ and if we do want to see the work of world literature as a window on different parts of the world, we have to take into account the way its images have been multiply refracted in the process of transculturation. World literature can be described, to borrow a phrase from Vinay Dharwadker, as “a montage of overlapping maps in motion” (*Cosmopolitan Geographies*, 3), and this movement involves shifting relations both of literary history and of cultural power. Works rarely cross borders on a basis of full equality; if the classics and masterpieces long dominant in world literature have typically enjoyed high prestige and authoritative weight in their new homes, the power relations are often reversed when noncanonical works come into North America today. Tim Brennan and others have criticized the manipulations by which the political edge has often been taken from works imported into the American context, but it is not enough to have our politics in the right place. All works are subject to manipulation and even deformation in their foreign reception, but established classics usually gain a degree of protection by their cultural prestige: editors and publishers will be less likely, for example, to silently truncate a classic text or reorganize it outright, a fate that is commonly experienced by non-canonical works even at the hands of highly sympathetic translators. As will be seen below in examples from Mechthild von Magdeburg to Rigoberta Menchú, works by non-Western authors or by provincial or subordinate

⁵ Cited by Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, who describes the space of *transculturación* as “a liminal zone or ‘impassioned margin’ where diverse cultures converge without merging” (*The Cuban Condition*, 25).

Western writers are always particularly liable to be assimilated to the immediate interests and agendas of those who edit, translate, and interpret them. This book is written in the belief that we can do better justice to our texts, whether perennial classics or contemporary works, if we really attend to what we are doing when we import them and introduce them into new contexts.

In emphasizing the shaping force of local contexts, I mean to distinguish world literature from a notional “global literature” that might be read solely in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatever. The world’s literature is not yet sold by a Borders Books Without Borders. The airport bookstore is stocked by buyers who operate first and foremost within a national context and its distribution system, and the bookstore’s customers, mostly traveling to or from home, continue to read in ways profoundly shaped by home-country norms. For all the power of the Internet, even Amazon.com has been setting up distinct subsidiaries abroad rather than relying on its American-based website to achieve a global reach.

Modern literature can be studied in global terms within the “poly-systems” framework developed by translation theorists like Itamar Even-Zohar, or the sociopolitical “world systems” approach based in the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein. A notable example of such work is Franco Moretti’s ambitious mapping of the spread of the novel, beginning with his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*. As he has carried his work beyond Europe, Moretti has found that the global system of literary production and reception is highly variable locally, and he has described the difficulty of dealing directly with the masses of disparate material that a global approach should encompass. Moretti has gone so far as to recommend that we abjure close reading altogether, analyzing broad patterns rather than individual works. “Literary history,” he says, “will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*. Still ambitious, and actually even more so than before (world literature!); but the ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text* (“Conjectures on World Literature,” 57). Though his emphasis is political rather than archetypal, Moretti in this sense recalls Northrop Frye’s method in *Anatomy of Criticism*, where Frye gave rapid surveys of patterns and motifs in a wide range of works. In his article, Moretti draws a sharp distinction between two metaphoric approaches to change: trees and waves. Individual works can be studied by specialists as offshoots of a family tree, an exfoliating national system; global comparatism, on the other hand, should concentrate on wave patterns of transformations sweeping around the world.

Are students of world literature really going to have to leave the

analysis of actual works to specialists in national literatures, as Moretti proposes? Those of us unable to tear ourselves so resolutely away from the pleasures of the text are likely to disagree. A world systems approach to literature has many of the virtues earlier found in structuralist approaches, but it also shares some of the problems experienced by those who attempted to apply the insights of structural linguistics directly to complex literary works. Deep structures could be elucidated, but literary effects are often achieved by highly individual means, and generative grammars of narrative had difficulty providing much insight into works more elaborate than folktales or detective stories. As with texts, so with cultures at large: individual cultures only partly lend themselves to analysis of common global patterns. As Wallerstein himself has said, “the history of the world has been the very opposite of a trend towards cultural homogenization; it has rather been a trend towards cultural differentiation, or cultural elaboration, or cultural complexity” (“The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture?”, 96). As a result, systemic approaches need to be counterbalanced with close attention to particular languages, specific texts: we need to see both the forest and the trees.

This is a problem that Moretti acknowledges. Going beyond a simple form-and-content account of the spread of the novel (the Western form imitatively adapted to convey local content), Moretti argues for the importance of a third term, narrative voice—a primary feature of indigenous tradition that critically affects the interplay of content and form. As he says, however, we can’t study narrative voice at a linguistic remove in the way that we can trace patterns of book sales or broad movements of motifs (“Conjectures,” 66). But how to mediate between broad, but often reductive, overviews and intensive, but often atomistic, close readings?

One solution is to recognize that we don’t face an either/or choice between global systematicity and infinite textual multiplicity, for world literature itself is constituted very differently in different cultures. Much can be learned from a close attention to the workings of a given cultural system, at a scale of analysis that also allows for extended discussion of specific works. A culture’s norms and needs profoundly shape the selection of works that enter into it as world literature, influencing the ways they are translated, marketed, and read. In India, for example, world literature takes on a very particular valence in the dual contexts of the multiplicity of India’s disparate languages and the ongoing presence of English in post-Raj India. English can be seen in comparative terms as three distinct entities in India: as the language of the British literature that featured so prominently in colonial Indian education; as the worldwide phenomenon of contemporary global

English; and as Indo-English, with its ambiguous status somewhere between a foreign and a native language.

Amiya Dev has pointed out that India's twenty-two principal literary languages themselves form a plenum comparable to that of European literature, and the different Indian literatures are always strongly colored by the other languages in use around them. As a result, Dev says, no Indian literature is ever itself alone: "Bengali will be Bengali +, Panjabi Panjabi +, and Tamil Tamil +. In a multilingual situation there cannot be a true appreciation of a single literature in absolute isolation" (*The Idea of Comparative Literature in India*, 14). "The very structure of Indian literature is comparative," as Sisir Kumar Das has said; "its framework is comparative and its texts and contexts Indian" (quoted in Chandra Mohan, "Comparative Indian Literature," 97).

By contrast, world literature in Brazil has long been shaped by a very different set of forces: by complex relations between people of indigenous, European, or mixed descent; by inter-American relations within Latin America and vis-à-vis North America; and by lasting cultural ties to Portugal, to Spain, and to France. In works like Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropofágico*, "international modernism" helped form a specifically Brazilian cultural identity, as Beatriz Resende has recently emphasized ("A Formação de Identidades Plurais no Brasil Moderno"). Relatedly, whereas European scholars have often seen world literature as radiating outward from metropolitan centers toward relatively passive provincial recipients, a number of contemporary Brazilian scholars are moving beyond the paradigm of "Paris, cultural capital of Latin America" to emphasize a two-way process, one that is grounded as much in Brazil's dynamic heterogeneity as in French cultural authority.⁶

For any given observer, even a genuinely global perspective remains a perspective *from somewhere*, and global patterns of the circulation of world literature take shape in their local manifestations. With this in mind, in the following chapters I will be concentrating particularly (though not exclusively) on world literature as it has been construed over the past century in a specific cultural space, that of the formerly provincial and now

⁶ This is the subject of an illuminating article by Tania Carvalho, "Culturas e Contextos" (2001). In her balanced presentation of a two-way exchange, Carvalho avoids the implicit triumphalism seen in a work like Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999), which might better be titled *La République parisienne des lettres*. An unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, Casanova's book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context.

metropolitan United States. This focus gives time for detailed treatment of exemplary works, allowing for an interplay of general issues and actual cases. Further, while avoiding the hubris of supposing that we *are* the world, an account of world literature in this setting may bring out patterns that can be suggestive for accounts of world literature elsewhere.

A final look at Johann Peter Eckermann at home and abroad can suggest some of the issues involved when a provincial author reaches a metropolitan audience. Both in his encounters with Goethe and then in the subsequent reception of his *Conversations* in England and in America, Eckermann gives us a vivid illustration of the problematic power relations between elite and popular worlds. Whereas Goethe can praise Chinese novelists for already enjoying a highly refined level of culture “when our forefathers were still living in the woods,” Eckermann’s own family, as his introduction informs us, had only gotten a few hundred yards away from the woods, to which he regularly returned to gather kindling. He begins his book with a twenty-page story of his own life up to his arrival in Weimar, entitled “Introduction: The Author Gives an Account Concerning his Person and Origins and the Beginning of his Relation to Goethe.” This is a story whose elements can all be found in Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*. Eckermann is born in 1792 in a village in northern Germany, youngest child of a second marriage. His family is very poor—“the chief source of our small family’s nourishment was a cow” (*Gespräche*, 11)—and young Johann spends his childhood gathering straw from the fields and firewood from the forest, working the family’s vegetable plot, and walking with his father from village to village, wooden boxes on their backs, selling ribbons, thread, and cloth. Fascinated one night by the picture of a horse on his father’s tobacco pouch, Johann devotes the evening to copying it, and his parents are charmed by the result. All night, he can scarcely sleep, looking forward to seeing his drawing again the next morning.

He obtains paper and charcoal, and draws incessantly. A well-to-do villager takes an interest, offering to send him to Hamburg to learn painting. His parents refuse, pointing out that it is difficult and even dangerous work, especially as the houses in Hamburg—house painting is the only painting trade they know of—are so tall. Discouraged, Johann stays at home, but his drawings do inspire some neighbors to pay his fees at the village school. At sixteen, he gets a job as secretary to the local judge. He serves briefly in the army as Napoleon’s forces are driven out of Germany; stationed in Flanders, he sees actual paintings for the first time. (“Now that I saw what it was to be a painter, I could have wept that it had been forbidden

me to follow such a path” *Gespräche*, 16). The war ends, and he returns home, to find his father deceased, his older sister and her family now sharing his mother’s cottage; he walks for days through snow-covered fields to reach Hamburg, finds lodging with a friend from his village, and attempts to become an artist.

Checked in this ambition by poverty and ill health, he finds a clerk’s job at the local royal court, and begins to read and to try his hand at poetry. He is twenty-four. He studies privately, painfully aware that he lacks the education enjoyed by the great writers whose biographies he constantly reads. Still, his poems meet with approval, and he ventures printing a small volume of them. He sends a copy to Goethe, who writes him a kindly note. They have no further contact until he concludes his fellowship at Göttingen, writes his manuscript on poetry, and hazards his letter and visit.

Eckermann succeeds in leaving his childhood surroundings behind, but his provincial roots are hard to sever entirely. Once he is installed in Goethe’s circle, the social differences continually reappear in his account, often displaced into a difference of gender. Throughout the *Conversations*, Eckermann plays the shy, admiring maiden to Goethe’s heroic authority. At their very first conversation on Goethe’s sofa, Eckermann says: “We sat a long while together, in a tranquil affectionate mood. I forgot to speak for looking at him—I could not look enough. His face is powerful and brown—full of wrinkles, and each wrinkle full of expression! [*und jede Falte voller Ausdruck!*] . . . With him I was indescribably happy” (2).

As can be seen, Eckermann’s maidenly reserve entails a silence in the face of Goethe’s vast powers of expression, which extend even to his wrinkles. A year later, Eckermann is still speaking in the tones of young love, stimulated ever anew by Goethe’s poetry as mediated by the poet’s voice and by his entire body: “He brought some manuscript poems, which he read aloud to me. Not only did the original force and freshness of the poems excite me to a high degree; but also, by his manner of reading them, he showed himself to me in a phase hitherto unknown but highly important. What variety and force in his voice! What life and expression in the noble countenance, so full of wrinkles! And what eyes!” (45). Five years into their association, Eckermann is still making a point of arriving early when invited to dinner, so as to have his hero to himself: “I found him, as I wished, still alone, expecting the company. He wore his black coat and star, with which I so much like to see him” (219). They now have a discussion in which Goethe confides that he will never be popular with the multitude; he writes only for like-minded individuals. The other guests arrive and dinner begins, but Eckermann is lost in thought:

I could pay no attention to the conversation that was going on; Goethe's words entirely occupied my mind.

Meanwhile, all around me were jesting and talking, and partaking of the good fare. I spoke now and then a word, but without exactly knowing what I said. A lady put a question to me; to which, it seems, I did not render a very appropriate answer: they all laughed at me.

"Leave Eckermann alone," said Goethe. "He is always absent, except when he is at the theater."

Biscuits and some very fine grapes were brought for dessert. The latter had been sent from a distance, and Goethe would not say whence they came. He divided them, and handed me a very ripe branch across the table.

I highly enjoyed the grapes from Goethe's hand, and was now quite near him in both body and soul. (220–21)

This is as near as Eckermann will ever get, savoring the grapes sent to Goethe by an unnamed admirer; he never succeeds in appropriating his hero's literary power as a poet. Goethe himself hardly helps matters by instructing him, at the start of their acquaintance, to abandon a projected long poem on the seasons: "I especially warn you against great inventions of your own . . . for that purpose youth [Eckermann is *thirty!*] is seldom ripe" (7). Yet if Goethe, nearing the end of his life, feels his audience to be a declining few, Eckermann can make a book out of their conversations and in this way bring his image before a wider audience. This act of piety is at the same time his most successful act of appropriation, as he shows in the opening words of a preface that precedes his autobiographical introduction in the original German edition: "This collection of conversations and discussions with Goethe stems above all from the natural drive that dwells within me to appropriate to myself, through writing, whatever lived experience seems worthy or notable" (*Gespräche*, 7). Though the diamantine Goethe presents very different facets to different people, Eckermann says, "this is *my* Goethe" (8; Eckermann's emphasis).

Eckermann takes up the process of mirroring or *Spiegelung* that Goethe associates with the network of world literature and applies it to his portrait of Goethe himself: "This word [*"my"*] applies not only to the way he presented himself to me, but more especially to the way I was able to grasp him and represent him in turn. In such cases a mirroring occurs, and it very rarely happens that in passing through another individual no specific characteristics will be lost and nothing foreign will be mixed in" (8). Eckermann

thus mixes some of his own foreign substance into the portrait, and in the process the silent, maidenly hearer gets the last word.

Interestingly, in a further installment of the *Conversations* published twelve years after the original, Eckermann ends his account by aligning himself with the Virgin Mary. His final entry centers on discussion of the Bible. He has just bought a copy but is annoyed to find that it lacks the Apocrypha. Goethe comments that the Church erred in closing the canon of scripture, as God's creative work still continues, notably in the activity of great spirits like Mozart, Raphael, and Shakespeare, "who can draw their lesser contemporaries higher" (*Gespräche*, 667). Following these words—the last words of Goethe's that Eckermann records—a one-line paragraph appears: "Goethe fell silent. I, however, preserved his great and good words in my heart" (667). This phrasing echoes Luke 2:51, in which the young Jesus preaches in the temple; though his hearers don't understand him, "his mother kept all these words in her heart."

The biblical ending to Eckermann's sequel mirrors the classical ending to his original account. Eckermann has always experienced Goethe's house as a sort of museum of classical art. The first thing he notices on his first visit are "the casts from antique statues, placed upon the stairs" (1), and Goethe himself is the cherished exhibit at the heart of the house: "This evening, I went for the first time to a large tea-party at Goethe's. I arrived first, and enjoyed the view of the brilliantly lighted apartments, which, through open doors, led one into the other. In one of the farthest, I found Goethe, dressed in black, and wearing his star—which became him so well. We were for a while alone" (8). Now, at the end of the book, the Goethe whom Eckermann wishes to monumentalize turns into a funerary monument. After recounting a last conversation on Greek tragedy and the role of the artist, Eckermann passes over any mention of Goethe's final illness or death. There is simply a gap, and then a haunting, and haunted, closing paragraph:

The morning after Goethe's death, a deep desire seized me to look once again upon his earthly garment. His faithful servant, Frederick, opened for me the chamber in which he was laid out. Stretched upon his back, he reposed as if asleep; profound peace and security reigned in the features of his sublimely noble countenance. The mighty brow seemed yet to harbour thoughts. I wished for a lock of his hair; but reverence prevented me from cutting it off. The body lay naked, only wrapped in a white sheet; large pieces of ice had been placed near it, to keep it fresh as long

as possible. Frederick drew aside the sheet, and I was astonished at the divine magnificence of the limbs. The breast was powerful, broad, and arched; the arms and thighs were full, and softly muscular; the feet were elegant, and of the most perfect shape; nowhere, on the whole body, was there a trace either of fat or of leanness and decay. A perfect man lay in great beauty before me; and the rapture the sight caused made me forget for a moment that the immortal spirit had left such an abode. I laid my hand on his heart—there was a deep silence—and I turned away to give free vent to my suppressed tears. (344–45)

The deep silence of the scene only heightens its stark visual power. Eckermann has achieved a strange synthesis in prose of the pictures he once hoped to paint and the dramatic poetry he continued to compose.

None of Eckermann's efforts at writing in "high" genres made any impact at all, but in the more popular form of the journal he achieved a decisive entry into world literature. His book was translated into "all the European languages," as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* informs us, and even into "all the languages of civilization," as Havelock Ellis put it in 1930 in an introduction to the *Conversations* (a phrase that, though grandiose, at least allows for the Japanese translation). He became through his book the widely traveled cosmopolite he could never be in life, even emerging in Spanish translation as the dashing Juan Pedro Eckermann.

The book's rapid foreign success stands in sharp contrast to its early reception at home. Though it was put out by a prominent publisher, Brockhaus, it sold poorly and attracted only a handful of reviews. Goethe's work was indeed falling into neglect in Germany, and his lofty, conservative perspective had little appeal for the German literati of the turbulent years leading up to 1848. Eckermann had considerable difficulty finding a publisher for his sequel, which did even more poorly than the original version. The *Gespräche* only began to gain a substantial audience in Germany twenty years later, when Brockhaus took over the sequel and reissued it along with the original version. Eckermann's book thus provides an interesting example of a work that only achieves an effective presence in its country of origin after it has already entered world literature; in a movement that would hardly have surprised Goethe, the book's reception abroad set the stage for its subsequent revival at home.

The *Conversations* did particularly well in English translation; both the first version and the sequel were rapidly translated and soon found many

admirers. An abridged translation—made, interestingly, by the American feminist Margaret Fuller—appeared as early as 1838, and only two years after Eckermann published his 1848 sequel an English translator, John Oxenford, expanded Fuller’s translation, adding substantial entries from the sequel. In translation, the book not only gained new readers but also achieved new coherence, for Oxenford redid the entire series of conversations to produce an integrated sequence, whereas Eckermann himself had had to issue his new material as an independent volume, having broken with his original publisher after the first edition failed to attract the wide acclaim he was sure it should have received.

The *Conversations* gained in this way in translation. Yet Eckermann himself lost, for the book entitled *Gespräche mit Goethe* became *Conversations with Eckermann*: Oxenford gave Goethe, not Eckermann, as the book’s actual author. Eckermann’s authority over his text diminished along with his authorship: from Oxenford on, translators and editors have felt free to rework his entries and even his prose, according full respect only to the text’s quotations from Goethe—even though the quotations themselves are usually Eckermann’s reconstructions, often years after the event, and are shaped, like the framing narrative itself, by Eckermann’s interpretation of Goethe and his work. As Eckermann put it in a letter to a friend, his book was not “merely the mechanical production of a good memory. . . . even though I made nothing up and *everything is completely true*, it has nonetheless been *selected*” (*Gespräche*, 680). Or as he bitterly remarked in another letter, “were I such a nonentity as many believe, how could Goethe’s worth and nobility have so fully preserved themselves in passing through my spirit?” (*Gespräche*, 694).

All too often, Eckermann’s translators actually seem to have felt that he wasn’t insignificant *enough*. In his 1850 version, Oxenford systematically reduced Eckermann’s presence throughout the book. He drastically abridged Eckermann’s autobiographical introduction, and in the body of the text he silently omitted phrases that seemed too emotive or self-conscious (“with him I was indescribably happy”; “I rejoiced greatly at these words”). Further, he dropped whole entries, usually ones in which Eckermann has as large a role as Goethe, such as the final entry from the sequel, with its discussion of the Bible and Eckermann’s implicit comparison of himself to Mary.

Havelock Ellis deplored the nineteenth-century diminishment of Eckermann’s life and authorship. In his preface to the 1930 edition of Oxenford’s translation in the Everyman Library, Ellis praised a recent biography of Eckermann as long overdue and asserted that “Eckermann will not

be forgotten again. . . . he has moulded the portrait by which we all best know the greatest modern figure in the world of the spirit” (xviii). Yet in this very edition, Havelock’s praise for Eckermann is followed by a stern note from one J. K. Moorhead, the Everyman edition’s editor, who has actually gone farther than Oxenford himself in reining Eckermann in: “Nearly one-eighth of the original book,” Moorhead tell us, “has been got rid of by chastening [!] Eckermann’s extreme verbosity and what he himself might have consented to call his subjectiveness” (xxi).

The situation is even worse in a recent reissue of Oxenford’s translation, in a quality paperback edition from the North Point Press (1984). Not only is the book yet again titled *Conversations with Eckermann*, with Goethe given as the book’s author, but Goethe himself is taken out of history. Whereas the *Conversations* begins with Goethe aged seventy-four and ends with his death at eighty-three, the North Point edition’s cover shows Goethe at about forty years of age. The North Point edition goes even further in a frontispiece, which gives a Roman-style bust of Goethe as a young man (figure 1). Goethe has seen his dearest wish fulfilled: he has indeed become nobler, more Latin—and also decades younger—in translation.

Crossing the English Channel, Goethe revives like Dracula from his bier and becomes the author of the book that records his own death. Eckermann’s life, meanwhile, dissolves along with his authorship: whereas earlier editions tended to abridge Eckermann’s preface and autobiographical introduction, the North Point reprint drops them entirely. This makes the book’s beginning a little mysterious (“Weimar, June 10, 1823. I arrived here a few days ago, but did not see Goethe till today”), but the deletions preserve Goethe’s authorship from any challenge from the person who is now construed merely as his amanuensis. “JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE,” the cover tells us, “was an intellectual giant. . . . Of all his works, *Conversations with Eckermann* perhaps best demonstrates the range of his interests and the depth of his command of them.” Eckermann, meanwhile, is simply “a young friend,” as a brief “Note on the Text” explains, who transcribed and published Goethe’s remarks. Having given new life to his cosmopolitan hero, the provincial author fades into the obscurity cast by the lengthening shadow of the portrait he himself has painted.

I will be centrally concerned, in the following chapters, with tracing what is lost and what is gained in translation, looking at the intertwined shifts of language, era, region, religion, social status, and literary context that a work can incur as it moves from its point of origin out into a new cultural sphere. Today we are making more and more translations from and among an un-



Figure 1. Roman Goethe

precedented range of literary worlds; done well, these multiple translations can give us a unique purchase on the scope of the world's cultures, past and present. All too often, though, things slip in the process, and we can gain a work of world literature but lose the author's soul. Our sophisticated critical methods and refined cultural sensitivity have not yet sufficed to keep us from falling into errors and abuses that were common a hundred and even a thousand years ago. We ought to do better, but this will require a better sense of what it is we do when we circulate works through the shifting spheres of world literature. What follows is an essay in definition, a celebration of new opportunities, and a gallery of cautionary tales.