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## In the World Republic of Letters: Towards a Reconceptualisation of the Notion of *Weltliteratur*

**Abstract:** The paper problematises the origins, characteristics, and implications of the term *Weltliteratur*, proffering critical insights into its interdisciplinary, transnational character and presuppositions about its discontinuous development. Having been initially conceptualised as a heretofore undeveloped research area, the domain of “world literature” is first eulogised as worthy of further scholarly attention by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the late 1820s – the time of political unrest and multiple socio-cultural changes. As such, the idea also seems to have been of paramount interest to the ancients (H. M. Posnett), in which sense it may be portrayed as borderline anachronistic. Conversely, it does possess and evoke great resonance in future writers, thinkers, and intellectuals alike, resulting in its many reconceptualisations, not only in the field of literary studies but also in numerous nascent or still-developing disciplines such as comparative literature, genology, translation criticism, hermeneutics, cultural studies; furthermore, it is equally relevant for a number of various thematic poetics.

Engaging in a dialogue with Reinhart Koselleck’s “conceptual history” alongside its highly idiosyncratic theoretical apparatus, the present paper adapts and reappropriates Koselleck’s nomenclature with a view towards a preliminary systematisation of anticipatory mechanisms which influenced the reception of the category of *Weltliteratur* as much as they governed its subsequent re-development, be it in academia or in twentieth- and twenty-first-century public discourse. In this sense, Goethe’s prescient analysis of various national literatures as well as of the heterogeneity of artistic discourses of his time may be said to have laid the foundations for new comparative research methodologies, and, by extension, to what Pascale Casanova would eventually name as “the world republic of letters.”

**Keywords:** *Weltliteratur*, *Begriffsgeschichte*, comparative literature, conceptual history, history of ideas

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł ten stanowi próbę problematykacji genezy, cech charakterystycznych oraz możliwych kierunków rozwoju terminu *Weltliteratur*. Oferuje on wnikliwą analizę jego interdyscyplinarnego, transnarodowego charakteru oraz komentarz na temat nieciągłości rozwoju tego terminu. Po raz pierwszy pogłębione badania nad domeną „literatury światowej” podjął Johann Wolfgang von Goethe pod koniec lat dwudziestych XIX wieku, w okresie nasilonych niepokojów politycznych i licznych zmian społeczno-kulturowych. Z jednej strony idea ta była

przedmiotem żywego zainteresowania już wśród starożytnych (H.M. Posnett), z drugiej zaś – rezonowała ona z wieloma pisarzami i myślicielami współczesnymi, którzy podejmowali się jej rekonceptualizacji zarówno w ramach badań literaturoznawczych, jak i poprzez różnorakie, ciągle rozwijające się metodologie nowo powstałych dyscyplin, takich jak literaturoznawstwo porównawcze, genologia, krytyka przekładu, hermeneutyka czy kulturoznawstwo. Działania te były istotne również dla rozwoju wielu poetyk tematycznych.

Podjmując dialog z „historią pojęć” Reinharta Kosellecka i jej wysoce idiosynkratycznym aparatem teoretycznym, niniejszy artykuł adaptuje nomenklaturę niemieckiego badacza w celu wstępnego usystematyzowania mechanizmów antycypacyjnych, które wpłynęły na recepcję kategorii *Weltliteratur* i przełożyły się na jej późniejszy rozwój – zarówno w środowisku akademickim, jak i w XX-wiecznych i XXI-wiecznych dyskursach politycznych. Tekst postuluje, iż Goethe w swojej wizjonerskiej analizie literatur narodowych oraz heterogeniczności dyskursów artystycznych położył podwaliny pod rozwój nowych metodologii badań porównawczych, a tym samym pod to, co Pascale Casanova nazywa „światową republiką literatury”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Weltliteratur*, *Begriffsgeschichte*, literaturoznawstwo porównawcze, historia konceptualna, historia pojęć

### In lieu of an introduction

While reassessing the notions of canonicity and intertextuality, one may be tempted to posit there is an invisible and powerful structure of literary universality: the same characters, motifs, and symbols recur time after time, seemingly permeating disparate works of art, albeit in slightly different guises. They span the past, the present, and the future, as much as they bridge various cultures, languages, or geographical regions, to the point where literature almost feels like “the fabric of the universal” (Casanova 2004, 126), the verbal matrix of beliefs and customs, values and laws, desires and feelings. It leads to a most interesting paradox, as the entirety of human literary production may be simultaneously interpreted both as very close-to-life, familiar, genuine *and* as a defamiliarised, artificial construct which ultimately reappropriates human experience only to produce mere simula-cra of reality. Thus construed, the concept poses a number of potential hermeneutic problems that must have been particularly prominent at the time of its inception as well as subsequent, and very much needed, redefinitions.

One such reconceptualisation – perhaps an amendment or an enhancement of sorts – was offered by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827, who at that point coined the term known as “world literature” (*Weltliteratur*). The writer was so fascinated and enthralled by the constant influx of foreign, particularly oriental, literatures that he augured a new era of *belles-lettres*: one in which no frontier could limit or control the unrestrained flow of human thoughts. He mentions that for the first time in a conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann, his personal secretary, in an astute commentary that merits inclusion in its entirety:

But, really, we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle which surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise every one to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; *the epoch of World literature* is at hand, and every one must strive to

hasten its approach. But, while we thus value what is foreign, we must not bind ourselves to anything in particular, and regard it as a model. We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Servian, 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. (Eckermann and Soret 1850, 351; emphasis mine)

Not only did Goethe's bold idea of *Weltliteratur* stimulate a whole host of theoreticians to scrutinise its implications and potential issues, becoming a veritable hotbed of dissension – after all, heated discussions on “world literature” take place until this very day – but it also cast aspersions on the well-established concept of “national literature,” indirectly questioning its viability and implying its obsolescence. In a way, the author's drive for change was very much a product of his times: it stems from and conjoins a deep-seated love for one's country shared amongst the German Romantics and socio-economic tensions arisen after the Congress of Vienna, which intended to restore a semblance of normality after the French Revolutionary Wars as well as the Napoleonic Wars, shaping a new political landscape. Partially remaining but a pipe dream, the call for a pan-European cooperation and cosmopolitanism occasionally incited an adverse reaction and a revival of nationalist sentiments, sometimes enrooted in xenophobic hostility – a fact that was actually foreseen, acknowledged, and recognised as highly precarious by the majority of the diplomats deliberating at the Viennese Congress.

The background behind the inception of the notion of “world literature” is, then, most complex and heterogenous, and as such eludes an easy, pithy description. It is a transitional period of change, as much political as it was social, economic, and cultural; as much fuelled by a cosmopolitan spirit of unity as it was marred by nationalist antagonisms. Such a turbulent state of flux and the very complexity of the concept in question create an interesting comparative contrast from the point of view of conceptual history. “We all seem to agree that we no longer think history as a ‘unilinear’ and ‘totalizing’ dynamic of ‘development.’ Beyond this negation, however, there is no single dominant form of imagining and representing history” (Gumbrecht 1997, xii), as there is no single dominant that would uniformly account for an overarching mood or climate (Gumbrechtian *Stimmung*) of any given era. It naturally further complicates any analysis spanning social history and the history of ideas, and, in turn, may generate some semantic tension between what Reinhart Koselleck conceptualises in his seminal *Begriffsgeschichten* as a *Begriff* and a *Vorgriff*. For it is the social that foregrounds the semantic, and the semantic that informs the social, all mutually interconnected and contingent on one another; one always deals with an intertwinement of ideas, with a “Verflechtung der Sozial- und der Begriffshistorie” (Koselleck 2006, 11). The following section of the present paper addresses Reinhart Koselleck's theoretical propositions – offering some alternative conceptual paradigms – only to account for and further contextualise Goethe's project of *Weltliteratur*, whereupon it mentions its past iterations and future developments.

## Preliminaries to *Begriffsgeschichte*

Koselleck's strand of "conceptual history" appears to be based on two major pillars: contextuality, on the one hand, and conflictuality, on the other. Nothing happens in isolation, and everything in existence is interconnected, be it on a micro or macro level. Consequences of each event ripple through time and space, influencing everything on their way in a myriad of subtle ways; the results or, more broadly, the aftermath of the process may be analysed and rationalised *a posteriori* – by the very necessity: linguistically, as language is the only reliable medium known to mankind by means of which one may efficaciously record and investigate all that has ever transpired. At the same time, the very essence of an event transcends and breaches the limits of any linguistic system: "Was sich tatsächlich ereignet, ist offenbar mehr als die sprachliche Artikulation, die dazu geführt hat oder sie deutet" (Koselleck 2006, 15). In this sense, no occurrence can ever be fully analysed, its innermost "truth" – ever reached. There is always something the observer does not know or acknowledge, and each act of interpretation is flawed and imperfect by definition. Conversely, language may shape reality in its own elusive ways – apart from being mostly constative in character, it does have great performative potential. As assessed by Koselleck, "[w]eder holt das sprachliche Begreifen ein, was geschieht oder tatsächlich der Fall war, noch geschieht etwas, was nicht durch seine sprachliche Verarbeitung bereits verändert wird" (2006, 13). This leads to the aforementioned conflict underlying *Begriffs-* and *Diskursgeschichte*; concepts may be well embedded in history and in context, but their non-concreteness always leaves room for discussion, where exegesis is, in fact, as much a hermeneutic endeavour as it is a tool for potential manipulation, obfuscation, and sophistry. Interestingly enough, for this reason "Koselleck employs [in his writings] numerous metaphoric expressions that depict purposeful intellectual activity, whether political, moral, or purely intellectual, as struggle, battle, violence, and warfare" (Pankakoski 2010, 760).<sup>1</sup> Political and academic discourse is a space of intellectual strife and constant tension, where meanings might be lost or retransfigured – oftentimes unconsciously – even on the pre-cognitive or the pre-linguistic level: "Es gibt also außersprachliche, vorsprachliche – und nachsprachliche – Elemente in allen Handlungen, die zu einer Geschichte führen" (Koselleck 2006, 16). At the same time, what needs to be reiterated, is that the majority of human experiences actively resist verbalisation or narrativisation, as their character is *not* linguistic or goes *beyond* what is verbalisable. However, as categories of meaning fundamental to the process of infinite semiosis, all those elements have to function in the discursive space of any story, thus being a part of both social and conceptual history:

Sie sind den elementaren, den geographischen, biologischen und zoologischen Bedingungen verhaftet, die über die menschliche Konstitution allesamt in die gesellschaftlichen

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<sup>1</sup> Pankakoski (2010, 760ff.) almost creates a mini lexicon of militaristic terms Koselleck uses in his publications, enumerating, for instance, an intellectual "attack" (*Angriff*), "drawn battle lines" (*Kampfstellung*), political "confrontation" (*Auseinandersetzung*), "occupation" (*Okkupation*), or "sharp weapons" (*scharfe Waffen*) with which to assail one's opponent.

Geschehnisse einwirken. Geburt, Liebe und Tod, Essen, Hunger, Elend und Krankheiten, vielleicht auch das Glück, jedenfalls Raub, Sieg, Töten und Niederlage, all dies sind auch Elemente und Vollzugsweisen menschlicher Geschichte, die vom Alltag bis zur Identifikation politischer Herrschaftsgebilde reichen und deren *außersprachliche Vorgaben* schwer zu verleugnen sind. (Koselleck 2006, 16; emphasis mine)

What forms the pre-linguistic knowledge is always-already available for retrieval and enables a person to fully process and internalise their experiences, and act accordingly in any situation. What is beyond the linguistic (“outside language”) proves to be far more problematic: even though one may cognise, for instance, sensory or affective stimuli, it is much more complex to analyse abstract and otherwise conceptual notions as the ones enumerated in the abovementioned passage. To define “life,” “death,” “agency,” or “subjecthood” is an onerous task, fraught with many difficulties of linguistic, pre-linguistic, and post-linguistic nature – also in a clearly determined theoretical context, whose presence is very much needed in any act of interpretation or analysis. A concept may only be scrutinised by means of other concepts – all in the semiological space of a given discourse; it cannot exist in isolation, just as one cannot separate the *signifié* from the *signifiant* in Saussurean and Peircean semiotics. Naturally, the same goes for any more complex structure: a string of words, a sentence, a narrative, a story, and – ultimately – history. “We thus find ourselves in a methodologically irresolvable dilemma: that every history, while in process and as occurrence,” claims Koselleck, “is something other than what its linguistic articulation can establish; but that this ‘other’ in turn can only be made visible through the medium of language” (2004, 223). While referring to a processal nature of interpretation, the historian introduces one more key element lying at the core of hermeneutic enquiry: temporalisation.

In his *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Reinhart Koselleck coins an interesting category of “concepts of movement,” whose “meaning is not fixed by experience but is open to dispute” and which “are thereby more open towards the future” (Pankakoski 2010, 766). Pertaining mostly (but not exclusively) to all the -isms, those notions may span the entirety of the temporal spectrum, with well-established concepts eventually shifting semantically and, oftentimes, drifting away from their original meanings. The reasons for the said semantic shift are not always easily identifiable – it may be conditioned socially, politically, economically, or even artistically. The change, then, is as much enrooted in the past (where the primary meaning lies) as it is influenced by the present and looks forward to the future. “Temporalization, therefore, did not simply transform older constitutional concepts, but aided in the development of new ones [...]. The transitional period between past and future is thus kaleidoscopically, with every freshly minted concept, projected anew” (Koselleck 2004, 249). From the point of view of conceptual history, what underlies the formation of new notions are pre- and post-linguistic tensions, which Koselleck in his *Begriffsgeschichte* assesses as strictly metahistorical (2006, 33ff.). The first type of tension has already been mentioned indirectly: it is the opposition between “earlier” and “later,” whose diachronic complexity has a bearing on any systematisation of history, including

the history of ideas. Every event may generate a potential infinitude of past and future references to other occurrences, just like any element of its conceptualisation may be said to have a potentially infinite number of anaphoric and cataphoric references to other components of a discourse in which it is inherently embedded. The second opposition is that between the “inside” and the “outside,” between the I and the Other. Every action, especially an action wherein some agent engages with or acts on a patient, has a delimiting, territorial character, i.e. it differentiates between entities and subjectivities; it introduces an element of power struggle or a degree of hierarchisation; it distinguishes between the inside and the outside, clearly demarcating the boundary between the two. Consequences thereof are at the core of the third opposition – the one between “up” and “down.” It is the antithesis between “high” and “low,” where verticality denotes and directly refers to the social ladder. Concept-wise, the contrast might pertain to the linguistic register or genological differences between different text forms, where some of them seemingly work better in certain contexts and worse in others, based on their decorum, a degree of complexity, or general suitability to the occasion or expectations. “Zusammengefaßt: früher/später, innen/außen, oben/unten sind drei Oppositionsbestimmungen, ohne die keine Geschichte zustande kommt, wie auch immer sie sich im einzelnen wirtschaftlich zusammensetzt – aus wirtschaftlichen, religiösen, politischen, sozialen oder sonstigen Faktoren” (Koselleck 2006, 35).

All those properties are especially prominent in spoken language, and in their various configurations they normally generate noticeable “Spannung [...] zwischen gesprochener Rede und ihren Ereignisfolgen” (Koselleck 2006, 37). Concomitant temporalisation complicates all attempts at a concise and exhaustive oral definition of some concept as a given situation unravels at a particular moment – to define or explicate something *ex eventu* is completely different from doing so *post eventu*, when one has the full benefit of hindsight. In other words, to conceptualise something as it transpires before one’s very eyes is always problematic: the subject perceives the situation only from one vantage point and cannot properly, and objectively, assess all of its essential constituents. Equally complex is formulation of judgements, critiques, pronouncements, and all kinds of assessments concerning the future: “Die gesprochene Sprache ist immer entweder mehr oder weniger, als die wirkliche Geschichte in ihrem Vollzug einlöst. Sie vor allem befindet über die Möglichkeit einer Geschichte in actu, hat also eine andere temporale Struktur als die Ereignissequenz selbst. *Begriffe werden dann zu Vorgriffen*” (Koselleck 2006, 37; emphasis mine). *Concepts*, then, may become tentative *anticipations*, *proleptic* – or simply *predictive* – in character.<sup>2</sup>

As an alternative to Koselleck’s theoretical proposition, one may also consider (here: necessarily simplified) that of Heidegger’s. “The working out of under-

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<sup>2</sup> That is also why, what has been emphasised before, “[i]n Koselleck’s understanding, concepts do not vary only according to their semantic field but also according to the temporal assumptions built into them” (Motzkin 1996, 41). Steeped in a very particular historical context, a socio-cultural *milieu*, or an artistic convention, any idea eventually “either obtains new intensities or creates new intensities from the collision, such as between pre-political and political meanings. These new intensities in turn propel the concept further” (Motzkin 1996, 44).



standing into a fully developed interpretation consists in accumulating the hermeneutic ‘fore-structures’ which together make up what Heidegger calls the ‘hermeneutic situation’” (Caputo 1987, 70). Obliquely referring to *Being and Time*, John D. Caputo mentions three exigent prerequisites for any act of interpretation or hermeneutic appraisal, namely: a) fore-having (*Vorhabe*); b) fore-sight (*Vorsicht*); c) fore-grasping (*Vorgriff*). Each fore-structure is a necessary constituent of any interpretative act or a heuristic analysis. *Vorhabe* pertains to holding the being in one’s possession or being endowed with it in its entirety – it “refers in particular to having a hold on the *whole* object, getting it into our possession as a whole. [...] In order to have an interpreted grasp of the system which makes up our world, therefore, we need to have the whole scope of that system in view” (Caputo 1987, 70). Once seized, be it physically or mentally, the object of one’s scrutiny needs to be carefully examined, stripped of any mysteries, imprecisions, inaccuracies, and its essence – thoroughly fathomed. “In order to project a being appropriately, it is necessary to have an initial grasp of the kind of Being [...] which belongs to it, so that we understand the sort of thing with which we have to do” (Caputo 1987, 70). Finally, and perhaps most importantly,

to have a fore-grasp is to have a fore-conception of the projected being, which Heidegger describes as having at one’s disposal an articulated system of concepts with which to grasp the being. Fore-grasping is to fore-sight what the articulated is to the general schema. Fore-grasping spells out and articulates the kind of Being which is caught sight of in fore-sight. Fore-grasping supplies the appropriate conceptual system or table of categories into which the being is entered. (Caputo 1987, 70)

By establishing all the fore-structures, one imbues the object of their interpretation with meaning. It is the first step that actually bridges “comprehension” and “conceptualisation,” which Caputo – this time directly referring to Gadamer – succinctly encapsulates as “a back-and-forth movement between understanding and interpretation until the right ‘fit’ is found between the fore-structures and the entity” (Caputo 1987, 70). At the same time, one always needs to be mindful of the fact that “concepts have political and social capacities” (Koselleck 1982: 419) and never exist in isolation nor are totally autonomous. Hence, from an epistemological point of view, everything that is construed conceptually is also subject to temporalisation, and thus to historicisation. It becomes part of bigger structures, just like, for instance, personal memories with time become part of collective or national heritage. Even on the most abstract level, its clarification is contingent upon a network of other interconnected concepts, which, too, are *eo ipso* grounded on as well as referring to other ideas – social, historical, political, etc. *Begriffe* and *Vorgriffe*, then, are by necessity embedded and immersed in social history as much as they are intrinsically derived from language and, more specifically, discourse:

a concept is not a mere subjective invention of the intellect, a coherent and stable unity of meaning, or a classificatory tool that helps us measure social regularities externally according to pre-constituted ideas. Rather, a concept is a constellation of apparently dispersed elements in society, a crystallization of the ways in which actors make sense of the world and social relations are historically organized. Therefore, a concept is a hermeneutically

embedded object of experience, which is unconceivable without the extra-linguistic elements of historical reality. (Cordero 2016, 62)

The affective underpinning underlying Koselleck's temporalisation and Heidegger's usage of the morpheme "fore-" is well reflected in an interesting dichotomy proposed in 1991 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, namely that between a percept and a concept. Not only is it partially reminiscent of Koselleckian *Be-* and *Vorgriffe*, but it is, in fact, the same structure in reverse – almost like a mirror image. Proleptic "anticipation" which may arise on the basis of a concept is, for Deleuze, less important than what transpires prior to its creation or at the very moment of its inception. "Percepts can be telescopic or microscopic, giving characters and landscapes grand dimension as if they were swollen by a life that no lived perception can attain" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 171); in a sense, then, "the percept" can be construed "as a minimum before the void" suffused with "subtle imperceptible variations (which are constitutive of a percept nevertheless)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 181). Since "[t]he activity of temporal semantic construal at the same time involve[s] the establishment of the historical force contained within a statement," where "within this temporal scheme there are of course endless transitions and superimpositions" (Koselleck 1982, 412, 417), a percept functions as a buffer – a moment of respite wherein a mental image is being made, simultaneously remaining both *inside* and *outside* of the temporal frame in which it happens to exist. Not unlike a photograph that froze a given moment in time but which still has not been fully developed from a negative. That is also its primary function: "to make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, affect us, and make us become" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 182). It is a sensorial "fore-conception" which precedes a formulation of a concept, and – as such – is worthy of further scrutiny by means of methodologies appurtenant to conceptual history and related disciplines.

## Towards a cosmopolitan exchange

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Weltliteratur* is a curious chimera of a notion, whose temporal and spatial breadth is, indeed, quite astounding. Spanning the past, the present, and the future as well as – at least in theory – all geographical regions of the world, the concept is truly universal and transnational. It foregrounds an extensive system whereby the entirety of world literature could potentially be classified, compartmentalised, and collated by way of comparative analyses. At the same time, the notion defies and subversively resists any simple conceptualisations, for it is not based – or, according to its very precepts, should not be based – on a singular set of ideas characteristic of one specific intellectual group living in a distinct social *milieu* at a fixed time and in a fixed place. In other words, since "world literature" should be cosmopolitan in every respect imaginable, it technically must not originate in any particular national literature or stem from a certain national mindset that would flaw its otherwise pure constitution. Its core strength lies in its ability to transcend the boundaries of one discipline,



artistic epoch, or culture, thus overcoming its inherent limitations as supposedly “territorial” and “monocultural.” World literature, then, forms a complex polysystem which initially was understood to encompass everything that is of paramount importance to particular national literatures; in the words of Werner Krauss, “[s]ie erhebt sich dann als eine Spitzenliteratur mit ihren unsterblichen, den Normalhorizont überragenden Meisterwerken über alle Literaturen. Weltliteratur ist dann zu einem Pandämonium geworden, in dem sich Cervantes und Rabelais, Dante und Voltaire zunicken” (Krauss 1965, 347–8). It bridges the literary, the social, the artistic and, last but not least, the linguistic, all of which add up to the “fore-conceptions” as well as Koselleckian metahistorical tensions mentioned before. “Gesellschaft und Sprache gehören insofern zu den metahistorischen Vorgaben, ohne die keine Geschichte und keine Historie denkbar sind” (Koselleck 2006, 12), and – as only stands to reason – Goethe’s idea of world literature was also a product of his times, arisen from concerns far more mundane than what the concept itself appears to be built of. It was not free from prejudice, the author’s personal convictions, or socio-historical intricacies of the time in which it was devised. For instance, as written by Goethe himself in 1827 for a special issue of the journal *Über Kunst und Altertum*,

ich bezwecke ein Höheres, worauf ich vorläufig hindeuten will. Überall hört und liest man von dem Vorschreiten des Menschengeschlechtes, von den weiteren Aussichten der Welt und Menschenverhältnisse. Wie es auch im Ganzen hiemit [sic] beschaffen sein mag, welches zu untersuchen und näher zu bestimmen nicht meines Amtes ist, will ich doch von meiner Seite meine Freunde aufmerksam machen, daß ich überzeugt sei, es bilde sich eine allgemeine Weltliteratur, worin uns Deutschen eine ehrenvolle Rolle vorbehalten ist.

I have something higher in mind, which I want to indicate provisionally. Everywhere one hears and reads about the progress of the human race, about the further prospects for world and human relationships. However that may be on the whole, which it is not my office to investigate and more closely determine, I nevertheless would personally like to make my friends aware that I am convinced a universal world literature is in the process of being constituted, in which an honorable role is reserved for us Germans. (Pizer 2000, 215)<sup>3</sup>

Despite Goethe’s attempts to remain completely objective, as testified to by his frequent use of distancing impersonal pronouns (e.g. “Überall hört und liest man,” “es bilde sich”) or the subjunctive mood, his private opinions are still very much present in the text. One cannot help but notice a marked degree of social and national hierarchisation as well as a clearly occidental, Europocentric point of view he decides to adopt. His idea – in all its intrinsic cosmopolitanism – is still deeply embedded in the historical and social framework of the early nineteenth century.

The way to an unbridled global exchange envisaged by Goethe was fraught with many difficulties, which can also be said about a problematic, arduous concept formation. Given the latter’s embeddedness in a very specific context, “social and political conflicts of the past must be interpreted and opened up via the medium of their contemporary conceptual limits and in terms of the mutually un-

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<sup>3</sup> Unofficial translation offered by J. Pizer, based on *Goethes sämtliche Werke. Jubiläums-Ausgabe in 40 Bänden*. Vol. 38. Stuttgart and Berlin: J. G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung.

derstood past linguistic usage of the participating agents” (Koselleck 1982, 414) – only then can an idea be fully formulated. The aforementioned conflicts, present both in world history as well as in conceptual history, are ridden with dualities and dissonances, such as the ones prominently discussed after the Congress of Vienna: where do nationalism and cosmopolitanism begin and end? How to delimit and differentiate patriotism from xenophobia? Can one still speak of one’s national identity without acknowledging political and societal structures outside of a given nation that nevertheless influence it in a number of ways? What about languages and literatures, which – by their very constitution – are heterogenous and hybrid? All of those questions necessitate and merit thorough analyses, and all of them must surely have given Goethe much food for thought in the last years of his extraordinary life.

“Given Germany’s lack of a strong, immanent, infrangible national identity in his time,” claims John Pizer, “it is not surprising that Goethe was particularly aware of and open to the possibility of a transnational literary modality” (2000, 216). At its core lies the belief in full egalitarianism typical of the Age of Enlightenment conjoined with the *idée fixe* of all the Romantics – the heartfelt conviction that each individual is thoroughly original, creative, ingenious, and, by extension, that every local culture is completely unique and worthy of attention. Goethe’s theoretical proposition is as much based on those two ideas as it is fuelled by his personal interest he took in other literatures, cultures, and minorities, perhaps at one point deepened by his “resignation to the impossibility of creating a ‘classical’ (national) German literature [which] may have made the formulation of a ‘world literature’ the only possible alternative to cultural fragmentation” (Pizer 2000, 216). In a way, his appeal to counteract the said cultural fragmentation and to hasten the approach of the “era of world literature” is based on three main constituents. To begin with, Goethe seems to believe that the entirety of the human literary production belongs to and should be accessed by all mankind, and must be used accordingly for its benefit. Secondly, the gift of creation, although distributed unevenly, has its seeds in every person, and thus everyone should be able to cultivate it. Finally, since even national literatures have transnational elements, they might be read with a view towards furtherance of one’s own knowledge of a given country or culture. In this sense, *Weltliteratur* should always find its origins in human curiosity towards other people and other cultures, but – unlike its national equivalent – it has an added element of being constructed in such a way as to remain comprehensible to all of its potential readers. Simple in theory; much less so in *praxis*.

One key problem underlying Goethe’s conceptualisation of world literature – and an issue of great interest to Reinhart Koselleck – is his attitude towards notions such as “nation” or “culture.” It is difficult to assess unanimously what the establishment of *Weltliteratur* would actually entail. Would every country try to overcome its national limitations in an attempt at ascending higher in the hierarchy of development and would humanity embark on a noble quest for unity and self-actualisation? Or would it simply be limited to an exchange between various countries of works which they deem worthy of further dissemination? The former

proposition is actually considered by the famous Weimar wordsmith with reference to Thomas Carlyle:

We are weakest in the æsthetic department, and may wait long before we meet such a man as Carlyle. It is pleasant to see that intercourse is now so close between the French, English, and Germans, that we shall be able to correct one another. This is the greatest use of a world-literature, which will show itself more and more.

Carlyle has written a life of Schiller, and judged him as it would be difficult for a German to judge him. On the other hand, we are clear about Shakespeare and Byron, and can, perhaps, appreciate their merits better than the English themselves. (Eckermann and Soret 1850, 432)

Here, Goethe proleptically refers to *Weltliteratur* as a means of mutual transnational help in the form of nascent literary criticism. The cosmopolitan exchange contained therein is practically never found in the standard definition of literature conflated with the category of *national* (viz. isolated) writing. The author *anticipates* development of both *belles-lettres* and critical analyses that assume new forms which, with hindsight, one might assess as revolutionary and non-contemporaneous with that era. His anticipation is also underlaid with a most vexing paradox: on the one hand, Goethe postulates knowledge should be freely disseminated in a way that grants easy, unobstructed access but, on the other, its prior selection is limited and controlled by certain intellectual circles and, more broadly, the elites (cf. Baldensperger 1904, 267ff.). The issue is further aggravated by the writer's Eurocentrism; he may have been interested in Persian poetry, Indian drama, or Chinese prose, but he always prioritised the West-European canon over any other kind of writing. "Goethe's remarks anticipate both the postmodern mass global marketing of culture and conservative reaction against this trend, though here too Goethe's thinking is primarily informed by European rather than truly global tendencies" (Pizer 2000, 216–7). Naturally, what remains the hallmark and the veritable pinnacle of literary accomplishment is ancient Greece – a conviction that over the centuries have been so deeply enrooted in the writers' mentality that it was carried over until the early twentieth century. It was particularly prominent amongst Goethe's contemporaries, and it also left a lasting impression on those following his work in the decades to come. A very clear echoes of his bold propositions may, for instance, be found in "Comparative Literature" penned by Charles Chauncy Shackford in 1876, wherein the author as much eulogises ancient Greek drama as he supplements and exemplifies Goethe's ideas:

The literary productions of all ages and peoples can be classed, can be brought into comparison and contrast, can be taken out of their isolation as belonging to one nation, or one separate era, and be brought under divisions as the embodiment of the same æsthetic principles, the universal laws of mental, social and moral development: the same in India and in England; in Hellas, with its laughing sea, and Germany, with its sombre forests. (Shackford 1876, 266)

Very similar sentiments are proffered by Jean-Jacques Ampère, who, too, espouses new modes of reading that account for other nations and cultures:

We have ceased looking upon the *Iliad* as an epic of the study, methodically composed by a writer of taste and philosophy, only when these popular songs of heroic Greece have been compared with those that have been a spontaneous product among other peoples at the same social epoch. In studying the Spanish romances, the ancient Germanic and Scandinavian poetry, we have learned how the different elements of the primitive epics have been formed, grouped and changed. The monuments of the Middle Ages have explained those of the early ages of Greece. (Quoted in Shackford 1876, 278)

But it was not until 1886 when H. M. Posnett published his seminal *Comparative Literature* that comparative studies emerged as a proper scientific discipline, with its own coherent methodology and field-specific nomenclature. “The fundamental facts in literary evolution,” deliberates Posnett, “are the extent of the social group and the characters of the individual units of which it is composed” (1886, 235) – a statement strikingly similar to some of Koselleck’s. The author expounds on this idea directly referring to the Greeks and Romans, hypothesising that “world literature” *per se* had existed long before Goethe actually gave this phenomenon a name. “The leading mark of world-literature [...] is the severance of literature from defined social groups – the universalising of literature, if we may use such an expression” (1886, 236).<sup>4</sup> Such a conceptualisation of *Weltliteratur* is surprisingly modern, and its reference to the social underpinning of all literatures – feels really apropos and much in tune with Reinhart Koselleck’s theoretical propositions. Both Goethe and Posnett base their understanding of the notion on a set of particular fore-conceptions, steeped in national history, politics as well as social mores of their time, and prescience of their definitions testify to their proleptic, partially visionary character. In a way, the said definitions were universalising and atemporal – their simplicity and veracity made them timeless, even if at the moment of their inception they were occasionally misunderstood or misappropriated by both intellectuals’ contemporaries. It proves Koselleckian conviction that certain ideas not only generate semiotic and semantic friction but are also the resultant of the tension between the social and the linguistic. Either definition of *Weltliteratur*, be it Goethe’s or Posnett’s, has “ein prognostisches Potential, das über den einmaligen Anlaß hinausgreift” (Koselleck 2006, 37–8), and as such is subject to further debate.

The concept of world literature may indeed be interpreted as the very cornerstone of modern comparative literature, which over the course of nearly two hundred years have undergone a number of significant changes and revisions. In the words of Emily Apter, one of the leading comparatists, “Goethe’s ideal of *Weltliteratur*, associated with a commitment to expansive cultural secularism, became a disciplinary premiss that has endured” (2006, 41) until this very day, and – as emphasised before – the writer’s percipient attitude incentivised other

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<sup>4</sup> Posnett further explicates and exemplifies his argument: “Such a process may be observed in the Alexandrian and Roman, the later Hebrew and Arab, the Indian and Chinese, literatures; and this universalism, though differing profoundly in its Eastern and Western conceptions of personality, is alike in the East and West accompanied by the imitation of literary work wrought out in days when the current of social life was broken up into many narrow channels foaming uplands of rock and tree” (1886, 236).

scholars to systematise it as one coherent field of research. As if by definition, it “was in principle global from its inception, even if its institutional establishment in the postwar period assigned Europe the lion’s share of critical attention and shortchanged non-Western literatures” (Apter 2006, 41). In this sense, the discipline did not really develop the way Goethe had prognosticated; it was not motivated by lofty ideas of international cultural exchange that brings mankind to a higher level of evolution but due to spreading globalisation, which, in the words of Apter, also led to the “comp-lit-ization” of various literary canons. Perhaps unsurprisingly: if one were to assume we live in a grand *cosmopolitheia* – as did Kant back in the day, and as does Spivak now – it is only natural that the change (of any kind) is always governmentalised, observed, controlled, or even exploited. “*Cosmopolitheia* requires a borderless world,” but the human race is forced into a permanent “conflictual coexistence at the crossroads” (Spivak 2012, 111, 110) – a position that favours practicality over idealism. “The term” of world literature may well have “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” (Damrosch 2003, 1), but as a *Vorgriff*, an anticipation, it could not account for all the possible alternatives or variations of its development and most complex progression. Accordingly, comparative literature, ended up as a hybrid chimera of a discipline, arisen from and spanning many different convictions, expectations, and oftentimes exalted hopes. Known under distinct national names, suffice to mention *littérature comparée* or *vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, the field assumes several unalike guises. Its very much needed reconceptualisation taking place nowadays – in unpredictable, highly volatile times of socio-political changes, also in academia – may even remind one of the unstable conditions in which the Goethean concept originated in the first place. As stated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in a conversation with David Damrosch,

To step into a world of literature by ourselves today – because everything is opening up – and to say that it’s the message of capitalist globalization is not to be tendentious but to point out that this moment is conjuncturally similar to the time of Goethe and Kant. A sudden access to a world, and they start talking about *Weltliteratur* and *cosmopolitheia*, in the same way, but with a great difference as well, that we talk about world literature and cosmopolitanism. (Damrosch and Spivak 2011, 467)

The ongoing changes and processes have to be accounted for but not necessarily by means of categories which – unrevised – seem completely obsolescent. “If we look to Goethe for guidance, the perplexities only multiply, fuelled 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” (Damrosch 2003, 1). By analogy, his idea of *Weltliteratur* must, too, be modernised to still serve its primary purpose. The same goes for “[t]he original enterprise of comparative literature, which sought to read literature trans-nationally in terms of themes, movements, genres, periods, zeitgeist, history of ideas”; the enterprise that, according to Susan Bassnett, is now “out-dated and needs to be rethought in the light of writing being produced in emergent cultures” (2010, 4). One such reconceptualisation and, until this very

day, one of the more convincing ways of thinking about both comparative studies and world literature is a paradigm proposed by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*, a masterpiece of literary criticism published originally in 1999. In it, Casanova mingles essayistic impressions on the state of literature by means of a sociological apparatus advanced by Pierre Bourdieu view a with towards a new systematisation of all human literary endeavours, razing numerous ideological walls and fortresses built by literature departments around the world. Her work does justice to Goethe's original notion of writing that transcends the boundaries as much as it has a markedly Koselleckian inclination to embed the observations in context, thereby spanning literary, social, and conceptual history. She thus emphasises that

Goethe elaborated the notion of *Weltliteratur* precisely at the moment of Germany's entry into the international literary space. As a member of a nation that was a newcomer to the game, challenging French literary and intellectual hegemony, Goethe had a vital interest in understanding the reality of the situation in which his nation now found itself. Displaying the perceptiveness commonly found among newcomers from dominated communities, not only did he grasp the international character of literature, which is to say its deployment outside national limits; he also understood at once its competitive nature and the paradoxical unity that results from it. (Casanova 2004, 40)

Pascale Casanova's exhaustive and most competent scrutiny of the topic subtly evinces fore-conceptions underlying Goethe's reasoning, simultaneously juxtaposing his experiences against the backdrop of his tumultuous times. In her efforts to "describe the world republic of letters, which is to say the genesis and structure of international literary space," (Casanova 2004, 351), the scholar proposes a way out of the methodological impasse which Goethe could not in any way imaginable predict, on top of which she subsequently offers convincing prolegomena to a new world literature and a new, reformed comparativism. With literature treated nearly as one of Koselleck's "concepts of movement," Casanova also institutes an element of temporalisation in the analytical part of her study, speaking of "what might be called the Greenwich meridian of literature [that] makes it possible to estimate the relative aesthetic distance from the center of the world of letters of all those who belong to it" (Casanova 2004, 88). Accordingly,

[t]his aesthetic distance is also measured in temporal terms, since the prime meridian determines the present of literary creation, which is to say modernity. The aesthetic distance of a work or corpus of works from the center may thus be measured by their temporal remove from the canons that, at the precise moment of estimation, define the literary present. (Casanova 2004, 88)

As such, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* may be interpreted as an early attempt at a conceptualisation of a new critical paradigm – one which bridges the gap between various time periods, geographical regions, and cultural differences. Stemming from the well-grounded category of national literature, it disregards the notions of borders and limitations, championing a more open approach to prose and poetry, where all things literary create a heterogeneous system of intertextual and intersemiotic connections. As a product of his times, Goethe's world literature eased a great deal of pent-up hostility after the



Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna, even if on the level of language the idea itself was based on semantic tensions reminiscent of those proposed by Reinhart Koselleck in his *Begriffsgeschichte*. Goethe motivated a whole host of theoreticians to engage in the institution of what would eventually become known as comparative literary studies. Although founded upon an assemblage of transient fore-conceptions and Deleuzian percepts, his tentative hypothesis proved to be as intellectually stimulating as it was borderline prophetic in its visionary mental construal of a new era of *belles-lettres* and – by extension – the eventual establishment of the “world republic of letters.” Its resonance cannot be denied, testifying to the author’s ingeniousness and his unparalleled ability “to write between self and world, such as to see and to show the continuity between them” (Minden 2011: 25–6). Both synchronous and asynchronous, proleptic and analeptic, concurrently inside and outside of the temporal frame wherein it was devised, the concept illuminated future research methodologies and a number of related fields of enquiry. One may be even tempted to say, following David Damrosch, that “Goethe is a diamond [...] that casts a different color in every direction” (2003: 1), and his brilliant idea – just like a precious gem in its resplendent beauty – unabatedly glimmers through time and space until this very day, radiating enticing shafts of light on all facets of our literary and critical endeavours.

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