Lost in Lit-Terra Incognita, or What Is and to What End Do We Study World Literature?

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> I thought in silence 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.
>
> —Johann Peter Eckermann, qtd. in Damrosch, *What* Is *World Literature?* 2

> The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil. I understood only a fraction of the things being said within the walls of my skull. Only later, when I began to probe, did I learn that below the surface transmissions—the front-of-mind stuff which is what I'd originally been picking up—language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words . . . like calling out to like.
>
> —Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 200

I.

On May 26 and 27, 1789, a mere seven weeks before the outbreak of the French Revolution, the German dramatist, aesthetician, and historian Friedrich Schiller delivered his famous inaugural lecture at Jena University: "Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?" ("What is and to what end does one study universal history?"). Such was the celebrity of Schiller, renowned in particular for his 1781 drama of revolt *Die Räuber*, that some 500 students came to listen—an unusually large crowd for German universities in the late eighteenth century. In his lecture Schiller reflects on the nature of history and its discursive implications. He notes how world history appears to the human observer like "a perpetually flowing river," only a few of whose waves will ever be illuminated by universal history (Schiller 763). Consequently, the discipline of universal history, unable to capture every wave, eddy, or current of history's progress, can never be more than an aggregate of fragments, hardly deserving the name of

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a genuine science. Thus, to smooth over our necessarily fragmentary and discontinuous perception of the vast quantities of historical data, the historian—and here Schiller shifts from a historian's perspective into a more philosophical register—is forced to bridge the gaps and fill the lacunae by employing artificial connecting links or bonding agents ("künstliche Bindungsglieder"), thereby unifying "the aggregate" of disparate materials into a coherent discursive "system," a "rationally connected whole." However, this only works, he maintains, because observers can rely on the "unity and continuity of natural laws and the human spirit" (763).

Why start with Schiller, an author better known for his rebellious dramas, philosophical idealism, and edifying aesthetics than for his link with world literature? Indeed, Volume E of the six-volume second edition of *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (2002, ed. Lawall) offers in the section entitled "Revolution and Romanticism in Europe and America" not one line of Schiller's revolutionary dramas, but instead selections from Rousseau, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Goethe, among others. Nor does the six-volume *Bedford Anthology of World Literature* (2003, ed. Davis et al.) or the six-volume *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (2004, ed. Damrosch and Pike) offer us any text by Schiller. Although in many respects antipodes, Goethe and Schiller became close friends and collaborators, and since the early nineteenth century Germans have come to see them as the double helix of German literary classicism. But if we go by the three most comprehensive English-language anthologies of world literature, it is Goethe and not his more idealistically zealous friend who is deemed worthy to be anthologized. Why start with Schiller in this essay on world literature, then, if it is Goethe who seems more global and who was, after all, the originator of the term *world literature*?

First, because world literature is not unlike universal history in Schiller's sense. It too appears to us as "a perpetually flowing river," only a few of whose waves will ever be illuminated by universal literary history. Indeed, the history of world literature starts at the very moment when modern history itself starts, inasmuch as the latter's definition is premised on the interpretation of surviving written records. In fact, it is sometimes impossible to discriminate the early source documents of history from those of literary history. It is no coincidence that the first chapter of David Damrosch's recent *What* Is *World Literature?*, a book that will serve as the backdrop to my own reflections here, deals with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, found inscribed on ancient cuneiform tablets when Austen Henry Layard and his assistant Hormuzd Rassam uncovered the ancient Assyrian ruins of Niniveh starting in the mid-1840s. The second reason for beginning with Schiller is that his premise of the "unity and continuity of natural laws and the human spirit" will play a crucial role in what I wish to argue. And, third, Schiller's compound "Universalgeschichte," universal history, might be seen to pave the way for Goethe's compound "Weltliteratur," which in German could equally be termed "Universalliteratur."

Indeed, I had planned initially to start with Goethe and his seminal term "Weltliteratur," which, for obvious reasons, tends to form the entry point for most discussions of world literature, Damrosch's recent book being no exception. Damrosch uses his introduction to recount in great detail how the term was coined by

Goethe in conversation with his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann in the late 1820s and put into circulation by Eckermann when he published his *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* after Goethe's death in 1835. As a professor of German literature writing about world literature, how could one not want to begin with Goethe's maxims on world literature, one of the most famous of which runs: "General world literature can only develop when nations get to know all the relations among the nations. The inevitable result will be that they will find in each other something likeable and something repulsive, something to be imitated and something to be rejected. This too will contribute to the expanding economic relations, for the recognition of common convictions will further a prompter and deeper confidence. On the other hand, when we are dealing with people who think very differently, we will be more cautious as well as more tolerant and forgiving" (Goethe 10–11).

If for Schiller the key premise was the "unity and continuity of the human spirit," for Goethe, perhaps sobered and disillusioned by the butchery following the French Revolution in the 1790s, but also looking back on the wave of nationalistic fervor inspired by the Napoleonic Wars not only but especially in Germany in the early decades of the nineteenth century, world literature was a means of *Völkerverständigung*, a practical instrument to further international understanding and reconciliation. In recognizing what unites us across borders, but also what makes us different, "we will [become] more cautious as well as more tolerant and forgiving," Goethe predicted (11).

II.

If Goethe has been the usual starting point for most discussions of world literature, Damrosch's book *What* Is *World Literature?*—with its symptomatic stress on "Is"—is the obvious point from which to launch further explorations of this concept and its scope, definitional problems, and viability.[1] But let me be quite clear: I will not even attempt to go beyond what Damrosch has already said with such clarity, urbanity, and erudition. Damrosch went to great lengths in preparing his book: in particular, he studied a number of languages and cultures, both ancient and modern, in order to be able to read closely a broad range of texts, and their translations, within their original contexts of production, reception, and circulation. *What* Is *World Literature?* thus covers a textual terrain reaching from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and hieratic Egyptian poetry to such contemporary "classics" as Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Rigoberta Menchú's *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, and Milorad Pavić's *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Clearly, Damrosch's model is to be emulated, but few of us will have the time and perseverance, and even fewer the linguistic agility, to do so. Thus Damrosch suggests that collaboration is one way into the future. The lone scholar of yore will no longer be able to master—if

[1] Damrosch's *What* Is *World Literature?* is of course only one within a spate of recent studies on the topic. Others include the January 2001 special issue of *PMLA*, "Globalizing Literary Studies," coordinated by Giles Gunn; Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004); the essay collection *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast (2004); Damrosch's introductory volume *How to Read World Literature* (2009); and the MLA "Options for Teaching" volume *Teaching World Literature* (2009), edited by Damrosch.

ever he or she was—more than a handful of languages competently.[2] And mastering a language is not the same as mastering a culture and its literary heritage. For many of us Damrosch's book, and his method, will thus remain an ideal, one "to be striven after, [yet] too great to be reached," as Eckermann says about Goethe. Even Damrosch grants that, on a practical level, world literature is limited to what is available in translation, and it is typically only "experienced as what is available to read in classrooms and on bookstore shelves, on course syllabi and in anthologies for students and general readers" (*What* Is *World Literature?* 111). Damrosch is a demanding teacher: he requires of readers that they make every effort to study not only the text, but also its context and even its reception and translation history. He argues that "A lively awareness of a work's original context is an important safeguard against its outright assimilation to the reader's own immediate moment. . . . Dante's [*Divina Commedia*] changes shape as it crosses borders: it is a fundamentally *different* work abroad, and even in Italy it was a very different work for Italo Calvino and Primo Levi in the twentieth century than it was for Boccaccio in the fourteenth. Yet the *Commedia*'s effects will always be shaped by the reader's powerful sense of it as a poem from a very different time and place from our own" (140). The implicit hermeneutic assumption here and elsewhere in Damrosch's study is that the reader is to some degree acquainted with the language of the text at hand and can assess, with some degree of accuracy, its linguistic, aesthetic, historical, and cultural differential. I agree with Damrosch that this is how it *should* be, and that this is what we *should* strive for. My concern here today, however, is different. If Damrosch shows us how to do world literature well, what kind of consciousness we *should* be guided by and what kind of knowledge we *should* invest in, my interest is in what happens when we do it poorly, when we don't take the time to do justice to what we read by learning the text's original language and yet read it anyway—in translation because we have no alternative.

Clearly, in this instance translation becomes the crucial issue. Damrosch too is very aware of this. Two quotes may suffice as illustration: "works of world literature take on a new life as they move into the world at large," he claims early in *What* Is *World Literature?*, "and to understand this new life we need to look at the ways [in which] the work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts" (24). Later, in his final chapter, he adds:

> World literature is writing that gains in translation. . . . Informational texts neither gain nor lose in a good translation: their meaning is simply carried over with little or no effective change. . . . At the other extreme, some works are so inextricably connected to their original language and moment that they really cannot be effectively translated at all. Purist views of literary language often take all poetry as "what is lost in translation," in Robert Frost's famous phrase. . . . It is more accurate to say that *some* works are not translatable without substantial loss, and so they remain largely active within their local or national context, never achieving life as world literature. (288–89)

It follows from this, Damrosch concludes, "that the study of world literature should embrace translation far more actively than it has usually done to date" (289).

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[2] A colleague of mine recently observed: "Do we really believe that anyone can master ten languages to a level where they are in a position fully to appreciate literary texts in all ten? I don't. Learning even three languages is difficult, and those who are natively trilingual often sound, in my experience, slightly peculiar in at least one of their languages (I'm thinking not just of George Steiner . . .)" (Harrison 339).

This is all fair and good, but my point is that this is the perspective of the subject specialist who is either a native speaker of a given language (or range of languages) or someone who has trained to be highly proficient in that language or set of languages and their cultural and literary traditions. And, as valid as what Damrosch says may be, the person who can assess the quality of a translation—and who can position the source and target texts within their linguistic and cultural and historical contexts—is someone who does not need the translation in the first place. I want to reverse this perspective. I want to look at what happens when we don't know the source language but only see the translation. What pitfalls do we face when we can't read the foreign text in mint condition and when we can't know how to assess its original context? This strikes me as the more common state of affairs when readers encounter the literature of the world, past and present. After all, is it not the case that most of us simply do not have "World enough and time," as the heading of Damrosch's final chapter suggestively reads, to learn all the languages we would need in order to successfully study world literature?

III.

Let me take a closer look at one concrete example and analyze a poem from a language and culture I do not know. The poem I have selected is taken from the 1,300-page anthology *World Poetry*, edited by Katherine Washburn and John S. Major, which contains 1,600 poems in translation drawn from dozens of languages and cultures spanning a period of more than 4,000 years. It is an untitled love poem by the medieval Japanese poet Fujiwara no Teika, who lived from 1162 to 1241. The poem reads in Stephen Carter's translation:

Those long black tresses
that I roughly pushed aside:
now strand upon strand
they rise in my mind's eye
each night as I lie down. (506)

All that the editors of this anthology allow us to know about the poem beyond the author's and translator's names is that it was taken from the anthology *Traditional Japanese Poetry*, published by Stanford University Press in 1991, and that both Teika's poem and the other poems within the same sub-section were written during the Kamakura and early Muromachi periods. Except for the years of Teika's birth and death we are told nothing about the author and his background, and nothing about the poem's form, genre, context, or possible interpretations. Given this lack of information, as a non-native non-speaker, I initially could not even determine whether this is the same poem, although I suspected it was, as the one by Teika I found reproduced on the world-wide web:

かきやりしそのくろかみのすぢごとに
うちふすほどはおもかげぞたつ

kakiyarishi
sono kurokami no
suji goto ni
uchifusu hodo wa
omokage zo tatsu

I gently smoothed
Those raven tresses
Strand by strand; now
As I lie down
Her face floats before me.[3]

Assuming that these are the same poem, let's see what happens when I turn to its interpretation. And let me for argument's sake do something that any serious literary scholar would normally avoid like the plague: namely, attempt a non-specialist reading, risking professional embarrassment in the process. In short, I will bare my ignorance by putting myself in the place of the "normal" intended audience of a volume like this—that is, an average reader who has an interest in world literature and may know one or more foreign languages, but not all the languages used by the poets represented in this volume, and certainly not Japanese, this poem's original language. As such a naïve reader I see a short poem with five lines, no rhyme scheme, and an irregular syllable count (5–7–5–6–6), with 29 syllables in all, although a pattern is possibly intended; clearly, the lines are also printed in the way they are in order to indicate some sort of poetical word and line order. As regards the content, I see a male speaker recollecting an encounter with a woman with long black hair. "Each night" invokes a certain temporal distance between the two persons who were once close to one another, but we do not know why they have separated, whether they are or were young lovers, husband and wife, or whore and client, and, indeed, whether the woman is still alive.

There is one element in this poem that does not match our expectations of a traditional love poem, however conceived, and that is the word "roughly" in the phrase "Those long black tresses that I roughly pushed aside." It seems to suggest some form of violence on the speaker's part for which he now feels remorse. There

[3] Shinkokinshū 1390, accessed at http://www.temcauley.staff.shef.ac.uk/waka1446.shtml on July 25, 2008. As one expert on this subject, Thomas McAuley of Sheffield University, later confirmed (that is, after my having produced my interpretation of the poem), the two versions are indeed translations of one and the same poem. What's more, the following is of course completely unrecognizable to me as a foreign reader: "A further point is that Teika's poem is constructed as the male response to a famous earlier poem by Izumi Shikibu (?976–?)—widely regarded as the best poet of her time, just as Teika is of his. Her poem is:

kuro kami no
midarete sirazu
utiFuseba
madu kakiyarisi
Fito zo koFisiki

My black hair's
In disarray—uncaring
He lay down, and
First, gently smoothed it:
My darling love.

GSIS 13: 755 (waka 0925)

Again, there is nothing equivalent to 'gently' in the original, but as the poem is by a woman thinking back to an erotic encounter with pleasure, again it seems appropriate, and is in keeping with the opinions of the Japanese commentators. In conclusion, then, the translation really depends upon the translator's interpretation of the emotional attitude of the 'speaker' of the poem: if he/she imagines a 'man's man' who wouldn't take no for an answer, then 'roughly pushed aside' would be acceptable; my own image, though, is of a tender lover—hence my translation." I would like to thank Thomas McAuley for giving so generously of his time and knowledge and Elizabeth Oyler of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for reading and commenting on a draft of this essay.

is a story being told: probably not one of rape, but some sort of altercation that might have taken place. Did he leave her in rage because she had taken another lover? Did she want to stop him leaving and, for whatever reason, he has not been able to return? Much hinges on what the words "pushed aside" are meant to indicate in Japanese: did he push the tresses aside in order better to see her face, or did he push aside the head and the tresses, thus pushing the woman away from him? Although rather prosaic in tone (in English it is the arrangement on the page that produces the poetic effect rather than the words), the poem exudes a sense of melancholy and a suggestion of loneliness.

This is as far as my skill and resources could take me without external assistance—not very far indeed. But a particular tone and a specific situation were apparent. In pursuing the meaning of this poem further, I then sought outside help in the form of assistance from a colleague at another university, publications in the public domain by Earl Miner (a leading authority in Japanese and Asian literature), the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, and Wikipedia. Together, their comments provided crucial insight into the richness and complexity of this poem and its genre, as well as the factors that define what Roman Jakobson has called literature's "literariness." Let me abbreviate what I have learned.

The poem belongs to a traditional Japanese genre called *waka* (*wa* for Japanese, and *ka* for song) that eschews the symmetrical structure, regular rhyme pattern, and rising-falling lyrical meter of its counterpart the *kanshi* (*kan* for Chinese, and *shi* for poem); both have been practiced in Japan from antiquity to modern times. One form of *waka* is what today is called a *tanka*, which has two verses consisting of two and three lines forming a 5–7–5–7–7 syllable pattern; another, created relatively recently, is the three-line *haiku*, formed of 5–7–5 syllables, which has also become popular in the West. Obviously our poem is a *tanka*, except that the translator was not able to reproduce the precise syllable count in English. Despite its apparent formal simplicity, the *waka*, and its subgenre *tanka*, is a highly artistic form, typically including such rhetorical devices as a pillow word (*makurakotoba*), a poetic place name (*utamakura*), a pivot word (*kakekotoba*), a season word (*kigo*), a word association (*engo*), and a poetic allusion or reference to a precursor text (called *honkadori*, as if a twentieth-century writer were to cite Blake's "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night"). For my part, I can only guess which, if any, of these rhetorical devices are present in our poem.

In addition, I have found that our *tanka* is taken from the *Shinkokinshū*, the "New Collection of Japanese Poems," the eighth of twenty-one imperially commissioned poetry collections that date from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. The compilation of the *Shinkokinshū* started in 1201, and Teika, one of two leading poets of the period, had been commissioned as one of its compilers. The *Shinkokinshū* contains a total of 1,978 poems by 101 named and many anonymous poets, with some of the poems dating back to the eighth century; 46 of these poems were by Teika himself. Ours is number 1390. Books 11 to 15 of the 20 books in this compilation are devoted to "Love Poems." With the five books of love poems being arranged in the manner of a relationship that begins, is consummated, and ends, it becomes useful to know whether our poem by Teika was classified as a love poem and, if so, where it stood within this arrangement. If not a love poem, is it

anthologized as a "Poem of Lament" (Book 8), or a "Poem of Parting and Separation" (Book 9), or within any of the other categories?[4]

In short, I have probably made my point that the *waka*—and its subgenre the *tanka*—is not just an immensely suggestive literary form rich in signals of "literariness," but also one that certainly resists interpretation by the linguistically and culturally handicapped foreigner, and at times, I am told, by the native speaker as well. But Miner also stresses that even where "the depths of allusion are not always to be felt by the Western reader unfamiliar with the works alluded to," for example when "a poem by . . . Teika alludes both to an earlier poem and to *The Tale of Genji*," "its syntactical, metaphorical exchange of subject and predications" nevertheless "produces an atmosphere of beauty *intelligible to any reader*" ("Japanese Poetry" 425–26; my emphasis). I stress the clause "intelligible to any reader" as referring, implicitly, to universal intelligibility. Thus my analysis of Teika's poem might be considered my personal, if admittedly "Westerncentric," response—as Shu-Mei Shi would term it (16)—to its universal qualities, as opposed to what is culturally specific, literarily peculiar, and hence intelligible only to the linguistically proficient and culturally literate reader.

IV.

Let me now turn to another example: a poem in a language in which I am a linguistically proficient and culturally literate reader, namely German. Like Teika's *tanka* cited above, this poem is also contained in our anthology of world poetry, which—as the dust cover informs us—claims to collect "only works of the highest intrinsic quality." Written in 1636 by the Baroque poet Andreas Gryphius (1616–64) and now ranking among the 150 most quoted poems in the German language (see Braam 279–84), "Tränen des Vaterlandes" ("Tears of Our Fatherland") is a poem about the impact of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) on the country and its people (I reproduce it here in the format of its first printing in 1643):

Threnen des Vatterlandes / Anno 1636

Wir sindt doch nuhmer gantz / ja mehr denn gantz verheret!
Der frechen völcker schaar / die rasende posaun
Das vom blutt fette schwerdt / die donnernde Carthaun
Hatt aller schweis / vnd fleis / vnd vorraht auff gezehret.
Die türme stehn in glutt / die Kirch ist vmbgekehret.
Das Rahthaus ligt im graus / die starcken sind zerhawn.
Die Jungfrawn sindt geschändt / vnd wo wir hin nur schawn
Ist fewer / pest / vnd todt der hertz vndt geist durchfehret.
Hier durch die schantz vnd Stadt / rint alzeit frisches blutt.
Dreymall sindt schon sechs jahr als vnser ströme flutt

[4] Further investigation shows this *waka* to be from Book 15, in other words a love poem from towards the end of the love sequence. As for the word "roughly," Thomas McAuley emailed the following: "I would view it, not necessarily as a mistake, but at the extreme end of the possible continuum of interpretations. The verb *kaku*, which occurs in the poem as part of the compound verb *kakiyarishi*, literally translates as 'rake,' but in relation to hair is always interpreted to mean 'brush.' The *yari* element simply indicates that the action was done to, or by, someone else, and *shi* is a past tense marker. So a literal translation is simply '(I) brushed her (hair)' or '(he) brushed my (hair)'—with subject being supplied by context. There is nothing in the poem which corresponds to 'roughly,' but then there is nothing corresponding to 'gently' either—the latter just seems more appropriate to me in the context of what is, after all, a passionate love poem."

Von so viel leichen schwer / sich langsam fortgedrungen.
Doch schweig ich noch von dem was ärger als der todt.
Was grimmer den die pest / vndt glutt vndt hungers noth
Das nun der Selen schatz / so vielen abgezwungen. (Schöne 270)

World Poetry presents this sonnet to us in a translation by John Peck:

"My Country Weeps"

We are finished, yet still
they have not finished with us.
Brazen troops of nations,
crazed trumpets,
blood-slick sword
and the big howitzer
have devoured everything that sweat
and diligence laid away.
Towers flicker, the cathedral
lies roof through floor,
city hall sits in terror,
our forces smashed,
girls defiled,
and wherever we turn
flames, plague, and mortality
pierce heart and spirit.
Trench and street are constantly
refreshed conduits of blood,
For eighteen years now
our rivers have
brimmed with corpses, slowly
pushing themselves clear.
Yet still I have said nothing
of what vexes like death
and dips a lashing beak deeper
than hunger, pest, and holocaust:
that so much treasure has been
plundered from our souls. (Washburn 638–39)

This translation is notable in that it attempts neither to reproduce the sonnet form that is a hallmark of so much German Baroque poetry nor to capture the distinctive historical flavor of the language and tone used by Gryphius. Indeed, some of the vocabulary sounds oddly modern and Americanized—"howitzer" and "city hall," for instance: a howitzer is a cannon used from the eighteenth century onwards and translates into German as *Haubitze*, whereas the German word used by Gryphius is *Karthaun*, designating a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century military device no longer in use. Thus the word *Karthaun* has a distinct archaic ring for the German ear, as have *der frechen Völker Schar, die Starken*, and *Schanz*, some of whose meanings we no longer fully understand without further philological and historical inquiry. A translator intent on translating not just the words but also the sound and atmosphere exuded by Gryphius's poem would want to choose words with a similar archaic inflection. Peck's objective by contrast is to modernize the translation, presumably to make it more accessible for the contemporary reader.

Clearly, not all translations are equal in quality, and an editor of an anthology of world literature must choose especially carefully because the anthology's readers will not be able to judge the quality of the translations selected. Well-crafted

modernizing translations may excite the specialist connoisseur but may not serve the layman equally well, and even the best of comparatists is of necessity but a layman in any number of languages, as I tried to illustrate above. In Gryphius's case a translation exists that attempts faithfully to reproduce the sonnet form and rhyme scheme, as well as to capture the archaic flavor and original spirit of the poem:

"Tears of the Fatherland"

Entire, more than entire have we been devastated!
  The maddened clarion, the bold invaders' horde,
  The mortar thunder-voiced, the blood-stained sword
Have all men's sweat and work and store annihilated.

The towers stand in flames, the church is violated,
  The strong are massacred, a ruin our council board,
  Our maidens raped, and where my eyes have scarce explored
Fire, pestilence, and death my heart have dominated.

  Here through the moat and town runs always new-let blood,
  And for three-times-six years our very rivers' flood
With corpses choked has pressed ahead in tedious measure;

  I shall not speak of that which is still worse than death,
  And crueller than the plague and torch and hunger's breath:
From many has been forced even the spirit's treasure. (Gode 21)

If Peck has attempted to bring the text to his American reader, this second translator, George C. Schoolfield, has tried to move the reader towards the original text (see his use of "clarion," "horde," and "mortar"). We have here two prime examples of what Friedrich Schleiermacher, Goethe's and Schiller's contemporary, calls, following Dryden's and Goethe's lead, the two fundamental methods of translation: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him. The two roads are so completely separate from each other that one or the other must be followed as closely as possible" (Schleiermacher 9). In our day-to-day dealings with literature there is a place for translations of both kinds. We can savor the skill of the historicizing translator (Schoolfield in this instance), who attempts to mold the target language into what the original might have sounded like to the original audience if it had been written in English. Lawrence Venuti calls this the "foreignizing" kind of translation (147, 150). We can also enjoy the wit and play of what Venuti calls the "domesticating" or contemporizing translator (such as Peck), who undertakes to reproduce in the target language the poem as it might have been written if it were written today. Take Juvenal's "Satire III," another poem contained in our anthology of world poetry, as a case in point. The text in question is a poem about Rome, probably written in the early second century. In John Holloway's translation we find this Roman setting marvelously—and hilariously—transposed onto contemporary London. I quote the opening stanza:

"London, Greater London (After *Satire III*)"

Well, it really hurts, to think of him going away,
But he's made the right decision: that's got to be faced,
For what could be worse than—well, yes, the horrors of London
(Culminating in the Festival of Poetry)? . . . His station waggon
Was crammed the day he went. I joined him as far as Richmond,

> Through the publishers moved up west, and the Royal Car Parks,
> And the spacious village Estates in the Green Belt.
> This is what he said: "It's unliveable-in:
> Gets worse every day; so I'm off, before I'm senile." (Washburn 177)

The genuine brilliance of this translation notwithstanding, when it comes to anthologizing world literature, and in particular when it comes to anthologizing texts without commentary that might aid the reader in positioning a text in its (literary) historical context—context being a term that is also accorded a crucial role by Damrosch in his studies—it is incumbent upon the compiler to choose the kind of target text that conveys even to the layman reader—that is the reader *not proficient* in the source language, in other words the reader who has to rely on the translation and has no means of judging its quality—a sense of the original, including its temporal and spatial aesthetic specificity and distance from us. No one is helped by the translator glossing over this differential. But, lest I be misunderstood, I say this for anthologies of world literature specifically and not necessarily for the practice of literary translation in general, where contemporizing translations have a vital and entertaining role to play. But an anthology that, ultimately, intends to convey a sense of cultural and temporal differentials, and the richness of the global literary tradition in all its "glocal" characteristics and particularities, should avoid the kind of translation that in Schleiermacher's sense brings the text to the reader. For what have I then gained as a reader? Possibly only, as in the case of John Peck's version of Gryphius, the most generic kind of universalism. By the same token, however, one can also argue in defense of Peck and Holloway that contemporizing translations are trying not to recapture the spirit of yore but rather to reinvent for today the poem's original spirit, not least because to weather successfully the test of time a poem must be able to retain (a modicum of) its poetic effect, even in translation. After all, as Miguel de Unamuno so perceptively noted in 1917, "a poet who, when translated, loses all poetry, can never be a universal poet" ("Poeta en que al traducirle no queda poesía, no podrá ser poeta universal"; 3:1003).

One option, of course, might be to include two or more translations in one's anthology. The new *Longman Anthology*, under the general editorship of David Damrosch and David L. Pike, does precisely this in some of its sections. In *How to Read World Literature*, his companion piece to the anthology, Damrosch calls this method of reading multiple translations "triangulation": "Even if we can't read the source language ourselves," he observes, "we can use translations to triangulate our way toward a better sense of the original than any one version can give us on its own" (71). But of course we cannot expand our anthologies endlessly, as everyone in this business admits. And sometimes we may only have one translation at our disposal.

V.

In his introduction to Arabic poetics the Syrian-Lebanese poet Adonis—the pen name of Ali Ahmed Said—quotes the ninth-century poet al-Jahiz, who already one thousand years ago expressed his fundamental scepticism about the translatability of Arabic poetry when he claimed: "Arabic poetry is untranslatable

and cannot be adapted to another language. When this is attempted, its structure is shattered, its metre is destroyed, its beauty disappears and its marvels fall away" (Adonis 36–37). Our contemporary, Adonis, goes on to add: "Thus the poetry 'collapses': everything that is special or distinctive about it ceases to exist and only the common and universal elements remain" (37). Adonis calls this the purist's version of translation theory: translation is in principle impossible. I sense that Adonis does not agree with this doctrine; he is merely using al-Jahiz to make a valid point, namely that in translation it is often the universals that are left standing, while the particulars get lost. This is why the notion of *Universalliteratur*, "universal literature," my derivation from Schiller's *Universalgeschichte*, may actually be more felicitous than Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, "world literature." Universal literature would be a literature that not only circulates universally but also rests upon all that is universal about human expression and human sentiment—if only as the largest common denominator.

However, I say this with a certain hesitation since I can only speak from a "Westerncentric" perspective. What for me might seem to be unproblematically universal and anthropologically human—the late Wolfgang Iser, for example, had started conducting research into what he termed literary anthropology—might just be yet another manifestation of the ideologically blinkered hegemonical Eurocentrism of yore. Why else would Pauline Yu want to caution us that "literary 'universals' on close examination almost invariably turn out to be Western ones" (163). Similarly, Joseph A. Massad warns us about the "epistemic violence" set off by our "reading signs through a Western grid of interpretation" and "assimilating others into the European self under the sign of universalization as identity or, representing the other as exemplifying a radical and unbridgeable alterity, under the sign of localism as difference" (246–47). Indeed, in his compelling comparative "East/West" study of the Don Juan *Stoff*, Takayuki Yokota-Murakami goes so far as to condemn "comparativism" altogether because "it inevitably involves exclusion" (187). "Translinguistic/civilizational comprehension," Yokota-Murakami contends, "cannot be achieved except by a distortion of the object in accordance to the viewer's paradigm. . . . Comparison, then, is realized through the imposition of the observer's paradigm upon the other" (187–88). The alternative, in Yokota-Murakami's opinion, is a stark one, namely to avoid comparative criticism altogether, because it will always only end in "violence" against, and oppression of, "the Other" (187, 189).

But one does not have to subscribe to Yokota-Murakami's stringently nominalist world view in which no comparisons are permissible because they are inevitably premised upon some form of "metaphysical essentialism-universalism" (26). Not all of us have this yearning for the "transcendental signified," nor are all of us looking for that "Ur-concept" that might be considered "ideal and universal" (23). Yokota-Murakami sets his own radically historicist nominalism (in which the use of any generic term or concept for the purpose of cross-civilizational comparison engenders the epistemic violence mentioned above) against everyone else's generic realism, in which concepts must have some kind of "platonic essence" (26). What he overlooks in this modern-day *Universalienstreit* (debate about universals) is that nominalism and realism are complemented by conceptualism, in which concepts, and by extension comparisons, are employed as pragmatic tools to further our

understanding, and I would hope that most comparatists today are open-minded enough to accept that they might be misapplying generic concepts and to correct themselves on the basis of conversations with others.

But the fact remains that, wherever we might be positioned on this planet, if we do world literature we are forced to rely on translations. And universals may be all that we have; they just may not be particularly universal, but oftentimes local or parochial instead. Maybe we should adopt a more conceptualist formula to approach this thorny issue and talk of more or less cross-civilizational variables and constants. "The issue is," Damrosch stresses, "to stay alive to the works' real difference from us without trapping them within their original context or subordinating them entirely to our own immediate moment and needs. An emphasis on universality can be a powerful aid in protecting the work from either of those extremes, so long as this universality isn't created by a process of stripping away much of what is really distinctive about the work" (*What* Is *World Literature?* 135). This is the crucial aporia facing any comparatist who aspires to take on world literature. As Damrosch also poignantly observes:

> Aesthetically as well as ethically, a pure universalism . . . is finally reductive, missing the real complexity of a work, just as much as would an opposite insistence that a work can only be read effectively in the original language, untranslatably linked at all points to its local context. An informed reading of a work of world literature should keep both aspects in play together, recognizing that it brings us elements of a time and place different from our own, and at the same time that these elements change in force as the book gets farther from home. (276)

"An informed reading" is Damrosch's formulation here; elsewhere he speaks of "a kind of *detached engagement*," which he defines as "informed but not confined by a knowledge of what the work would likely mean in its original time and place, even as we adapt it to our present context and purposes" (277; his emphasis). But however we approach this issue, as my non-native analysis of Teika's poem indicates, we inevitably face certain limitations. As Franco Moretti states, "the sheer enormity of the task makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, bigger: what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The *categories* have to be different. . . . world literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method" (149).

In light of the issues raised by Yu, Massad, Yokota-Murakami, Damrosch, and Moretti, among many others, all of us, whatever our language background, will have legitimate gripes and reservations about the study of world literature. For my part, I remain an advocate of aesthetic merit and aesthetic surplus value. How many of us were not socialized as literary scholars by some version of Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Poststructuralism, and Deconstruction, or by form-oriented neo-Marxist literary critics such as Theodor W. Adorno, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Terry Eagleton? Of whatever shade, variation, or combination, all of them put great stock in close reading, formal analysis, and—at times rather surprisingly—a focus on "great texts." Ironically, the genre that is the most difficult to translate, namely poetry, because it is the most compact, dense, and intractable of all literary forms, is precisely the one that is said, by theorists as well as by key philosophers, to be the most indicative of our human condition. Recall the pivotal role that poems by Hölderlin and Celan play in the works of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida. In his commemorative talk on Gadamer at Heidelberg University in 2003, Derrida reflects: "Poetry, I mean lyrical poetry, is the prime

location for the experience of the sameness and otherness of language. . . . The poem is arguably the only place where language can be experienced as such, in all its idiomatic particularities, which on the one hand will always resist translation, but, on the other, and precisely for this reason, will require a translation of which we expect the impossible, namely to make the impossible possible in the unheard-of event" (Derrida 11; my translation).[5]

The toughest lesson for me, then, is that world literature forces me to forego, at least as regards those languages that I do not command, all that I normally hold dear, namely close formal-aesthetic and historical analysis of texts. Lone scholars that we often are in a professional field that remains quintessentially individualistic, we can no longer judge for ourselves. Our categories become suspect the moment we sense, if we sense, a lack of applicable coordinates. World literature is fundamentally unsettling in that it obliges us, where rigorous literary study is involved, to cede judgment to others, to rely on what Moretti calls "second hand" or "distant reading": a "patchwork of other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*" (151; his emphasis). What we lose in verticality (depth, intensity, rigor), Moretti implies, we gain in horizontality (surface, breadth, extension). He seems to have no problem with this, whereas I am still finding it difficult to adjust. Harnessing a different metaphor, Wai Chee Dimock, in her article "Literature for the Planet," has spoken of the "elasticity" of "literature [perceived as] a continuum," an elasticity that allows "two thousand years and two thousand miles [to] register as near simultaneity" whereas "ten years and ten miles can sometimes pose an impassable gulf," messing up any notion of "territorial sovereignty and numerical chronology" (174).

But regardless of where we stand—territorially or chronologically—no one who does world literature can get beyond the fundamental dilemma of reading foreign literary texts in translation and, in the process, reading them merely thematically (some will insist superficially) and without due attention to their cultural, historical, aesthetic, and stylistic specificity and alterity. As regards the specific point of thematic leveling (the Germans have a fitting verb for this, *nivellisieren*), Katie Trumpener notes in her response to the 2004 ACLA Report that

> if all or most texts are necessarily read in translation, [Saussy] suggests, the result will be a thematically driven, aesthetically and culturally flattened view of global texts. Responding publicly to the draft essays of the Saussy report, Gayatri Spivak has pointedly criticized world literature teachers who venture beyond their own fields of expertise and linguistic competence. For when they teach "foundational" texts like the *Mahābhārata*, she argued, they will likely be oblivious not only to these works' linguistic texture and historical meaning but to the ongoing controversies they engender in their own cultures of origin, whether among local feminist critics or among intellectuals critical of the way current fundamentalisms use these texts to legitimate themselves. (Trumpener 195)

Trumpener defends the teaching of world literature nonetheless, even if only as an activity of a community of scholars from a sufficiently broad range of backgrounds, as is possible for example at her institution, Yale University. Discussing Yale's world literature courses, she writes: "We spent a lot of class time talking

[5] The original German reads: "Da ist Poesie, das lyrische Gedicht, die große Instanz für die Erfahrung der Eigenheit und der Fremdheit von Sprache. . . . Das Gedicht zeigt wahrscheinlich den einzigen Ort an, an dem sich Sprache einzig erfahren läßt, nämlich in ihren idiomatischen Besonderheiten, die einerseits für immer der Übersetzung widerstehen und deshalb andererseits eine Übersetzung einfordern, der zugemutet wird, das Unmögliche zu leisten, das Unmögliche in einem unerhörten Ereignis möglich zu machen."

about formal questions of genre, temporality, narration, narrative consciousness, and perspective. But these texts also, quite insistently, raised questions of foundational violence and the ethics of conflict, of the logics of feud, massacre, terror, and genocide as well as the quasi-theological role of literature in mediating ideological shifts and moments of historical crisis, enacting conversion and convergence" (196). It is, of course, not readily apparent from Trumpener's remarks where the boundary lies between a culturally, aesthetically, and historically informed reading, one that is sensitive in Spivak's sense to the local semantics of a given text, and a "flattened," or universalizing, thematic reading in Saussy's understanding. Saussy himself notes:

> Although thematics, or subject matter, is the starting point of many an investigation, it is never enough simply to discover the same themes appearing in different places: an account of how the works make their subject manifest is the only thing that can save a comparison of nature poetry in Wordsworth and Xie Lingyun, for example, from platitude. An enabling hypothesis at best, the universality of selected themes cannot serve as a conclusion. Enumeration is a slender form of interpretation, and with a horizon of universality, one has never finished enumerating. . . . Thematic reading is the constant pedagogical temptation in world literature. (Saussy 13–14)

The implication is that "merely" thematic readings are less scrupulous and less rigorous than an interpretation should be and that they are less authentic than specialist contextual readings, if that is the opposition being proposed. Charles Bernheimer, in his introduction to *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, the 1995 counterpart to Saussy's 2006 essay, puts the problem even more starkly:

> No matter how many years you may have given to the study of a culture, if it is not yours "in the blood," it will always be possible for you to be found lacking in some quality of authenticity. The more literatures you try to compare, the more like a colonizing imperialist you may seem. If you stress what these literatures have in common—thematically, morally, politically—you may be accused of imposing a universalist model that suppresses particular differences so as to foster the old humanist dream of man's worldwide similarity to man. If, on the other hand, you stress differences, then the basis of comparison becomes problematic, and your respect for the uniqueness of particular cultural formations may suggest the impossibility of any meaningful relation between cultures. (Bernheimer 9)

The dilemma Bernheimer identifies seems to make any study of world literature impossible, either because it linguistically, culturally, and historically flattens its object, making it universally vague when read in translation—hence Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's branding this the "arrogance of the cartographic reading of world lit. in translation" (73)—or because, if we restrict our object to the linguistic, cultural, and historical hyper-specificity of the original, no one can access it but the native- or near-native-speaker subject specialist. If, on the one hand, to adopt the terms used by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida in their Paris debate in the early 1980s, texts would seem to function too easily as a bridge, glossing over the differences, on the other, they would seem to function as a barrier to communication.[6]

It is precisely because two of the negative keywords that reappear in debates surrounding world literature are *universality* and its derivative *universal* that I started out with Friedrich Schiller's Enlightenment aesthetics and historiography, which centered on this very concept. Today, we seem rather keen to dissociate ourselves from this contested and allegedly "humanist" concept (Yokota-Murakami 26 et

[6] Compare Gadamer's and Derrida's contributions to the volume *Text und Interpretation. Deutsch-französische Debatte*, ed. Philippe Forget.

passim) with all its baggage, declaring it a vestige of literary criticism's metropolitan Eurocentric past, although for Rey Chow and others it is not a vestige at all, but represents rather a continuing menace and covert, if not overt, perpetuation of existing power relationships: "I would therefore offer the hypothesis that the current and rather euphoric talk about globalization is more of the same old ongoing Western modernist narrative in which the enlightened belief in universals (inclusionism being one such universal) proceeds hand in hand with, or is the mere flip side of, the perpetuation and enforcement of cultural boundaries (that is, practices of exclusion)" (69). In the same vein, the "Nobel Prize's politics of recognition," Shu-Mei Shih has argued, "involves the granting of universality to the exceptional particular. . . . This logic suggests that particular works cannot be universal unless they are exceptional" (25–26). Moreover, because "this simple summary shows a tension between the particular (what is historically and politically specific) and the universal (what is human or literary)" (26), she concludes that "a global literature should be not the old world literature spiced with exotic or exceptional representatives from 'the rest of the West' but a literature that critically examines its own construction by suspiciously interrogating all claims to universalisms, while acknowledging that any criteria emerging from these interrogations will be open to new questioning" (29).

This reads like the sum of the worst that might be said about anthologies of world literature: namely, that in seeking to achieve a semblance of universality they perpetuate existing cultural classifications, and that by merely "spicing" themselves "with exotic or exceptional representatives from 'the rest of the West'" they bolster the boundaries established by Western criticism and theory. Indeed, if one analyzes the contents of the three major anthologies of world literature in circulation today, one cannot but note that they all programmatically promote what would seem to be an elitist exceptionalism. As much as I am able to tell as regards those literatures the languages of which I do not know, the focus of each anthology is the canon of what the respective editorial board members consider the masterpieces of the relevant native traditions. But in critiquing this implicit elitism, we should not overlook the fact that this principle of selection also has considerable ramifications for the former Western canon of "world masterpieces." To give but one example from one of my own subject areas: in the old one-volume 2,600-page 1980 edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, which was of course a compilation of non-English-language masterpieces only (the English-language texts being collected in separate anthologies), German literature was represented by five authors—Goethe, Büchner, Thomas Mann, Kafka, and Brecht—comprising some 257 pages or 10% of the total page count. In the newer six-volume 2002 *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, now containing some 6,250 pages, German literature is represented by fifteen authors. Four of the fifteen are medieval writers in Volume B, who are represented with one poem each; the others are Goethe, Hölderlin, Novalis, and Heine in Volume E (with 108 pages representing 12% of that volume), and Freud, Thomas Mann, Rilke, Kafka, Schwitters, Brecht, and Bachmann in Volume F (with 230 pages representing 15% of that volume). In total, German authors now receive only about 5.5% of the page count.

But the crucial point here is not the reduction of the relative space accorded to German literature. (Indeed, is 5.5% not a rather generous apportioning of space considering that the world's native German speakers make up only about

one sixtieth or 1.6% of the total global population?) Rather, it is the fact that, whereas in the old *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* the only other languages represented were (besides the Hebrew Bible) Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Swedish, and Norwegian, in the new *Norton Anthology of World Literature* we have Akkadian, ancient Egyptian, Chinese poets from all eras, Japanese authors (anthologized in the *Man'yōshū* and *Kokinshū*, and Murasaki Shikibu), Arabic writers (Ibn Ishaq, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and Naguib Mahfouz), Persian (Attar, Rumi, and Sa'Di), selections from a variety of Sanskrit masterworks, Urdu (Ghalib), and anonymous Tamil, Pali, Bengali, Hindi, Gujerati, Maninka, Nahuatl, Mayan, Navajo, and Zuni works as well as the Koran, not to mention many contemporary non-Amero-European writers.

Regardless of the number of volumes and pages we allot to an anthology, the challenge is impossible, making the anthologizing of world literature a preposterous proposition. How can we ever reduce so many cultures' many centuries' worth of authors and texts to a handful of texts in translation each? But this is precisely what anthologies of world literature by definition must do. The pragmatics of today's publishing world clearly puts pressure on the selection process: *who* do we include and *why* do we include a given author or text? Do we avoid including longer texts (novels in particular) because if we use only shorter ones we can incorporate more authors? In many anthologies, because of the inclusion of a lengthy excerpt from Goethe's *Faust*, Goethe tends to occupy about as much space as all other German authors combined, confirming but maybe also unfairly exaggerating his canonical status. And, in an era dominated by cultural and postcolonial studies, feminism, queer theory, and New Historicism, do we try to maintain a gender balance between male and female writers? Do we include marginalized writers or those from minority ethnic backgrounds (for example, in German literature's case German-Turkish writings)? Do we open up the traditional literary genre canon to include autobiographies, philosophy, economic and political criticism, or texts from other sciences? Note that, in my German example, the various anthologies of world literature offer texts by Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, Marx and Engels, and Sigmund Freud, none of whom is a literary writer in the narrow sense. Where are we to draw the line?

In a nutshell, because we can't expand anthologies endlessly, the more we expand our horizons in world literary terms within the given and limited space, the more exclusive we are obliged to become in terms of national literary perspective. In other words, the more we expand the margins in one direction, the more we are forced to reduce the margins in the other direction. Take the Norton and Longman anthologies as examples: the Norton anthology offers one German woman writer for the period 1700 to the present (Ingeborg Bachmann), the Longman anthology two (Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and Nelly Sachs). Neither anthology presents any other clearly identifiable minority voice within German literature: the traditional mainstream canon takes precedence, the exceptional and marginal are drowned out.

But what is also apparent is that the editors of these recent anthologies have at least tried to redress the old geopolitical imbalance between East and West and North and South. As general editors of the Longman anthology, David Damrosch and David L. Pike see the selected texts as engaging in a "double conversation with their culture of origin and with the varied contexts into which they travel

away from home," allowing us "to see patterns of difference as well as points of contact and commonality" (Damrosch and Pike xxii). The in many respects justified criticism of universalism by Chow, Massad, Shih, Yokota-Murakami, and Yu notwithstanding, the Longman project, which includes critics like Sabry Hafez, Haruo Shirane, Djelal Kadir, and indeed Yu herself on the editorial board, aims to make us see human "differences" as well as "commonalities" from a truly global literary perspective. To once more pick up on the language used by Gadamer and Derrida, language that foreshadows many later debates about the possibility or impossibility of this conversation and the uses and abuses of universality, the texts of world literature are seen here as both a barrier and a bridge, both as something particular—and in their particularity and roughness sometimes incomprehensible—and as something universal, something that binds us together in a common humanity, "like calling out to like," as Salman Rushdie puts it in *Midnight's Children* (see the second epigraph), even if—in literary analysis—we must ultimately resort to a rather superficial thematicism.

However one looks at it, world literature constitutes a difficult balancing act, but it is a necessary one nonetheless. In critiquing the Eurocentric orientalist universalism of yore, whose substitution by a "universal universalism" is long overdue, Immanuel Wallerstein says:

> To be non-Orientalist means to accept the continuing tension between the need to universalize our perception, analyses, and statements of values and the need to defend their particularist roots against the incursion of the particularist perceptions, analyses, and statements of values coming from others who claim they are putting forward universals. We are required to universalize our particulars and particularize our universals simultaneously and in a kind of constant dialectical exchange, which allows us to find new syntheses that are then of course instantly called into question. (48–49)

"It is not an easy game," he concludes, echoing Shu-Mei Shih's argument that a truly global literature must be "a literature that critically examines its own construction by suspiciously interrogating all claims to universalisms, while acknowledging that any criteria emerging from these interrogations will be open to new questioning."

Perhaps the value of the study of world literature is, then, that it provides not only comparative but also contrastive perspectives on literature. It induces us to put in question our unquestioned assumptions about universality, while at the same time allowing us to recognize what we share with others, as distant as they may be in space or time. If Djelal Kadir sees the process of reading world literature as making us more "otherwise," so as to restrain a tendency towards the "vengeful type of ethnocentrism and hegemonic circumscription" (7), if Dimock sees cross-cultural reading as making us more elastic, if Damrosch sees world literature as a means of expanding the ellipse that is the "locus of negotiation between two [or more] different cultures" (*What* Is *World Literature?* 283), thus helping us to recalibrate our hermeneutic foci, then reading world literature has a definite place—even within national literary studies! In Katie Trumpener's words, "What world literature courses impart is not only a bigger but a more inflected and more complex sense of the world, as of its literary manifestations. . . . Those of us teaching world literature are trying to actualize Herder's expansive vision, informed by a sense of the implicit parity between literatures" (197–98).

The mention of Herder brings me full circle back to Goethe's and Schiller's time, but now to their younger contemporary, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. In grappling with the problem of translation—he had translated works by Horace,

Pindar, and Sophocles, among others—and the imitation of antiquity, he came to some surprising inferences, which he formulated most poignantly in a letter to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff on 4 December 1801. "It sounds paradoxical," he writes,

> but I put it to you again . . . , what we are actually born with, the national, will always become less and less of an advantage. For that reason the Greeks are not such masters of sacred pathos, because it was native to them; on the other hand they are exceptional in their faculty for exposition, from Homer onwards, because this extraordinary man had the feeling necessary to capture the *Junonian sobriety* of the occident for his Apollonian realm, and so truly to appreciate the foreign. With us it is the other way round. . . . But what is our own has to be learnt just as much as what is foreign. For this reason the Greeks are indispensable to us. Only it is precisely in what is proper to us, in the national, that we shall never match them because, as I said, the *free* use of what is our *own* is hardest of all. (207–08)[7]

The true achievement of this rather difficult passage is Hölderlin's reformulation of the dialectic of self and other. We need the other not as a contrastive background to ourselves, but because—and this is the crucial twist—the other already contains what is our own and is better able to express it than we ourselves. Because work is involved in acquiring what is other, Hölderlin argues, we tend to excel more in that other than in what is innate in us. Hence the Greeks excel in what is ours, and we excel in what is theirs. Hölderlin thus effectively transcends the self/other dichotomy that had so persistently defined, and dogged, idealistic aesthetics and philosophy since Fichte and Hegel, a problematical dichotomy that still underpins much contemporary theorizing, as Timothy Reiss has convincingly illustrated. Discussing the dialectical premises of such theorists and critics as Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Timothy Brennan, and others, Reiss comes to some unexpected conclusions: "Most of the writers discussed here . . . posit cultural antagonisms taking the form of oppressor and oppressed, of colonizer and colonized" (112) and "To think of cultural difference as the 'other' of metropolitan practice is a dilemma for all commentators on these topics" (111)—indeed it is nothing less in Reiss's view than the "continuation of the 'colonial enterprise'" itself (137). Much like Hölderlin two centuries earlier, and counter to most contemporary theory, Reiss contends that "cultural categories mingle and float. 'Borders' are beyond porous, cultures mutually defining" (112).

Let me restate: while the concept of world literature is clearly valuable as an imaginary discursive space or *locus*, the actual practice of reading, doing, or teaching world literature remains fraught with problems: this is one of the few things upon which *all* contributors to the most recent volumes on world literature agree. We face the issue of over-thematizing world literary texts to the detriment of the fullness of their contextual specificity. We will never be able to resolve the problem of translation for those languages we do not know. We face the perennial danger of universalizing. And, especially as regards the anthologizing of world literature, we are invariably forced into a double exercise in reductionism and essentialism, with

[7] The German text reads: "Es klingt paradox. Aber ich behaupt' es noch einmal, und stelle es Deiner Prüfung and Deinem Gebrauche frei; das eigentliche nationelle [sic] wird im Fortschritt der Bildung immer der geringere Vorzug werden. Deswegen sind die Griechen des heiligen Pathos weniger Meister, weil es ihnen angeboren war, hingegen sind sie vorzüglich in Darstellungsgabe, von Homer an, weil dieser außerordentliche Mensch seelenvoll genug war, um die abendländische *Junonische Nüchternheit* für sein Apollonsreich zu erbeuten, und so wahrhaft das fremde [sic] sich anzueignen. Bei uns ists umgekehrt. . . . Aber das eigene [sic] muß so gut gelernt sein, wie das Fremde. Deswegen sind uns die Griechen unentbehrlich. Nur werden wir ihnen gerade in unserm Eigenen, Nationellen nicht nachkommen, weil, wie gesagt, der *freie* Gebrauch des *Eigenen* das schwerste ist" (460).

world literature being reduced to a number of volumes in translation—however many publishers will allow and the market can handle—and with the literature of a given language area compacted into a handy repository of supposedly representative authors, most often those who have produced the canonical texts of a given literary tradition. And yet, if we are to broaden our horizons and see those literatures and cultures with which we are familiar and fluent within a larger and more global or planetary context in order to "critically examine [our] own construction[s] by suspiciously interrogating all claims to universalisms," as Shih demands, then we may have little alternative. If we are to combat false perceptions of otherness as much as the myopic perceptions of our selves, or, speaking with Hölderlin, if we are to see the other in ourselves, and ourselves in the other, not in order to play off superiority against inferiority, but in order to help us see what is common humanity in us all, then we might ask with Frantz Fanon, "Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself? Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*? At the close of this study, I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness" (231–32).

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