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## **World Literature as a Construct: Chronotopicity and Self-Reflexivity**

In the last ten years or so since the publication of David Damrosch's path-breaking book *What is World Literature?* (2003), one has come to recognise the need to begin to locate the various facets of the currently prevalent Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature with more conceptual rigour. The first imperative, it seems to me, is to pose the question: where is "world literature" ontologically?<sup>1</sup> Some believe it to be an attestable network of texts that, aided especially by the process of globalisation, enter into a myriad of relations – however complex and mediated, but still ultimately demonstrable – that reveal (or sometimes conceal) the hard facts of canon-formation, cultural propaganda, ideological indoctrination, book trade, etc. Others, on the other hand, understand world literature to be above all a prism through which to analyse literature, a "mode of reading." (Sometimes these two beliefs coexist in the same body of work, making it prone to conceptual confusion.) A third option, often coexisting with the other two, is to practice "world literature" as an intellectual discourse with clear ideological subtexts, frequently liberal and cosmopolitan. How we actually understand "world literature," as an attestable reality of texts or as a prism – one might even be tempted to add a "unit" – of comparison, in other words a "mode of reading," is not a metaphysical issue; it has very real implications about the ways in which we approach questions such as how should one try to narrate the history of world literature. In addition to this fundamental differentiation, I also wish to suggest another, more concrete grid that should assist in this effort of locating world literature

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<sup>1</sup> The question „where is world literature?“, asked from perspectives that differ from those informing the present article, also resonates in an eponymous essay by David Damrosch, „Where is World Literature?“ and in Aamir Mufti's recent book, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (see especially the chapter „Where in the world is world literature?“).

as a construct. This grid is essentially chronotopic and consists of several vectors. One needs to be aware of at least four major reference points: time, space, language, and, crucially, what one could term the plain of self-reflexivity, i.e. how literature itself reflects on, and creates images of, “world literature,” thus opening up spaces for interrogation and dissent from the currently prevalent notions of world literature. In what follows, I will address these four points in sections of varying length.

### 1. *Time*

In examining the position of world literature on the axis of time we are bound to ask the question of whether world literature (as attestable textual reality; as prism; or finally as an intellectual discourse) ought to be conceived (a) as an offspring of globalisation and transnationalism, or rather, (b) as having always been there (but, if the latter, again, how do we write its history to account for this: Nikolai Konrad and Franco Moretti could both serve as examples to focus on), or (c) – a third option – as a pre-modern phenomenon that dwindles away with the arrival of the nation state and national cultures (Posnett; Mihaly Babits; to some extent also Antal Szerb). Scenarios (b) and (c) are especially important, as they present an alternative to the prevalent view of world literature as being pegged to globalisation and transnationalism (and to recent cognate discourses of cosmopolitanism shaped by developments in political philosophy and the social sciences, which tend to see world literature, uncritically, as facilitator of cosmopolitan attitudes). These two scenarios thus dissent from the dominant Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature that highlights its dependence on globalisation and transnational developments.

Let me dwell on these two dissenting scenarios in closer detail. A key representative of the first one – according to which world literature, rather than being an offspring of globalisation, has always existed – is Franco Moretti, whose work is well-known and does not need further elucidation here. Moretti, to remind the reader, believes that the eighteenth century was a line of demarcation in the history of world literature, for it was then that an international book market began to accelerate the travel of texts and norms of innovation. The difference between these two stages – pre- and post-18<sup>th</sup> c. – is so unbridgeable that Moretti reaches for two different methodological toolkits to explore these stages: the first one he hopes to understand by employing evolutionary biology (relying on a key text written as early as the early 1940s), the second one he reflects upon with the help of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory. (This is not

the place to discuss the blind spots in Moretti's otherwise remarkable account of post-18<sup>th</sup> c. world literature.) But before Moretti, and unbeknownst to him, Nikolay Konrad, a Russian Sinologist and Japanologist, equipped with the *longue durée* perspective which the study of Chinese literature makes more easily available, had attempted an interpretation of world literature based on the same premise – that it is not the product of late (post)modernity, but a phenomenon that had been there for centuries before that. Konrad essayed to understand the evolution of world literature by looking at how paradigmatic aesthetic formations travel around the globe (thus binding it together). The Renaissance, for example, which he took to be a socio-cultural situation of renewal through reconnecting with tradition, had started, according to Konrad, not in Italy but in China of the eighth century AD, in the so-called *fugu* movement. (Konrad has been severely criticised for this analogy; the criticism stands, but we need nonetheless to see how his argument works). After China, the Renaissance “travels” to Iran, and only then does it arrive in Europe. Another important aesthetic formation, Realism, follows the opposite direction of travel. It begins in Europe – it is in Europe that the contradictions of capitalism were ripe to capture and analyse in the genre of the novel – then crossed over into the Middle East (but there, the novel never managed to assert itself as the dominant genre of realist prose; the short story played that role), only to arrive in the Far East as late as the 1920s–1930s.<sup>2</sup> The breath-taking scale of Konrad's vision of the evolution of world literature clearly prepares the ground for Moretti's own exciting exploration of how the European novel travels to the shores of Brazil and to other corners of the world, and how it changes in the process.

The second of the two dissenting scenarios begins with the work of Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, whose book *Comparative Literature* (London, 1886) is the first in the English language to carry this combination of words in its title. Posnett's approach was that of a historical sociologist of literature who sought to align the different stages of literary evolution to the evolving stages in the political organisation of society. He thus distinguished between, amongst others, clan literatures, city-state literatures, world literature (wedded to Empire as a form of political organisation and to religions that were evolving towards global, rather than simply regional, phenomena), and national literatures. World literature, as one can see, is here assigned a place in history that identifies it as an

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<sup>2</sup> Konrad's explorations of world literature can be found in his collection of articles *Zapad i Vostok: Stati* (1966); there is an abridged, and linguistically rather inadequate and unreliable, English translation (*West-East: Inseparable Twain*, 1967).

earlier stage in the evolution of literature, to be followed by the literatures of the nation states. But the relation of chronological precedence does not carry evaluative connotations: Posnett remains equidistant from the types of literature he describes, a sanguine sociologist facing the need to register the evolution of literature as it tracks the evolution of the ways in which the body politic organises itself.

Not so the participants in the fascinating – and until now largely unregistered – Central-European debate on world literature that was taking shape in the mid-1930s and in the early years of the Second World War. The stage had been set by Mihály Babits (1883–1941), a Hungarian intellectual of the highest calibre, a poet, prose writer, literary critic, and a central figure in *Nyugat* (West), the liberal magazine that resisted the notion that Hungarian literature is a sanctuary for organic, home-grown uniqueness, safely isolated from the West (in one of his texts, Derrida refers to Babits' best known religious poem, "The Book of Jonah"). In the mid-1930s, Babits published in Hungarian his *History of European Literature* (translated after World War Two into German and Italian),<sup>3</sup> in which he proffered his nostalgic reflection on world literature. Like Posnett, Babits saw world literature as but a stage in the evolution of literature; it was tied to cultural and political formations that preceded the nation-state. It was Greece and Rome that exemplified for him the space of world literature, sustained by the two great shared languages of European culture, Greek and Latin. Unlike Posnett, however, Babits strikes an elegiac note, lamenting the loss of world literature. With the arrival of the nation state (and especially since its rise across Europe in the nineteenth century), world literature was gradually diminished and, eventually, made impossible by the unrelenting strife and bickering amongst the small states of Europe, each of them championing its own language. Unabashedly Eurocentric, Babits' version of world literature is indicative of later attempts, notably by Ernst Robert Curtius, to reconstruct the unity of European culture by recasting it as a phenomenon of the past that holds lessons for the future.

Antal Szerb (1901–1945), a Hungarian-Jewish intellectual and a representative of a brilliant generation of Central-European essayists between the World Wars, continues Babits' line whilst also taking his distance from it (Szerb greatly admired Babits and learned from him). Like Babits's, Szerb's own narrative is unapologetically Eurocentric. World literature, Szerb insists, comprises the literatures in Greek and Latin, the Bible, and the vernacular writing in French, Spanish, Italian, English,

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<sup>3</sup> My brief analysis is based on the German translation (1949).

and German.<sup>4</sup> He also follows Babits in his selection of writings on which the stamp of canonicity had been embossed; Szerb's answer to the question what constitutes canonicity is proto-Gadamerian: the canon is that which tradition names as canonical. Thus the compass of world literature is severely circumscribed: it is the body of writing that has been relevant to Europe (Szerb briefly discusses American literature and the classical literatures of Islam, but not of China and Japan, although they, too, have had an impact on European literature at a later stage), and that has become truly canonical, i.e. significant beyond a period or a single (national) culture. At the same time, unlike Babits, Szerb is less inclined to lament the collapse of world literature since the arrival of the nation state and nationalism. While he recognises the loss of shared cultural legacy and shared languages, he is more relaxed about the role of national cultures: his discussion of Russian and Scandinavian literatures directs our attention to the national as a gate through which previously unnoticed literatures are drawn into the orbit of world literature.

Methodologically, Szerb is beholden, yet not without reservations, to Spengler's theory of cultural cycles, in which civilisations are subject, ineluctably, to growth and decline (Szerb explicitly acknowledges Spengler's framework early on in the book). For Szerb, this is evident in the rise of two conflicting stylistic (often also ideological) lines in the evolution of European literatures. This principle of antagonistic duality, very much part and parcel of the analytical toolkit of art history and literary studies at the time (to which Bakhtin also pays its dues in his essays on the novel), informs Szerb's discussion of Romanticism, which he places at the centre of his history. Romanticism is prepared by the growth of the Gothic and Baroque, and it then exfoliates itself to give rise to Symbolism, various Modernisms, and a whole plethora of other post-Romantic *écritures*. At the other end of the spectrum one finds Realism, which Szerb takes as evidence of European literatures having entered a phase of decline. Realism, just like Romanticism, is only the end product of the evolution of an entire stylistic formation that mirrors a certain outlook and system of values; it comprises Classicism and the Enlightenment, with their allegedly homogenising and trivialising insistence on the supremacy of the rational, proportionate, and decorous. Still, following Lukács' vision of a new synthesis of epic and novel, Szerb departs from Spengler by considering the great examples of rejuvenation of Realism during the inter-war period, in which the epic returns (often with a renewed

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this portion of the text, I am referring to the German translation of Szerb's 1941 book: Antal Szerb, *Geschichte der Weltliteratur* (2016).

presence of myth at its heart) to nestle within the novelistic; amongst the best illustrations of this revival is Thomas Mann, notably championed at the time by both Lukács and Kerényi.

Babits' and Szerb's work on world literature is an insightful and stimulating exercise in cultural and intellectual history; at the same time, it serves as a cautionary tale about the difficulties we are bound to face when trying to ponder the scope of world literature today and the extent to which it lends itself to historical conceptualisation. Most importantly, it is an antidote – more radical in Babits, more qualified in Szerb – to the overwhelming current consensus, according to which world literature is conditioned by the rise of, and embedded in, globalisation and transnationalism.

## 2. *Space*

On the other hand, when it comes to space, one would be interested to understand what does it mean for texts to “circulate”; does “circulation” suggest a particular spatial arrangement, and a particular way of thinking about literature that insists on the speed of transmission, on its unhampered progression, and on removing, by implication, the barriers that would halt this circulation? The analogy to capital following the path of least resistance is hard to avoid; in the case of “world literature,” this accelerated flow is underpinned by multiple recontextualisations of the text, and not just by its decontextualisation, as opponents to the discourse of “world literature” would have it. If so, is “circulation” a specific image of communication that is wedded to particular (liberal) regimes of production and consumption of literature? (The need to think about world literature by considering simultaneously aspects of both its production *and* consumption is spelled out as early as 1848 in the famous passage on world literature in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*). Or should the metaphor of circulation be read more charitably, as a figure that describes the drawn out process of the text journeying beyond its environment, with an implicit promise of returning enriched by other cultures' interpretations? This hermeneutic circle does, however, depend on restoring a notion of origin, something that would go against the liberal assumptions of the prevalent Anglo-Saxon discourse of “world literature” by reinstating the importance of national literatures and essentialising particular cultural contexts.

The notion of space can and must be further complicated and de-homogenised by taking into account what I would call the *zonality* of world literature. It is essential to recognise, that, historically speaking, world

literature was sustained by exchanges in particular zones rather than through a global circulation of texts. The players of world literature would change over time. Before the 1870s, for example, it would make very little sense to talk about world literature with reference to Chinese-European exchanges. The first mention of Goethe in Chinese does not occur until 1878<sup>5</sup> (and Shakespeare begins to be properly translated only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), even though Europeans had been appropriating Chinese literature since the sixteenth century; in other words, until the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is no proper literary exchange between China and Europe, only a one-sided traffic from China to Europe. But it would, on the other hand, make complete sense to talk about world literature as a process of interaction between literatures in particular *zones*, e.g. India and the Persian and Arab world that had for centuries been in close cultural contact. “Zonality” is an idea that goes back to the Slovak comparatist Dionys Durišin, but he still believed – largely because he worked predominantly with European material – that these “zones” correspond to families of literatures based on families of languages (e.g. Slavic literatures, Scandinavian literatures, etc.). It seems to me that this notion needs to be radicalised to enable us to track exchanges between literatures on a global scale, where the zone of interaction is not determined by linguistic similarity. The crucial point, to sum up, is this: long before globalisation, what has made up world literature is not the plethora of seemingly ever present players (discrete, often nation-based, literatures), whose texts are immersed in a beguilingly panchronic regime of co-existence, easily available through the medium of a global language that facilitates appropriation in translation, but rather the interaction between historically shifting and zonally organised participants, whose outreach to other zones proceeds at different pace.

### 3. *Language*

We need to ask the unavoidable question about the location of “world literature” vis-à-vis language, which has important consequences for how we interpret the dissipated legacy of modern literary theory. This question appears to be banal at first sight; yet, there could not be a more fundamental question when it comes to how we think about literature than the question of language. Here we need to confront the issue of translation and recognise its legitimacy, not just with reference to current debates (between those who champion the beneficial role of translation and those who treasure

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<sup>5</sup> See Qian Zhongshu (382); the article was first published in 1948 in *Philobiblon*.

the idea of untranslatability<sup>6</sup>), but by going to the very origins of modern literary theory – the work of the Russian Formalists. My contention here is that we need to begin to understand the current Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature, in which the legitimisation of reading and analysing literature in and through translation plays a pivotal role, as an echo of, and a late intervention in, a debate that begins in the early days of classic literary theory. By “classic literary theory” I mean here the paradigm of thinking about literature that rests on the assumption of literature being a specific and unique discourse, whose distinctiveness crystallises around the abstract quality of “literariness”; this way of thinking about literature begins around World War One and is largely dead by the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> but it does not disappear without leaving behind a dissipated legacy consisting in rehearsing, in various ways, the question of the centrality – or otherwise – of language in how we understand literature. The current debate on “world literature,” I submit, is part and parcel of this dissipated legacy of classic literary theory, reenacting the cardinal debate on whether one should think literature within the horizon of language or beyond that horizon. It is important to insist on the current Anglo-Saxon discourse of “world literature” being an extension of these earlier debates on language and literariness originating in classic literary theory, not least because, like so many other discourses of liberal persuasion, it, too, often passes over in silence its own premises, leaving them insufficiently reflected upon, at times even naturalising them.

As is well-known, the Russian Formalists agreed that what constitutes the specificity of literature is literariness. But we tend to forget that they disagreed on what constitutes literariness. Roman Jakobson believed that literariness is lodged in the intricate and fine-grained workings of language (for this reason, I have called him elsewhere a linguistic fundamentalist). To him, only the language of the original matters, as this intricacy cannot be captured in translation. Not by chance does Jakobson spend his entire career, when it comes to literary scholarship, analysing texts written in verse, basing his work on the language of the original. Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum, to some extent also Tynyanov, on the other hand, believed that the effects of literariness are also (and, in a sense, primarily) produced on levels above and beyond language.<sup>8</sup> In a striking difference to Jakobson, they often chose to analyse prose rather than poetry (especially Shklovsky, whose

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<sup>6</sup> On the latter position, see, above all, Emily Apter’s book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013).

<sup>7</sup> On this, see Galin Tihanov, “Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe? (And Why Is It Now Dead?)” (2004).

<sup>8</sup> More on this see in Tihanov, “Pamiat’ teorii” (2016).



claim to being a literary theorist is articulated through exclusive attention to the “theory of prose” (as the title of his 1925 book reads), and to do it in translation. It is the level of composition, rather than the micro-level of language, that claimed their attention when trying to explain the effects of literariness. The famous distinction between plot and story, for example, works with undiminishing validity also when we read in translation; we do not need the language of the original to appreciate the transposition of the material and its reorganisation through retrospection, retardation, etc. Moreover, they proved that even on the level of style, the language of the original is not the only vehicle of literariness. The parodic aspects of *Don Quixote*, for instance, can be gleaned and grasped also in translation, provided we have some background knowledge of chivalric culture and its conventions. Thus the Russian Formalists’ internal debate on what constitutes literariness, had the unintended consequence of lending ammunition and justification to those, like Damrosch, who believe in the legitimacy of reading and analysing literature in translation. The current liberal discourse on world literature, then, is an iteration of the cardinal question of classic literary theory: should one think literature within or beyond the horizon of language? This specific iteration recasts this question, while retaining its theoretical momentum. The Russian Formalists were facing the foundational conundrum of literary theory: how to account for literariness with reference to both individual languages and language per se; if their response were to be seminal in terms of *theory*, it had to be a response that addresses both the singularity of language (the language of the original) and its multiplicity (the multiple languages in which a literary text reaches its potential audiences). No claim to theory would lawfully exist unless literariness could be demonstrated to operate across languages, in an act of continuous estrangement from the language of the original. The liberal Anglo-Saxon discourse on world literature, foremost in the work of David Damrosch, has proceeded in the steps of the Formalists by foregrounding the legitimacy of working in and through translation; it has confronted the tension between the singularity and multiplicity of language by concluding that studying literature in the languages of its socialisation is more important than studying it in the language of its production, not least because this new priority restricts and undermines the previously sacrosanct monopoly of methodological nationalism in literary studies. (That the languages of creation and socialisation can coincide, and the implications flowing from this, especially where this coincidence involves a global language such as English, is something I would elaborate on elsewhere).

#### 4. Self-Reflexivity

The fourth dimension one must be aware of when seeking to grasp “world literature” as a construct is the plain of self-reflexivity. One has to emphasize here the fact that literature’s self-reflexivity should not be reduced to, and indeed should be differentiated from, intertextuality. Methodologically, the project of intertextuality began life in the mid-1960s by dislodging Bakhtin’s dialogism from his ultimately ethical theory of art, in which notions such as voice, dialogue, and polyphony had recognizable moral overtones. In the work of Kristeva they were replaced by a more neutral apparatus that sought to name the phenomenon of one literary text engaging a previous text through allusion, quotation, repetition, etc. In the current Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature, however, this neutrality is often suspended in favour of celebrating the capacity of literature to weave its own dense intertextual network across time and space, thus demonstrating its own reproductive power qua “world literature.” The vector of self-reflexivity, on the other hand, helps us to capture a different set of phenomena: here, literature still engages earlier texts, but it does so in order to ponder the very idea of world literature, not with triumphalist confidence in its own powers of regeneration, but in the low key of skeptical reflection.

The case study I offer in this article involves Chinese culture and its appropriations in the West; it is directly relevant to the question about the location of world literature, in the sense that it locates “world literature” on the level of individual literary texts that examine artistically *the idea of world literature* and construct images of it. In this case, as I will try to demonstrate, this examination proceeds in a somewhat distrustful and sobering fashion, of which we need to be constantly aware. The text in point is Elias Canetti’s 1930s novel *Die Blendung* (translated into English and domesticated in the Anglophone world as *Auto da Fé*).<sup>9</sup>

Canetti’s novel has a deeper cultural subtext that has not yet been heeded or appreciated in sufficient measure, despite the fact that the novel has enjoyed enormous critical attention. *Auto da Fé* is a satire

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<sup>9</sup> Canetti’s novel should serve as a particularly apposite example of self-reflexivity: literature reflecting on the idea of world literature and constructing an image of it through a piece of work that has itself become a fact of ‘world literature’ by virtue of its numerous translations and the conspicuous travel and domestication of its title across cultural boundaries. In his article “Where is World Literature?” (esp. 218-19), Damrosch reflects on a novel in French (Mbwil a Mpang Ngal, *Giambatista Viko, ou Le viol du discours africain*, 1975) that parodies the notion of world literature; unlike Canetti’s novel, however, Giambatista Vico has remained untranslated and has not itself entered the circulatory orbit that sustains the works of ‘world literature’.

on the humanistic ideals of universalism. It is a counter-Enlightenment novel that punishes the hubris of believing in pure reason and boundless humanity. Unnoticed so far has remained Canetti's subtle mockery of the idea of *Weltliteratur*, a notion coined about half a century before Goethe by Schlözer and Wieland.<sup>10</sup> Especially relevant here is Schlözer's usage. Having returned from St. Petersburg after a long stay there, August Schlözer (1735–1809)<sup>11</sup> was appointed Professor of Russian literature and history at Göttingen (1769). It was while holding this Chair that Schlözer, whose spectacular—from today's perspective—range of scholarly interests mirrored the common standards of his age, published a work on Icelandic literature and history (1773), in which he concluded that medieval Icelandic literature was “just as important for the entire world literature” (*für die gesamte Weltliteratur ebenso wichtig*) as the Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Russian, Byzantine, Hebrew, Arabic, and Chinese literatures.<sup>12</sup> It is very important to note here that the idea of “world literature” begins life not amongst writers or narrowly specialised literary scholars but at the hands of a historian. As a historian, Schlözer wanted to understand the past lives of particular cultures, and he believed that the Icelandic genre of the saga could give scholars an insight into the organisation of family relations and inheritance in the Middle Ages. Literature, from his perspective as a historian, had a distinctly utilitarian value as provider of information about alien cultures and past times. It is this utilitarian perspective that enables Schlözer to relax the distinction between “great” and “small” literatures (a gesture that may appear radical even today) by declaring Icelandic literature as important as the seven “great” literatures he lists. Schlözer's notion of “world literature” reflects the Enlightenment's exploratory drive and ambition to expand the pool of available cultural evidence. This entailed inclusion of that which had previously been regarded as peripheral or simply non-extant. The revision of the Eurocentric cultural model that was to become the ultimate—not immediate—outcome of this process underpins our modern idea of “world literature,” in which the Western canon is but a constituent part of a larger and much more diverse repertoire.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On this, see Galin Tihanov, “Cosmopolitanism in the Discursive Landscape of Modernity: Two Enlightenment Articulations,” 142–43.

<sup>11</sup> On Schlözer's life and career, see most recently Martin Peters (2003).

<sup>12</sup> The quote is from Wolfgang Schamoni, 289; it was first adduced in Sigmund von Lempicki, 418.

<sup>13</sup> On current debates around the meaning of “world literature,” see especially Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (2003); Pizer, *The Idea of World Literature* (2006); Lamping, *Die Idee der Weltliteratur: Ein Konzept Goethes und seine Karriere* (2010); and Franco Moretti's influential articles collected in his

Enlightenment and Romanticism constituted in this regard a continuum, in which the exotic and unfamiliar gradually populated literature and the arts, often confronting the artist with the question of how to portray difference so that it becomes comprehensible, while retaining its irreducibility to Western cultural norms. Only slightly later than Schlözer, Herder's *Volkslieder*, in the first version of 1778–1779, comprised samples of oral poetry from as far afield as Peru; the second edition, *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (1807), extended this curiosity to Madagascar. It is important to realise that the prism through which Schlözer observed the growth of literature was that of the individual peoples of the world: in Schlözer's view, "world literature" is a cumulative, aggregate entity, whose completeness is a matter of expanding the list of nations whose literatures are represented in the catalogue of cultural wealth. An appreciation of cultural difference, in the collective agency of the people/nation, was thus on the agenda as an extension of the notion of solidarity with an—empirically attestable—wider humanity. But despite all this, Schlözer was less concerned with promoting a dialogue between these literatures, and their dynamic interaction hardly claimed his research ambitions.

Canetti's *Auto da Fé* cannot be grasped outside this framework of a boundless humanity that offers its cultural gifts to the discerning and appreciative European. Not by accident is Peter Kien, the main character in the novel, a sinologist, Chinese literature having been recognised as a constituent part of "world literature" by both Schlözer and Goethe, who tells Eckermann of his delight in reading a Chinese novel. As we know, Goethe was actually reading a second-rate Chinese novel (dropping the evaluative distinction between masterpieces and "ordinary" works of literature will prove crucial to the endurance of the current liberal discourse of "world literature"), and he was doing so not in German, but in a French translation (the ultimate cosmopolitan experience that is meant to create a space of freedom from the intrusive national pictures

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*Distant Reading* (2013). See also Elke Sturm-Trigonakis, *Global Playing in der Literatur: Ein Versuch über die neue Weltliteratur* (2007); Alfons K. Knauth, "Weltliteratur: Von der Mehrsprachigkeit zur Mischsprachigkeit" (2004); and Ottmar Ette, *Literature on the Move* (2003) (first published in German in 2001 as *Literatur in Bewegung: Raum und Dynamik grenzüberschreitenden Schreibens in Europa und Amerika*). For a stimulating account that still foregrounds a residually Eurocentric model, see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) [French ed., 1999]. For a recent critique of "world literature," see Emily Apter, *op. cit.* For an intervention that builds on Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova, and others, but also attempts to go further, see Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2015); see also Zhang Longxi, *From Comparison to World Literature* (2015).

of the world conveyed by the respective national languages – Chinese or German, and to minimise the lure of self-identification with a national culture).

“Keine menschliche Literatur war ihm fremd” (“No branch of human literature was unfamiliar to him,” 15)<sup>14</sup>: this is how Kien is introduced to the reader early on, with an added remark on his knowledge also of Sanskrit (no doubt a jibe at the Romantic preoccupation with ancient India), Japanese, and the Western European languages. Kien, in other words, is a philologist par excellence, a model scholar of “world literature” in its enticing totality. The fact that he carries “another,” invisible library in his head is a confirmation of his internalisation of culture. He had not succumbed to the recent fads of superficially praising Japanese and Chinese art, which had been so much a part of European middle-class demeanor since the late nineteenth century; instead, he walks around as a veritable encyclopedia of Chinese and other Eastern cultures, to which he relates with genuine understanding and informed restraint.

And yet Kien himself gives the lie to this humanistic embrace of otherness. “Literature” to him is the sum total of dead manuscripts and old inscriptions rather than the living word of, say, a novel. For Kien, novels furnish pleasure at a prohibitive cost; they “crack open” the otherwise monolithic personalities of their readers by enticing them into sympathising with characters who hold dear values that may well differ from their own. This turns the novel into a rather dangerous genre, an instrument of unhinging and dislocating the reader from a space of moral certitude into a zone of unfamiliarity, dizziness, and perilous self-reliance. For that reason, just as in Plato’s Republic, Kien believes that literature, if exemplified by the novel, as is the case in modernity, should be “prohibited by the state” (37). Canetti thus ultimately parodies the humanistic idea of a cosmopolitan culture—and the Enlightenment notion of “world literature” as one of its indispensable manifestations.

To appreciate the depth and subtlety of *Auto da Fé*, we must see it in the context of Canetti’s renewal of, and challenge to, the Central European Jewish literary patrimony, especially the work of Kafka. Canetti has often acknowledged his fascination with Kafka (in his essayistic work and also in his little book of 1969, *Der andere Prozess*, translated into English as *Kafka’s Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*, 1974), but nowhere so vividly as in his novel. It is with reference to Kafka that I suggest we could attain a more nuanced understanding of Canetti’s choosing to cast

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<sup>14</sup> Here and henceforth the English text of the novel follows the standard translation (Canetti, *Auto da Fé*, with indication of the relevant page number(s)).

Peter Kien as a sinologist. The mockery of the idea of “world literature” as an instrument of cosmopolitanism is an important pointer, but there appears to be more behind Canetti’s decision. In Chinese philosophy (a lifelong fascination for Canetti), he discovered an apposite parallel to Kafka’s art of “transformation” into “something small” (*Kafka’s Other Trial*, 89), of disappearance into self-imposed insignificance and humility as resistance to, or evasion of, power. In this sense Kafka, Canetti asserted unhesitatingly, was “the only writer of the Western world who is essentially Chinese” (*Kafka’s Other Trial*, 94). Canetti invoked his conversations in London with Arthur Waley, the self-taught Orientalist and translator of *Monkey*, of Chinese poetry, and the Confucian classics, as confirmation of his opinion. But the killer proof seems to have come from a passage in a postcard Kafka had sent to Felice from Marienbad in which he avowed: “indeed I am a Chinese” (quoted in *Kafka’s Other Trial*, 97), with all the ramifications of such a statement that Canetti then chose to read into Kafka’s brief text. In Canetti’s own words, “[s]ilence and emptiness [...] receptivity of everything animate and inanimate—these are reminiscent of Taoism and of a Chinese landscape” (*Kafka’s Other Trial*, 98).

Chinese philosophy and culture in Canetti’s novel should not be taken at face value: Canetti deliberately skewed, misread, and manipulated his sources,<sup>15</sup> but the end result was a caricatured emblem of cultural harmony and a deliberately debased ideal of “world literature” and cosmopolitanism, emptied, as we have seen, of its core notion of diversity and difference. Part and parcel of this parodying of “world literature” is the very motif of the “battle of the books,” a topos in European literatures that goes back to Cervantes and Swift.<sup>16</sup> Revealingly, in order to enhance their endurance in the new “war” regime, Kien reorders his books with their spines turned to the wall, introducing anonymity and obliterating any trace of difference. The novel, then, is a celebration not of the uniqueness of singular cultures, nor indeed of their supposed interaction; rather it is a reconfirmation of skepticism vis-à-vis the very possibility of cultural dialogue.

I have briefly analysed Canetti’s novel not just in order to highlight his skepticism (something very healthy to do, it seems to me), but in order to draw attention to this, in my view, extremely important meta-level of reflection on world literature, in which literature itself ponders the idea of world literature – always from a specific, and thus limited, cultural and ideological perspective. Realising that world literature functions

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<sup>15</sup> See Chunjie Zhang, 148–49; further on China in Canetti’s novel, see Alexander Košenina, 231–51 (with a good bibliography of earlier scholarship).

<sup>16</sup> On this see Hölter (1995).

as a historically shifting constellation of discourses that is chronotopically constructed, with social and ideological energies bubbling underneath and shaping this construct, is the first step towards denaturalising it and opening up a space that would permit the work of questioning to commence. Literature itself is an ally in this process; its capacity of self-reflexivity, as Canetti novel demonstrates, assist us in jettisoning the idea that world literature is a natural given that repels skepticism and disables the drive towards a closer inspection of its sometimes unspoken liberal premises.

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*Abstract*

In this article, I reflect upon world literature as a socio-cultural construct behind which one can discern particular historical dynamics and tensions. In the first part, I seek to locate the Anglo-Saxon discourse of world literature vis-à-vis three major reference points: time, space, and language. This chronotopic examination allows me to identify focal points of dissent from the currently prevalent liberal mobilisations of 'world literature'. The second part of the article is dedicated to the location of world literature on the level of literature's self-reflection. This is a specific meta-location of world literature which I examine through close attention to a 1930s novel. This allows me to think about skepticism and dissent as a meta-reflexive position, from which literature itself skeptically relates to the notion of 'world literature'.

*Key words:* world literature; self-reflexivity; subversion; Canetti

