

The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature

Hendrik Birus
University of München

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Birus, Hendrik. "The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 2.4 (2000): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1090>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1090)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 2 Issue 4 (December 2000) Article 7
Hendrik Birus,
"The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/7>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 2.4 (2000)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/>>

Abstract: In his article, "The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature," Hendrik Birus presents a new reading and understanding of Goethe's famous dictum: "National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for the era of world literature and everybody must endeavour to accelerate this epoch" (Eckermann 198, 31 January 1827). According to Birus, this dictum is not to be taken at face value today and argues that Goethe's concept of world literature ought to be understood in the sense that today it is not the replacement of national literatures by world literature we encounter; rather, it is the rapid blossoming of a multitude of European and non-European literatures and the simultaneous emergence of a world literature -- mostly in English translations -- as two aspects of one and the same process. The understanding of this dialectic, Birus argues, ought to be one of the main targets of comparative literature today.

Hendrik BIRUS

The Goethean Concept of World Literature and Comparative Literature

There is currently little agreement about the systematic localization or methodology of comparative literature. What is far less controversial is the description of the field of comparative literature as world literature. But what is world literature? The answer seems trivial: The literature of the entire world. Yet this entails certain problems, since today no one will be able to simply say, as Goethe could over 160 years ago: "European, i.e., world literature" ("europäische, d.h., Weltliteratur"; as reads the heading of a late outline of Goethe's [Werke. Sophien-Ausgabe; further on referred to as WA [I, 42.2, 500]). This is why Etiemble's lecture at the IVth Congress of the 1964 ICLA/AILC: International Association of Comparative Literature in Fribourg posed the programmatic question: "Faut-il réviser la notion de *Weltliteratur*?" (Etiemble 1975). Etiemble's demand for a "littérature universelle" (Etiemble 1982) -- or a "littérature (vraiment) générale" (Etiemble 1966, 1975) -- offered the tempting prospect of a "comparatisme planétaire" (Etiemble 1988). At the same time, however, it also suggested a concept of "world literature" too vast to be grasped by anyone, regardless of linguistic and literary education. After all, even the "decaglottism" proposed a century ago by the comparatist Hugó Meltzl von Lomnitz -- Meltzl had suggested focusing on German, English, French, Icelandic, Italian, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Spanish, and Hungarian (see Berczik) -- would remain, in its Eurocentrism, a far cry from the well-founded principles established by Etiemble (1975, 19-20). Should we then, for the sake of feasibility, view as "world literature" only the best examples of all literatures from different epochs and regions? It was in this sense that Horst Rüdiger, the post-World War founder of the German section of the ICLA/AILC, stood up for the "right and duty of literary evaluation according to supra-national standards" ("das Recht und die Pflicht zur literarischen Wertung nach übernationalen Maßstäben"), arguing that "the qualitative canonical concept of 'world literature' is an aesthetically necessary correlate to the quantitative, geographical concept of 'literatures of the world'" ("Dem quantitativen, dem extensiv-geographischen Begriff der 'Literaturen der Welt' stellt sich der qualitative, der kanonische Begriff der 'Weltliteratur' als ästhetisch notwendiges Korrelat zur Seite") (1972, 51, 1973; Marino 204-05). But, as noted contemptuously by Werner Krauss, the doyen of Romance Languages and Literatures in the German Democratic Republic, world literature "accordingly rises above all literatures as a superliterature, with its masterpieces towering above every normal horizon. World literature thus turns into a great pandemonium in which Cervantes and Rabelais, Dante and Voltaire nod to each other" ("Sie erhebt sich dann als eine Spitzenliteratur mit ihren unsterblichen, den Normalhorizont überragenden Meisterwerken über alle Literaturen. Weltliteratur ist dann zu einem Pandämonium geworden, in dem sich Cervantes und Rabelais, Dante und Voltaire zunicken") (347-48).

This was in no way Goethe's concept of "world literature," which he coined in the last decade of his life as a reaction to Romantic -- even pre-Romantic -- literary criticism's breaking through of the traditional limits of Occidental literature by reevaluating popular poetry and the literatures of the Middle Ages and of the Orient. Indeed, in the present use of the term, the quantitative aspect of world literature -- its extensional universality considering all particular literatures -- is often paralleled by the qualitative aspect of the exemplary value of those texts that belong to it. But contrary to this interpretation of world literature as a comprehensive and hierarchically structured thesaurus, Goethe had pointed out that it was presently, that is, contemporaneous to him, emerging. After all, from 1827 on Goethe asserts in the most varied ways that "such a world literature will soon come into being, as is inevitable given the ever-increasing rapidity of human interaction" ("eine solche Weltliteratur, wie bey der sich immer vermehrenden Schnelligkeit des Verkehrs unausbleiblich ist, sich nächstens bildet") (WA I, 42.2, 502); similarly in a letter to Adolph Friedrich Carl Streckfuß, 27 January 1827 [WA IV, 42, 28] and in *Maximen und Reflexionen* [WA I, 42.2, 202]), he even compares his situation to that of the sorcerer's apprentice, with the advancing world literature "streaming towards him as if to engulf him" ("daß die von mir angerufene Weltliteratur auf mich, wie auf den Zauberlehrling, zum Ersaufen zuströmt") (Goethe to Carl Friedrich Zelter, 21 May 1828 [WA IV, 44, 101]). And Goethe himself, like the later authors

of the *Communist Manifesto*, related the resulting "universal world literature" ("allgemeine Weltliteratur") not only in a general way to the "contemporary, highly turbulent epoch" ("gegenwärtige, höchst bewegte Epoche") and its "vastly facilitated communications" ("durchaus erleichterte Communication") (WA I, 41.2, 299), but also quite concretely to the "constantly spreading activities of trade and commerce" ("immer mehr umgreifende Gewerks- und Handelsthätigkeit") (WA I, 42.2, 505) in which he saw the "human spirit gradually attaining the desire to participate in the more or less untrammelled intellectual trade" ("kam der Geist nach und nach zu dem Verlangen, auch in den mehr oder weniger freien geistigen Handelsverkehr mit aufgenommen zu werden") (WA I, 42.1, 187).

Yet, for Goethe the significance of the concept of world literature is not merely limited to such current or future relevance. Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* had responded to the new quality of class antagonism by representing not only the present, but also the "history of all previous societies" ("die Geschichte aller bisherigen Gesellschaft") as "the history of class-struggle" ("die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen") (Marx and Engels 1974, 462; note Engels' clearly restricting annotation to the English edition of 1888). Goethe similarly lends his new concept of "world literature" further retrospective significance when he insists: "If we have dared to proclaim a European literature, indeed a universal world literature, then we have hardly done so simply to point out that different nations acknowledge each other and their respective creations, for in this sense it has existed for a long time and continues more or less to flourish" (1975, 295) ("Wenn wir eine europäische, ja eine allgemeine Weltliteratur zu verkündigen gewagt haben, so heißt dieses nicht daß die verschiedenen Nationen von einander und ihren Erzeugnissen Kenntnis nehmen, denn in diesem Sinne existiert sie schon lange, setzt sich fort und erneuert sich mehr oder weniger" [1970, 295]). What both applications of the term have in common, however, is Goethe's conviction that "like all things of supreme value, [art] belongs to the whole world and can only be promoted by a free and general interaction among contemporaries" ("[Kunst] gehöre wie alles Gute der ganzen Welt an und könne nur durch allgemeine freie Wechselwirkung aller zugleich Lebenden, in steter Rücksicht auf das, was uns vom Vergangenen übrig und bekannt ist, gefördert werden") (WA I, 48, 23). Naturally, a discourse of this kind must "always remain attentive to what has been inherited from the past," as we read in the famous stanza from the West-Eastern Divan: "He who cannot be farsighted / Nor three thousand years assay, / Inexperienced stays benighted / Let him live from day to day" ("Wer nicht von dreitausend Jahren / Sich weiß Rechenschaft zu geben, / Bleib im Dunkeln unerfahren, / Mag von Tag zu Tage leben (Und wer franzet oder bittet)" (1994, 59).

Although this historical field of reference cannot be excluded from the concept of "world literature," it by no means constitutes its core as a kind of treasury of humanity, but rather has its function solely with regard to the experience and interaction of contemporaries. Contrary to Gadamer's assertion of the "normative significance" ("normativer Sinn") of "world literature" (167), then, Goethe represents just the opposite of a normative concept of world literature. Rather, in the famous conversation with Eckermann on 31 January 1827, he introduces his proclamation of the "epoch of world literature" with the following observation: "I see increasingly that poetry is a common property of mankind and that it emerges in all places and at all times from many hundreds of people. Some are a little better at it than others and stay on top a little longer, that is all there is to it ... everyone must realize that the gift of poetry is not so rare a thing, and that nobody has reason to let it go to his head if he produces a good poem" / "Ich sehe immer mehr, daß die Poesie ein Gemeingut der Menschheit ist und daß sie überall und zu allen Zeiten in Hunderten und aber Hunderten von Menschen hervortritt. Einer macht es ein wenig besser als der andere und schwimmt ein wenig länger oben als der andere, das ist alles. ... jeder muß sich eben sagen, daß es mit der poetischen Gabe keine so seltene Sache sei und daß niemand eben besondere Ursache habe, sich viel darauf einzubilden, wenn er ein gutes Gedicht macht" (Eckermann 198).

Eckermann's diligent question whether the novel of manners of the Ming Era (*Yü-chiao-li* [*Red Jade and Dream Pear*]; Goethe read this novel in French translation [see Era]) with which Goethe was so preoccupied was not "perhaps one of the era's finest" ("vielleicht einer ihrer

vorzüglichsten"), is accorded the casual answer: "Not at all. The Chinese have thousands of such novels, and had them while our ancestors were still living in the forests" ("Keineswegs, die Chinesen haben deren zu Tausenden und hatten ihrer schon, als unsere Vorfahren noch in den Wäldern lebten") (Eckermann 198). Of course, whenever the "need for something exemplary" ("Bedürfnis von etwas Musterhaftem") -- a true model -- arose, Goethe resolutely drew on the "ancient Greeks": "We must view every-thing else historically and, as far as possible, learn from the good in it" ("Alles übrige müssen wir nur historisch betrachten und das Gute, so weit es gehen will, uns daraus aneignen") (Eckermann 198). If classical antiquity loses its exceptional status, the question of whether or not a hierarchical factor is indispensable to the concept of "world literature" takes on a significance quite different from that which it still had for Goethe. Just such a hierarchical factor underlies not only Etiemble's counter-proposals to the Eurocentric reading-lists he criticizes, but also and particularly the following description of the situation: "qu'au lieu de gaspiller son temps à lire mille mauvais livres dont tout le monde parle, on saura choisir parmi les dizaines de milliers de grandes oeuvres qui n'attendent que notre bonne volonté" (1975, 30). But not only is it difficult to derive a canonical notion of "world literature" from Goethe's comments. Goethe asserts, on the contrary, that popular literature plays a role -- indeed a central role -- in the process of "world literature's" formation: "If such a world literature will soon come into being, as is inevitable given the ever increasing rapidity of human interaction, then we may not expect anything more or different from [this literature] than what it can and does achieve ... whatever pleases the masses will expand without limit and, as we are already witnessing, find approval in all areas and regions" (Wenn nun ... eine solche Weltliteratur, wie bey der sich immer vermehrenden Schnelligkeit des Verkehrs unausbleiblich ist, sich nächstens bildet, so dürfen wir nur nicht mehr und nichts anders von ihr erwarten als was sie leisten kann und leistet. ... was der Menge zusagt, wird sich gränzenlos ausbreiten und, wie wir jetzt schon sehen, sich in allen Zonen und Gegenden empfehlen) (WA I, 42.2, 502f).

And his sole consolation in the face of the "English spring tide" ("englische Springflut") (Goethe to Streckfuß, 27 January 1827 [WA IV, 42, 28]) is that "some individuals will be blessed" by the "advancing world literature ... even if the general cause suffers" ("Dies sind aber schon die Folgen der anmarschirenden Weltliteratur, und man kann sich hier ganz allein dadurch trösten, daß, wenn auch das Allgemeine dabey übel fährt, gewiß Einzelne davon Heil und Segen gewinnen werden") (Goethe to Zelter, 4 March 1829 [WA IV, 45, 187]; see also Auerbach 303-04) for "those who have devoted themselves to higher things, to what is fruitful on a higher level, will get to know each other all the more quickly and closely" ("diejenigen aber die sich dem Höheren und dem höher Fruchtbaren gewidmet haben, werden sich geschwinder und näher kennen lernen") to "resist the everyday deluge" ("der breiten Tagesfluth sich entgegen zu setzen") and work together toward a world literature that would promote the "true progress of mankind" ("den wahren Fortschritt der Menschheit") (WA I, 42.2, 503). Even the recently debated thematic criterion for the applicability of the notion of "world literature" -- namely that it reflects "the problems, experiences, expectations and fears of the western industrial world" (Steinmetz 1988b, 132, 1988a, 136-41) -- even this criterion originates with Goethe, who had related the formation of a "world literature" to the "advancement of the human race" ("Vorschreiten des Menschengeschlechts"), to "long-term human and global prospects" ("weite Aussichten der Welt- und Menschenverhältnisse") (Goethe to Streckfuß, 27 January 1827 [WA IV, 42, 28]) and to the interest of nations in "gaining knowledge of the mutual relations of all to all" ("die Verhältnisse aller gegen alle kennen lernen") (WA I, 42.2, 505). Goethe considered that German Romantic and Biedermeier works, given their inadequate roots in the contemporary world, were hardly worthy of the name "world literature" in comparison with contemporary French literature. Goethe writes: "German poetry ... really provides nothing but the expressions, sighs and interjections of well-meaning individuals. Each person makes his appearance in accordance with his nature and education. Hardly anything attains to a universal, lofty level. Least of all does one find situations common to the domestic, urban or rural sphere. As far as Church and State are concerned, nothing is to be seen" (Die deutsche Poesie bringt ... eigentlich nur Ausdrücke, Seufzer und Interjectionen wohldenkender Individuen. Jeder Einzelne tritt auf nach seinem Naturell und seiner

Bildung; kaum irgend etwas geht in's Allgemeine, Höhere; am wenigsten merkt man einen häuslichen, städtischen, kaum einen ländlichen Zustand; von dem, was Staat und Kirche betrifft, ist gar nichts zu merken) (Goethe to Hitzig, 11 November 1829, WA IV, 46, 144-45).

On the other hand, it does indeed amount to a quantitatively comprehensive concept of world literature when, in the Eckermann conversation of 31 January 1827, Goethe echoes Herder in stressing that poetry is the common property of mankind, and that it emerges in all places and at all times. ... this is why I study foreign nations and advise everybody else to do the same. National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for an era of world literature, and everybody must endeavor to accelerate this epoch (198) ("daß die Poesie ein Gemeingut der Menschheit ist und daß sie überall und zu allen Zeiten ... hervor-tritt. ... Ich sehe mich daher gern bei fremden Nationen um und rate jedem, es auch seinerseits zu tun. Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen") (Eckermann 198). As a test, Goethe refers to the contrast between the highly-talented Béranger's "indecent, dissolute" ("unsittliche, liederliche") songs and the aforementioned "thoroughly decent" ("durchaus sittlich") -- if also thoroughly mediocre -- Chinese novel. Moreover, he underlines the novel's contrasts with and similarities to both his own "bourgeois idyll" *Herrmann and Dorothea* and to Richardson's epistolary novels (Eckermann 197-98). But an understanding of world literature as extensive as that documented in Goethe's works cannot be realized without a substantial reevaluation of literary translation that places it above the category of a makeshift solution and Árpád Berczik even forwarded -- with critical intention -- the exaggerated thesis that "World literature, following Goethe's concept, is nourished foremost by translations; more, it is almost identical to the art of translation ("Die Weltliteratur nach Goethes Konzeption wird vorwiegend durch Übersetzungen gespeist, ja, sie ist mit der Übersetzungskunst nahezu identisch") (288; see also Tgahrt). It is true that Goethe held the strong conviction that one should, as far as possible, "seek out, get to know and cherish each poet in his own language and within the specific area of his time and customs" ("daß man jeden Dichter in seiner Sprache und im eigenthümlichen Bezirk seiner Zeit und Sitten aufsuchen, kennen und schätzen müsse") (1994, 270) -- why else would he, for the sake of Hafiz, have begun to learn Persian at the age of 65? Yet in a review of Carlyle's *German Romance* he states with equal conviction: "Whatever one may say about the shortcomings of translation, it nonetheless remains one of the most important and most worthy activities in the business of this world. *The Koran* says: 'God has given each people a prophet in its own tongue.' Every translator is thus a prophet in the midst of his own people" ("was man auch von der Unzulänglichkeit des Übersetzens sagen mag, so ist und bleibt es doch eines der wichtigsten und würdigsten Geschäfte in dem allgemeinen Weltverkehr. *Der Koran* sagt: 'Gott hat jedem Volke einen Propheten gegeben in seiner eigenen Sprache.' So ist jeder Übersetzer ein Prophet in seinem Volke") (WA I, 41.2, 307).

To this extent, Goethe regards the process of development of world literature as profoundly bound up with the medium of literary translation, over and above our striving for the widest possible direct knowledge of the various literatures, and over and above the lively interaction among Literatoren (that is poets, critics, university teachers, etc.). Goethe had seen the "great value that world literature yields and that will increasingly manifest itself" above all else in the fact "that we are now, with close contact between the French, the English and the Germans, beginning to correct each other" ("Es ist aber sehr artig, daß wir jetzt, bei dem engen Verkehr zwischen Franzosen, Engländern und Deutschen in den Fall kommen, uns einander zu korrigieren. Das ist der große Nutzen, der bei einer Weltliteratur herauskommt und der sich immer mehr zeigen wird") (Eckermann 227-28) and, moreover, in the fact that "the disagreements that prevail within one nation are smoothed out by the views and judgment of the others" ("die Differenzen, die innerhalb der einen Nation obwalten, durch Ansicht und Urtheil der übrigen ausgeglichen werden") (Goethe to Sulpiz Boisserée, 12 October 1827 [WA IV, 43, 106]). Goethe had no high-flown illusions about this and expressly emphasized that "it is not a matter of nations being obliged to think in unison; rather, they should become aware of and understand each other, and, if love proves impossible, they should at least learn to tolerate one another" (WA I, 41.2, 348). He concedes that "it cannot be hoped that this will produce a general peace, but it can be hoped that the inevitable conflicts

will gradually become less important, that war will become less cruel and victory less arrogant" ("German Romance," WA I, 41.2, 306). Of course, our present century's history has ensured that even these moderate hopes would come to nothing. And, as Auerbach notes, the process of cultural "conciliation" ("Ausgleichsprozeß") that Goethe regards with some optimism is increasingly eroding every distinctive tradition, with the result that ultimately, "in a uniformly organized world, only one single literary culture -- indeed, in a relatively short time, only a few literary languages, soon perhaps only one -- will remain alive. And with this, the idea of world literature would be at once realized and destroyed" ("auf einer einheitlich organisierten Erde nur eine einzige literarische Kultur, ja selbst in vergleichsweise kurzer Zeit nur wenige literarische Sprachen, bald vielleicht nur eine, als lebend übrigbleiben. Und damit wäre der Gedanke der Weltliteratur zugleich verwirklicht und zerstört") (301).

And in a similar sense T.S. Eliot proposes "that a world culture which was simply a uniform culture would be no culture at all. We should have a humanity de-humanised. It would be a nightmare. But on the other hand, we cannot resign the idea of world-culture alto-gether" (62) while Lévi-Strauss suggests that "c'est la différence des cultures qui rend leur rencontre féconde. Or ce jeu en commun entraîne leur uniformisation progressive: les bénéfiques que les cultures retirent de ces contacts proviennent largement de leurs écarts qualitatifs; mais, au cours de ces échanges, ces écarts diminuent jusqu'à s'abolir" -- with the result, "que, dans leur évolution, les cultures tendent vers une entropie croissante qui résulte de leur mélange" (206). These views overlap with Etiemble's view -- arrived at differently, of course -- that "qu'au moment précis où la Weltliteratur devient enfin possible, elle devient du même coup quasiment impossible" (1975, 33-34).

In contrast, one of Goethe's last essays, entitled "Epochs of Social Education" ("Epochen geselliger Bildung"), leads one to the conclusion that Goethe directed all of his hopes towards exactly this progression away from the seclusion and intimacy of life in what he called the "idyllic epoch," to its gradual convergence and fusion, and finally to the point where it is wholly united with the "universal epoch." And four stages of literary education ("Bildung") are assigned to this progression: in the first, one sings only of the beloved and "prefers to head toward one's mother tongue" ("halten ... mit Vorliebe auf die Muttersprache"); in the second and third, "one does not resist the influence of foreign languages" ("den fremden Sprachen verweigert man die Einwirkung nicht"); and in the fourth, one is "convinced of the necessity of informing oneself about the present course of world events, in their real as well as ideal sense. All foreign literatures, together with our native literature, become part of the same phenomenon, and we are not left behind by world events" ("die Überzeugung, wie nothwendig es sei, sich von den Zuständen des augenblicklichen Weltlaufs im realen und idealen Sinne zu unterrichten. Alle fremde Literaturen setzen sich mit der einheimischen ins Gleiche, und wir bleiben im Weltumlaufe nicht zurück") (WA I 41.2, 361-62). This latter state can indeed be called "world literature."

Yet, this linear scheme of progression is somewhat deceiving. For just as all four historical stages must be experienced anew by each individual, and just as "world piety" ("Weltfrömmigkeit"), which seeks to embrace the whole of humanity, requires "home piety" ("Hausfrömmigkeit") as its basis (WA I, 24, 378), so even the most advanced world literature remains dependent on "naïve poetry" (Goethe 1994, 140) or "nature poetry" ("Naturdichtung"; see "Ein Wort für junge Dichter" [in a letter to Melchior Meyr, 22 January 1832 (WA I, 42.2, 106-08, esp. 106-07]; see also WA I, 42.2, 120) -- as its origin and its source of regeneration. Thus, if Goethe praises the dawning epoch of world literature for the fact that "the efforts of the best poets and aesthetic writers of all nations have, for some time now, been directed toward humanity in general," so that "in every particular of nationality and personality the general significance can be seen to shine through" ("Offenbar ist das Bestreben der besten Dichter und ästhetischen Schriftsteller aller Nationen schon seit geraumer Zeit auf das allgemein Menschliche gerichtet. In jedem Besondern ... wird man durch Nationalität und Persönlichkeit hin jenes Allgemeine immer mehr durchleuchten und durchscheinen sehen") ("German Romance," WA I, 41.2, 305), and if even he, to Eckermann's astonishment, stresses not the exotic features of this Chinese novel, but rather the fact that in it "the people think, act and feel almost exactly as we do" ("die Menschen denken, handeln und empfinden fast ebenso wie wir") (Eckermann 196) then this does not amount

to a submergence of the particular in the general -- even in "humanity in general" ("das allgemein Menschliche") -- but rather (in a language that is quite Hegelian) to "mediation and mutual recognition" ("Vermittlung und wechselseitige Anerkennung"): "One must get to know the peculiarities of each nation to then see past them and establish a relationship with the nation; for the characteristics of a nation are like its language and its coins ? they facilitate dealings with it, in fact they make such dealings possible in the first place" ("Die Besonderheiten einer jeden muß man kennen lernen, um sie ihr zu lassen, um gerade dadurch mit ihr zu verkehren: denn die Eigenheiten einer Nation sind wie ihre Sprache und ihre Münzsorten, sie erleichtern den Verkehr, ja sie machen ihn erst vollkommen möglich") ("German Romance," WA I, 41.2, 306). And Erich Auerbach has the same idea in mind when he writes: "'World literature' refers not simply to what is common and human as such, but rather to this as the mutual fertilisation of the manifold. It presupposes the *felix culpa* of mankind's division into a whole host of cultures" ("Weltliteratur ... bezieht sich nicht einfach auf das Gemeinsame und Menschliche überhaupt, sondern auf dieses als wechselseitige Befruchtung des Mannigfaltigen. Die *felix culpa* des Auseinanderfallens der Menschheit in eine Fülle von Kulturen ist ihre Voraussetzung") (301). Goethe, however, has the advantage over Auerbach's assessment of the situation not only in his astounding anticipation of Marx and Saussure on the comparative levels of culture, language, and economy, but also in the fact that, rather than identify the diversity of cultures as the precondition of the formation of a common world literature, he focuses instead with greater historical specificity on the modern antagonism among different nations. It was thus no unreflected Eurocentrism when he described the developing world literature as being, for the present, limited to European literatures, above all those of France, England, Scotland, Italy, and Germany (see especially Goethe's diverse outlines on "world literature" [WA I, 42.2, 491-501]) -- even if the non-European literatures were increasingly becoming the focus of attention, as vividly demonstrated by Goethe's *West-Eastern Divan* (*West-östlicher Divan*, 1819 and 1827) and his Chinese-German *Seasons and Hours of the Day* (*Chinesisch-deutsche Jahres- und Tageszeiten*, 1829).

Goethe's famous dictum: "National literature does not mean much at present, it is time for the era of world literature and everybody must endeavour to accelerate this epoch" ("Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muß jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen") (Eckermann 198, 31 January 1827) is not to be taken at face value. For, what we meanwhile observe is not the replacement of national literatures by world literature, but the rapid blossoming of a multitude of European and non-European literatures and the simultaneous emergence of a world literature (mostly in English translations) as two aspects of one and the same process. The understanding of this dialectic -- should not this be one of the main targets of comparative literature today?

Note: The present publication is an updated version of Hendrik Birus, "Main Features of Goethe's Concept of World Literature," in *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimic, and Irene Sywenky. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. 31-41. Publication of the new version is by permission of Honoré Champion.

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Erich. "Philologie der Weltliteratur." *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*. Bern: Francke, 1967. 301-10.
- Berczik, Árpád. "Eine ungarische Konzeption der Weltliteratur. (Hugo v. Meltzls vergleichende Literaturtheorie)." *La Littérature comparée en Europe orientale*. Ed. István Sötér, et al. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1963. 287-94.
- Eckermann, Johann Peter. *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*. Ed. Regine Otto and Peter Wersig. Berlin: Aufbau, 1987.
- Eliot, T.S. *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber & Faber, 1949.
- Etiemble, René. "Faut-il réviser la notion de Weltliteratur?" 1966. *Essais de littérature (vraiment) générale*. René Etiemble. Paris: Gallimard, 1975. 15-36.
- Etiemble, René. *Ouverture(s) sur un comparatisme planétaire*. Paris: Bourgois, 1988.
- Etiemble, René. *Quelques essais de littérature universelle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Gesammelte Werke*. Vol. 1. *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen: Mohr, 1986.

- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Die Schriften zur Naturwissenschaft*. [Leopoldina-Ausgabe]. Vol. 11. *Aufsätze, Fragmente, Studien zur Naturwissenschaft im allgemeinen*. Ed. Dorothea Kuhn and Wolf von Engelhardt. Weimar: Böhlau, 1970.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *West-östlicher Divan* (Frankfurter Ausgabe). Ed. Hendrik Birus. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Werke*. [Sophien-Ausgabe]. Weimar: Böhlau, 1887-1919. 133 vols. Rpt. München: deutscher taschenbuch verlag, 1987.
- Iu-kiao-li ou Les Deux cousines*. Trans. J.P. Abel-Rémusat. Paris, 1826.
- Krauss, Werner. "Probleme der vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte." *Zur Dichtungsgeschichte der romanischen Völker*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1965. 100-113, 345-48.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude, and Didier Eribon. *De près et de loin*. Paris: Jacob, 1988.
- Marino, Adriano. "Wo ist der Ort der 'Weltliteratur'?" *Vergleichende Literaturforschung in den sozialistischen Ländern 1963-1979*. Ed. Gerhard R. Kaiser. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1980. 189-208.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. "Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei." *Werke*. Berlin: Dietz, 1974. Vol.4, 459-93.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engles. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." Trans. Samuel Moore. *Great Books of the Western World*. Ed. Mortimer J. Adler. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1994. 413-34.
- Rüdiger, Horst. "Klassik und Kanonbildung. Zur Frage der Wertung in der Komparatistik." *Komparatistik. Aufgaben und Methoden*. Ed. Horst Rüdiger. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973. 127-44.
- Rüdiger, Horst. "'Literatur' und 'Weltliteratur' in der modernen Komparatistik." *Weltliteratur und Volksliteratur*. Ed. Albert Schaefer. München: Beck, 1972. 36-54.
- Steinmetz, Horst. "Weltliteratur. Umriß eines literaturgeschichtlichen Konzepts." *Literatur und Geschichte. 4 Versuche*. München: iudicium, 1988. 103-26, 136-41.
- Steinmetz, Horst. "Response to Claus Clüver's 'The Difference of Eight Decades: World Literature and the Demise of National Literatures'." *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 37 (1988): 131-33.
- Tgahrt, Reinhart, et al., eds. *Weltliteratur. Die Lust am Übersetzen im Jahrhundert Goethes. Eine Ausstellung des Deutschen Literaturarchivs im Schiller-Nationalmuseum Marbach am Neckar*. München: Koesel, 1982.

Author's Profile: Hendrik Birus teaches comparative literature at the University of München, Germany. His interests and numerous publications are in the fields of hermeneutics, comparative literature, and German literature, particularly Goethe, Lessing, Celan, and Adorno. Birus is editor, among others, of *Hermeneutische Positionen* (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht), of *Germanistik und Komparatistik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995), of Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker, 1994) and of the recently published the six volume series, *Johann Wolfgang Goethe. Werke* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1999). E-mail: <h.birus@lrz.uni-muenchen.de>.