

UNIVERSAL LITERATURE AND OTHERNESS

Rapid developments in science, technology and means of communication offer man possibilities for dialogue that up until now have been undreamed-of.* It must be undeniably admitted, however, that we live in a world dominated by fear of the other, fanaticism, racism and every kind of conflict. This is why we have thought it useful to reactualize the Goethian conceptions of universal literature and otherness, conceptions that, coming from

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I myself translated the text of Goethe used in the present contribution. For the conversations of Goethe with Eckermann I used the translation by Jean Chuzeville (Paris, Gallimard, 1941). For the *Divan* I used the translation of Henri Lichtenberger (Paris, Aubier, 1949) that I however often modified.

the generosity of a humanist and appreciator of the other, could help us contribute to the discussion on the problems of interculturality that give rise to more and more animated controversies.

However, what is commonly thought of in the West today as universal literature is generally reduced to a Eurocentric selection of masterpieces of universal literary heritage. In most collections, anthologies and libraries of universal literature, the literature of Africa, South America and Asia does not have the place it deserves. In other words, the *cultural* other, the other belonging to a civilization different from Western civilization, is absent from universal literature.

Some years ago, René Etiemble admirably stated this situation when he took part in the "International Association of Compared Literature." At that time he posed the question, "Must we revise our idea of *Weltliteratur*?"¹ He remarked that in most collections and studies on universal literature, whether in France, Germany or some other European country, the literary view of the world has been and remains an exclusively Eurocentric view.

In general, all that remains of the Goethian concept of *Weltliteratur* is its selective dimension, which in addition is reduced to a Eurocentric perspective. Such an interpretation causes the works "elected" by European authors to come from, as a rule, the Western world. Let us cite as an example the case of François Jost, who went so far as to propose for *Weltliteratur* the neologism *Wertliteratur*, a term meaning literature of *value*:² his examples of universal literature are chiefly limited to the Occidental sphere.

This is a reductionist conception of the universal. We expect to find what is common to human beings, and we are confronted with

¹ R. Etiemble, "*Faut-il réviser la notion de Weltliteratur?*" *IV Acta AILC Congress*, La Haye/Paris, 1966, pp. 5-16, gives a detailed criticism of the libraries of universal literature. In a German version, different from the present study, I have devoted some pages to the study of anthologies, encyclopedias and interpretation of *Weltliteratur* in German. Cf. "Goethes Theorie der Alterität und die Idee der *Weltliteratur*", *Gegenwart als kulturelles Erbe*, collective work, Bernard Thum, ed., Munich, Iudicium Verlag, 1985. Our research brought out the almost Eurocentric, to say nothing of Germanocentric, nature of these works.

² "*Weltliteratur*, as we have seen, is the equivalent of *Wertliteratur*," writes François Jost (p. 20). Cf. "Littérature comparée et littérature universelle," *Orbis litterarum*, XXVII, 1972, pp. 13-27 (if not otherwise indicated it is my underlining. Here it is Jost who underlines).

a notion of the universal in which the European projects his own image. For a long time in Europe, the universal has been synonymous with the European universe. It has to do with its cultural identity, that is, with what is composed of elements “proper” to Western civilization. On the other hand, cultural otherness is completely banished from it. Nothing is kept but what “belongs” or what is believed to belong to the West or that the West has appropriated and is now able to constitute or strengthen its own identity.

Given this situation, it seems problematic, indeed, even arguable, to have recourse today to the concept of *Weltliteratur* that has apparently forged an Western tradition of the literary view of the world, more or less systematically excluding the cultural other.

Nevertheless, the questions must be posed in order to know if the concept of *Weltliteratur* as it was formulated by Goethe really implies an Western cultural immanence and the exclusion of the other from the domain of universal literature.

In this work, therefore, we are interested in presenting Goethe’s reflections on otherness, that he developed essentially in the context of his theory of universal literature (*Weltliteratur*). This is all the more important since Goethe’s views on the question of the other throws light on his conception of universal literature. Consequently, the present work seeks to attain a double objective: to furnish the reader with a new analysis of Goethe’s conception of *Weltliteratur* and try at the same time to bring out his conception of otherness. Given that in Goethe these two levels of thought are mutually determined, our method of approach will in a way be a “double reading” that will attempt to consider universal literature through otherness and develop Goethe’s thoughts on otherness beginning with universal literature.

I. THE OTHER IN THE EXTENDED NOTION OF *WELTLITERATUR*

Considering the large number of representatives of the selective Occidental approach to universal literature, it is surprising to see that to my knowledge no passage of Goethe’s exists in which he

openly or implicitly expresses the idea of a universal literature composed of masterpieces chosen among the “elect” writers of the Occident.

Nevertheless, although it is not possible to show a selective-European point of view on Goethe’s part, he does speak clearly of selection in a thematic context relative to universal literature. On the subject of *German Romance* by the English author Thomas Carlyle, he wrote:

“It is obvious that the efforts of the best esthetic poets and writers of all countries have for long been directed toward the universally human.”³

In this sentence Goethe precisely states his selective point of view by emphasizing that it is a question of poets and writers of *all countries*. By that he means the best poets and writers of “each of them.”⁴ And even his mention of the *universally human*, of the “general” as the principal subject the best poets should treat, is equally relativized in the explanations he gives for *Weltliteratur*. For it is the *particular (das Besondere)* that is really essential for the poets of all countries:

“It is in each particular, whether it be more or less arbitrarily conceived in a historical, mythological or fabulist way, that we see the universal appear and radiate more and more through all nationalities and individualities.”⁵

Thus it is only in the receptive realization of the readers, or rather the reader, whose aim is to reach the universal, that it is concretized. On the basis of these quotations we cannot show any *regional* selection such as is presented in manifestly Eurocentric anthologies.

All this indicates that Goethe developed an *extended* idea of *Weltliteratur*, that according to him this idea must be applied to all countries. We have the impression that Goethe foresaw the dangers that could arise from the erroneous interpretation of his

³ Goethe, *Hamburger Ausgabe* (HA), XII, p. 352.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

concept of *Weltliteratur*. This is why he never ceases to emphasize the extensive nature of his point of view. Goethe was “convinced that a universal literature was being formed and that all countries are disposed to it and that they would consequently take favorable steps.”⁶ To his mind, “we will see that poetry belongs to all humanity and that it is active everywhere and in every individual.”⁷

Each time Goethe spoke of universal literature, he insisted on its extensive nature. In his introduction to the book of Thomas Carlyle on *The Life of Schiller* he makes the following observation:

“All countries [...] must have noticed that they have perceived a number of things that were foreign to them and that they have adopted. They have also felt needs here and there that were formerly unknown.”⁸

The extensive conception of *Weltliteratur* is shown just as clearly in Goethe’s lines on the occasion of the “*Colloque Scientifique de Berlin*” in which he speaks of having “dared proclaim a universal European literature, indeed a general universal literature (*allgemeine Weltliteratur*).”⁹

Here the term “general” does not refer to just any abstraction or exaltation nor to what could be considered as being the universally human, such as the “eternal” subjects of human existence—life, death, peace, war, love, hate. It refers to the totality of the nations of the universe. In the passage quoted above, Goethe makes a clear distinction between *European* universal literature and *general* universal literature, to which he attributes the quality of an extensive proposition in even the geographic sense of the word.

By conceiving *Weltliteratur* from an extensive point of view Goethe does not fall into the trap of the postulate of the leveling of cultures. He does not appeal to an aspiration toward cultures becoming identical on the basis of an evolutionist philosophy of history. On the contrary, going further in his thoughts on a general

⁶ Letter to Streckfuss, January 27, 1827, *ibid.* p. 362.

⁷ Letter to Iken, February 23, 1826, *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, 33, 1971.

⁸ HA, XII, p. 364.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

universal literature and a universal development of humanity, he never loses sight of the importance of the particularity of nations and peoples. In this way he integrates the categories of otherness and difference into his conception of universal literature. This idea, which takes the cultural other into consideration, later became one of the foundations of his notion of universal literature. In his review *On Art and Antiquity* Goethe wrote in this regard:

“Thus we repeat that there could be no question of leading nations to think like each other.”¹⁰

In these words, Goethe reveals his conception of universal literature as a conception that is not confined within a blind Eurocentrism. On the contrary, it takes otherness into account and, consequently, the particularity and identity of peoples. He had a presentiment of the danger that an assimilation of cultures could present whose material conditions he had especially seen in the “greater and greater speed in communication.”¹¹ He saw that historical and cultural development contributed not only to bringing people closer together but that it could also engender resistance on the part of countries who found their identity threatened:

“Nations would reciprocally know their respective conditions and what would happen is that each of them would find in the other agreeable things as well as repugnant things, things worthy of being imitated and things to avoid.”¹²

It is only on the basis of the principle of otherness, that is, difference, particularity and the legitimate identity of the other, that a rapprochement is possible. Speaking of the “poetry of all nations” Goethe expresses the idea, “We must learn to recognize the *particularity of each of them* and leave them as they are, which allows us to communicate with that poetry.”¹³ According to Goethe, it is also very important to hold to the principle of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Goethe-Jahrbuch, op. cit.*, p. XVI.

¹² HA, XII, p. 364.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

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reciprocity so as to forestall the dangers of assimilation. It is in this sense that he proclaimed the need for “mutual mediation and appreciation.”¹⁴

Once the particularity of the other is known and recognized as such, once we find the universal in it—the “general” in which the “particular” also participates—the conception of Goethian otherness opens up a perspective that is to find the “proper” in the particularity of the other, as particularity.

It is obvious that Goethe does not see great problems in the case in which an affinity between “one’s own” and the other exists, since “a firm and rapid confidence comes from convictions that are familiar to us and correspond to ours.”¹⁵ But true tolerance is only tested when confronted with a radical otherness:

“When we are dealing with [...] persons who think quite differently from us we are led to be more cautious on the one hand but more indulgent and tolerant on the other.”¹⁶

If we concede that knowing and recognizing the other represents the key to a comprehension of *Weltliteratur* and that Goethe’s thought takes into account his fear of assimilation, or rather disappearance, of the other during the development of universal literature, which would be nothing less than ethnocide, we must also not forget that Goethe was thinking of “non-Western” literature when he spoke of universal literature.

Literary criticism and comparative literature have often neglected to point out that Goethe first developed his concept of *Weltliteratur* in a conversation he had with Eckermann on literary production in Asia. This important detail has almost always been overlooked when quoting Goethe’s famous words to Eckermann on January 31, 1827:

“National literature (*Nationalliteratur*) does not mean much today: an epoch of *universal literature* is coming and each of us must try to hasten the advent of this epoch.”¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

¹⁵ *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, *op. cit.* p. XVI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Eckermann, *op. cit.*, p. 158 (Goethe’s underlining.) For the original quotations see Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe*, Munich, dtv, 1976, p. 229.

These words cannot be judged in all their import if they are taken out of the context in which they were pronounced. Here is Eckermann's account of this memorable universal literary day:

“At table at Goethe's house. ‘During the days in which I have not seen you,’ he said, ‘I have read many kinds of books, especially a Chinese novel that I am still reading and which seems worth reading.’”¹⁸

At first, Eckermann was astonished by Goethe's preoccupation and admiration for Chinese literature. Later, he sought to minimize its importance by seeming not to know well the literary situation in China. He then wondered if this Chinese novel was not an exception:

“But,” I said, “perhaps this Chinese novel is one of the more exceptional?” “Not at all,” said Goethe. “The Chinese have thousands like it and they even had them when our ancestors were still living in the woods.” He continued, “I see more and more that poetry is a patrimony common to humanity and that everywhere and at all times it has been manifested in hundreds and hundreds of individuals.”¹⁹

It is significant that just after these words on the “Oriental other” Goethe introduced his first proposals on universal literature:

“One has a little more success than another and survives a little longer than another, that is all. Consequently, M. von Matthisson must not imagine that he will be exactly that one, and I also must not think that it will be me, but each must tell himself that the poetic gift is not so rare and that there is no reason to be overproud for having written good poetry. But if we Germans do not look beyond our immediate surroundings, we will all too easily fall into that pedantic presumption. Also, I like to inform myself on foreign countries, and I advise everyone to do the same. National literature does not mean much today...”²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156 *et seq.* (*Gespräche*, p. 227).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158 (*Gespräche*, p. 228).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, (*Gespräche*, p. 228 *et seq.*)

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For Goethe universal literature is not just a catchword or the object of theoretical or methodical reflection, but a reality. He is one of the rare writers to have considered foreign literature as an integral part of his poetic creation. His horizon of literary reception extended even to the Far East, after he had covered the known and accessible literary spheres of his time.²¹

With the extensive idea of the notion of *Weltliteratur* and the importance that had been given to the cultural other, we have not exhausted all the dimensions of this Goethian conception of universal literature nor those of otherness and communication between the *one* and the *other*. The different parties found on the universal literary scene must be put into relationship with each other. They must become aware of their mutual existence, they must know each other and understand each other. The role that in this context falls to the poet is honorable: he mediates, he translates, he serves as intermediary.

II. THE OTHER IN THE COMMUNICATIVE NOTION OF *WELTLITERATUR*

Dialog seems to me the only category to express the *communicative* notion of *Weltliteratur*. For Goethe, knowledge and recognition of the other was not an end in itself but a condition for a dialog with him, a condition linked—must we be reminded of this?—to a profound sensitivity to its particularities “because the particularities of a nation are like its language and its currency, they facilitate *communication* and even more, it is only due to them that this becomes *completely possible*.”²²

Dialog in its turn serves to introduce us to the spirit of “a true general tolerance (*eine wahrhaft allgemeine Duldung*).”²³ It is Goethe himself who proves his tolerance in the words that follow this quotation by directly referring to the Holy Book of Islam:

“The Koran says, ‘God gave each people a prophet speaking in its own tongue’”²⁴

²¹ See Fritz Strich, *Goethe und die Weltliteratur*, Berne, Francke, 1946; Hans Reiss, *Goethe und die Tradition*, Frankfurt, Athenäum, 1972.

²² HA, XII, p. 352 *et seq.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The communicative idea of universal literature comes from Goethe's conviction that decisive developments are in course on the level of international communication. For Goethe, it was important to note that "the mind gradually feels the need to also participate in more or less free cultural exchanges."²⁵ This is what led him to conceive universal literature from a communicative, indeed even functional, point of view. In this context it is not at all surprising to see Goethe end his conversation with Eckermann on July 15, 1827, by emphasizing the "*great advantage* that comes from a universal literature and one that will be more and more seen."²⁶ This advantage consists essentially in that "we are in a position to correct each other."²⁷

Moreover, Goethe noted that fundamental economic and social transformations were occurring. He saw that these phenomena were linked to "industrial and commercial activity gaining more and more ground."²⁸ He also remarked changes in the book market which had a great influence on the elaboration of the communicative function of universal literature:

"Given the rapid and efficient work that booksellers are making at the moment, one can get each work very quickly instead of waiting, as has often happened to me, for the author to make such a gift when the occasion arises for him, while I have already read the book long before I received it from him."²⁹

These structural changes mentioned by Goethe certainly had social consequences. They created a distance between the writer and the reader and between the writers themselves, a distance that was all the more dangerous since it showed a gap between the person of the poet and his literary work. The personal motif that played a part on the occasion of sending or presenting a work to an author or reader friend and the correspondence or dialog that could follow, all those elements that usually give the work its identity were threatened with disappearance. The author was

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²⁶ Eckermann, *op. cit.*, p. 182 (*Gespräche*, p. 262).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, *op. cit.* p. XVI.

²⁹ Goethe, *Berliner Ausgabe*, Vol. 18, p. 427 *et seq.*

depersonalizing his book. Consequently, the real and so to speak direct exchange between the writers and the concerting of their activities were put into question.

That is undoubtedly one of the reasons that spurred Goethe on to proclaim a general universal literature and to incite “men of letters full of life and aspiration” to “know each other and feel obliged through their inclination and civic sense to *act socially*.”³⁰

Finally, there is another reason, not without importance, that has determined the communicative function of universal literature: paradoxically, it is universal literature itself or, more precisely, its uncoordinated and unrestrained development. Goethe wrote in this regard to Zelter on May 21, 1828:

“Besides, I point out to you that the universal literature I have invoked breaks in a foaming wave over me as water did over the sorcerer’s apprentice, to the point of drowning me.”³¹

And on March 4, 1829 he shares with Zelter his fears concerning “the consequences of universal literature on the move.”³²

What is evident here is that Goethe once again perceived not only the fortunate but all the dangers of the rapid development of *Weltliteratur*. What really disturbed him was the sudden transposition of the literary production of a culture, which had its origins in determined social and historical conditions, into a different culture, without any preliminary critical examination. This transposition is made in such a way that the other is taken by surprise. This is why Goethe reflected on the problem of the *mediatization of otherness*. He does not claim a mediatization as mediatization but a critical analysis of the object to be mediatized from the point of view of its meaning and its social consequences. The particularity of the other as receiver is to be taken into consideration when it is a matter of “transmitting” literature, so that the dialog may become possible. In the letter to Zelter quoted above Goethe adds:

³⁰ HA, XII, p. 363.

³¹ HA, *Briefe* 4, p. 277.

³² HA, XII, p. 363.

“The excesses to which the theaters of Paris, that great and vast city, are subjected also damage us who are still far from feeling this need.”³³

Given the communicative dimension of the concept of *Weltliteratur* it is not at all surprising to see Goethe grant a choice place to the questions and problems of translation in universal literature. In his introduction to *German Romance*, in which he presents some important aspects of *Weltliteratur*, Goethe also turns toward the particular as well as important role of the translator and considers it as “one of the most important and noble activities in general universal communication.”³⁴

The evaluation of universal literature from the point of view of otherness and the development of the question of the other beginning with the example of universal literature would be incomplete if we did not take into account the theoretical reflections of Goethe on the question of the “appropriation” of the other, that he developed in the context of his “theory” of translation. It is significant that Goethe expressed his thoughts on the theory of translation in the *Divan*, in which he sets forth his relationship with *that other*, the Orient, that played such an eminent role in the history of the West.³⁵

Goethe distinguished three modes (*Arten*) of translation:

- 1) simple-prosaic (*schlicht-prosaisch*)
- 2) parodistic (*parodistisch*)
- 3) identifying (*identifizierend*)

Each of these modes corresponds to a particular relationship with otherness:

“The first acquaints us with the foreign in the meaning proper to us.”³⁶

This way of translating is called simple-prosaic because it transposes the original text into our own view of the world and our

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

³⁵ See S.H. Abdel-Rahim, *Goethe und der Islam*, Augsburg, Werner Blasaditsch, 1969; H. Djait, *L'Europe et l'Islam*, Paris, Seuil, 1978; K. Mommsen, *Goethe und 1001 Nacht*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1981; M. Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam*, Paris, Maspéro, 1980; E. Said, *L'Orientalisme*, Paris, Seuil 1980.

³⁶ Goethe, *Divan*, *op. cit.*, p. 430 (HA, II, p. 255).

way of thinking, while renouncing the poetic nuances of the original and it also “surprises us in the middle of our national domesticity, our common private existence by showing us the eminent merits of the foreign.”³⁷

The second mode of translation is that “in which one strives, it is true, to put oneself into the situation of the foreign but in which, actually, one only seeks to appropriate the foreign meaning by again presenting it according to one’s own meaning.”³⁸ Goethe attributes this way of translating to people endowed with a great deal of spirit and thinks especially of the French, in particular of Delilles. “The French,” he says, “use this mode in translating all poetic works... Just as he adopts into his speech foreign words the Frenchman adopts sentiments, thoughts and even objects. He demands at any price that all foreign fruit have an equivalent growing in his own territory.”³⁹

The third mode of translation, “which must be called the last and supreme”⁴⁰ is naturally the one Goethe preferred to the two others. It is the mode “in which one would like to render the translation identical to the original, so that the *one* should not be valid instead of the *other* but actually in the place of the other.”⁴¹

It is the relationship of the *one* with the *other* that is decisive for appreciating and judging a translation. Goethe does not favor the first two modes because the end result is the loss of the *other* in the *one*, although they take different roads.

The simple and prosaic rapport with otherness, of course, allows us to know the foreign, but it suppresses the essential characteristics of the other so as to give a possible translation in the world view of the *one* and in his way of thinking. The *other* completely disappears. It is absorbed by the *one*.

The parodistic rapport with otherness is different from the first in that the essential traits of the other are taken into consideration

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 431, (HA, II, p. 255).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, (HA, II, p. 255).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, (HA, II, p. 255) On the subject of the relations of Goethe with France, see *Goethe et l'esprit français*, Acta of *Colloque international de Strasbourg*, 23-27, April 1957; Hippolyte L'oiseau, *Goethe et la France*, Paris/Neuchâtel, Victor Attinger, 1930.

⁴⁰ Goethe, *Divan*, *op. cit.*, p. 431 (HA, II, 256).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, (HA, II, p. 256).

but only to the degree in which a substitute can replace them. However, we can no longer recognize them as *other*, because they disappear within the conceptual apparatus of the *one*. In the parodistic relationship the other is almost always present, it is true. But it is no longer perceptible as the other because it is more or less well “contained”, not to say “embellished” in the form of the one. Speaking of a parodistic mediator, Wieland, a great German writer of the Enlightenment, Goethe wrote that he “did not approach Antiquity and the foreign except to the degree in which he found it suited him.”⁴² The parodistic approach to the other thus finds its limits when it is a matter of identifying the other in its otherness. In the “classic” French theater, for example, the other was not only “Frenchified”: his characteristic traits were rejected when they could not be integrated into the normative framework of decorum.

In view of Goethe’s clear position in favor of particularity it is not surprising to see him draw away from the ways in which the particularity of the other is neither considered nor taken seriously. This is why he was more interested in the identifying rapport with otherness that, different from the significance that could perhaps be suggested by the term “identifying”, does not confuse the *other* with the *one*. It is an approach that does not lead the other toward the one but the one toward the other. The other is not translated into the imagination and thought of the one. Just the opposite takes place. It is the one who is carried toward the other up to identification.

Goethe is completely aware of the difficulties arising from this method:

“In the beginning this mode met with the greatest resistance, because the translator who keeps resolutely to the original more or less gives up the originality of his own country.”⁴³

The identifying access to the other does not mean that the *one* must be put on the same level as the *other*. This method is called identifying because the other continues to exist as the other.

⁴² *Ibid.*, (HA, II, p. 256).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 431 *et seq.* (HA, II, p. 256).

Besides, the problems resulting from the identifying approach to the other are not only those of the author but also and especially those of the reader, since something is created “for which the taste of the masses must be first formed.”⁴⁴ Consequently, the identifying rapport with otherness requires as a previous condition of its realization the *emancipation of man from his own originality for which he is himself responsible*, to paraphrase the famous words of Kant on the definition of *Aufklärung*⁴⁵.

Naturally, it is not a question of man completely renouncing his originality, since that would question the postulate of particularity, which is the foundation of all relationships of the *one* with the *other*. Once the importance of the art of translating in the Goethian conception of universal literature and its role for comprehending the human and intercultural rapports are evaluated, the notion of *Weltliteratur* acquires a new dimension, that of a *hermeneutic category*. The hermeneutic is of course in origin not only the art of comprehending and/or explaining but also and especially the *art of translating*: in Greek mythology Hermes was the messenger who played the role of intermediary between gods and men.

It must be said that in Goethian thought it is not a matter of one of the classic questions of hermeneutics that is the recognition of what is already known, as in the simple and prosaic relationship with otherness, nor is it not to approach the other except to the degree in which suitability and propriety permit it. It is rather to rid oneself of the elements that make up one's own identity so as to be able first of all to identify the other as the other. For such a *hermeneutic process* no other notion seems to me more adequate than that of *estrangement (Verfremdung)*.

The notion of estrangement is not intended here as a notion of psychology or perception such as the process of singularity (*ostranenie*) of the Russian formalists⁴⁶ nor as the notion of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 432 (HA, II, p. 256).

⁴⁵ In his treatise entitled *Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce l' "Aufklärung"?* Kant writes, “It is the emancipation of man from his own minority, for which he is himself responsible.” See Kant, *Werke*, Wilhelm Weischede, ed., Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Vol. 9, p. 53, 1975 (Kant's underlining).

⁴⁶ See *Théorie de la littérature. Textes des formalistes russes*, Tzvetan Todorov, ed., Paris, Seuil, 1965.

historical and social criticism such as the *Verfremdung* of Brecht⁴⁷ but essentially as a notion of otherness.⁴⁸ The understanding of the other assumes as a sine qua non condition the fact of becoming a foreigner *and* foreign to oneself.

The hermeneutic nature of the notion of universal literature is shown not only in the art of translating but also in the effort of reflection made by Goethe, so as to discover the conditions that lead to the comprehension of the other. Estrangement, on which Goethe reflected, does not come only from the adaptation of foreign themes but also from form, since it is a matter of transcending the laws, constructions, metaphors, rhythmic sounds and rhetorical figures of one's own language and appropriating those of the foreign language. Thus Goethe praises the way in which von Hammer translated "the masterpieces of the Orient concerning which, he says, the faithful imitation of the exterior form must be particularly recommended. What an immense superiority is shown in the passages from Ferdousi translated by our friend over those of an arranger whose productions may be read in *Fundgruben*."⁴⁹

According to Goethe it is not only the laws of the language that are determinant. When a poem is translated into German, for example, there should be no question of using the second mode that "flatters the ears and senses of the North-east through iambic pentameter"⁵⁰ but to thwart their esthetic expectations. It is a way of building up a process of learning and knowledge in the reader with the help of the identifying mediatization of otherness. It is not comprehension but incomprehension, it is not affinity but estrangement that are found at the source of the emancipation of one's own originality. Speaking of the identifying essays of the German Voss, Goethe wrote:

"Voss, whose merit can never be over-estimated, was not at first able to satisfy the public; its ear had to become gradually

⁴⁷ See Bernard Dort, *Lectures de Brecht*, Paris, Seuil, 1950; Reinhold Grimm, "Verfremdung: Beiträge zu Ursprung und Wesen eines Begriffs." *Rev. Litt. Comp.*, 35, 1961, pp. 207-236.

⁴⁸ See Fawzi Boubia, "Die Verfremdung der Verfremdung," *Informationen. Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, 4, 1986.

⁴⁹ Goethe, *Divan*, *op. cit.*, p. 432 (HA, II, p. 256).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* (HA, II, p. 257).

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accustomed to the new style. But the one who today immediately grasps what has been done; to what degree of versatility the Germans have arrived; what rhetorical, rhythmic and metric advantages are offered to a young man of talent; how Ariosto and Tasso, Shakespeare and Calderon are presented to us today in two or three different forms as “Germanicized” foreigners, has a right to hope that literary history will proclaim the name of the one who, amid all sorts of obstacles, was the first to take this road.”⁵¹

The poet or the translator thus becomes an “artist of estrangement” who makes the painful exit from his own originality and the no less painful entrance into the originality of the other. On the subject of the Indian poem *Sakountala*, translated into German in the second mode, the parodistic, Goethe cherished hope that he expressed in this way:

“Now it is time to give it a translation in the third mode that would correspond to the various dialects, rhythmic, metric and prosaic styles of the original and allow us to taste and savor this poem again in all its particularity (*Eigentümlichkeit*).”⁵²

These words, drawn from the *Divan*, show, in addition to their close ties with the Goethian conception of otherness, translation and universal literature, the poetic moments that are the basis of the *Divan*. The fact that Arabic Germanists, reading the *Divan*, had the illusion of reading poems in Arabic could perhaps give an idea of the ability of Goethe to adapt himself to the other.

We have already seen that Goethe insisted on the need for dialog between the *one* and the *other*, especially in an intercultural context. Goethe thus put great hope in *Weltliteratur* as a social action: what he particularly wanted to fight were prejudices against the other. In this sense, Goethe brought up the intercultural importance of Madame de Staël’s book, *De l’Allemagne*:

“This work on Germany... must be considered as a powerful weapon that has opened a breach in that Wall of China built of old prejudices that separates us from France.”⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (HA, II, p. 256).

⁵² *Ibid.* (HA, II, p. 257).

⁵³ Goethe, *Tag- und Jahreshefte*, HA, X, p. 266.

The exposition I have just given of the *communicative* notion of *Weltliteratur* in the context of Goethe's observations on the radical transformations of social and literary conditions; his conviction that the era of *Weltliteratur* was only beginning; the fact that he proclaimed a general universal literature; and the solemn appeal he addressed to men of letters to activate its development—all these elements lead to the conclusion that universal literature is a project, a procedure of the future. Then the question arises to know if universal literature does not also have a bearing on the poetic creation of the past and if the dimension of otherness does not have a part in the relationship that Goethe maintains with literary tradition.

III. THE OTHER IN THE HISTORICAL IDEA OF *WELTLITERATUR*

It is important to see now if Goethe had not come to discover the value and intercultural significance of *Weltliteratur* only toward the end of his life or if he had not dealt with it for a long time and only developed the concept in his late works, that is, in the 1820s. It is also a question of knowing if Goethe attributed only the status of a regulative intercultural idea to *Weltliteratur*; if he formulated it as only a postulate; or if he saw in it a historical reality of long date. This question is taken up in the lines he wrote on the occasion of the *Colloque scientifique de Berlin*.

We are already familiar with this text.⁵⁴ In it we find the three essential dimensions of the concept of *Weltliteratur*:

- the extensive dimension (universal literature in general)
- the communicative dimension (nations learn about each other and writers must work together to act socially)
- the historical dimension (“universal literature has existed for a long time”)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Here is this essential text in its entirety: “If we have dared to proclaim a universal European literature, indeed, a general universal literature, it does not mean that the different nations must be acquainted with each other and their respective productions since, in this sense, universal literature has already existed for a long time, continues to exist and more or less renew itself. No! It is rather a question that men of letters full of life and aspiration become acquainted with each other and feel obligated through their leanings and their civic sense to act socially.” HA, XII, p. 363.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

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A rapid reading of Goethe's texts on *Weltliteratur* shows us that these three dimensions cannot be separated and that they form a homogeneous whole. For example, in the historical dimension we find the communicative dimension since, according to Goethe, different countries have always been aware of their respective literary works. The communicative dimension, in its turn, has a historical point of view to the degree that each literary epoch turns to universal literature with new demands. In Goethe's time it was above all the social dialog of writers. Finally, the extensive dimension is the condition of an intercultural communication on a universal scale.

We have already studied extensive and communicative dimensions of *Weltliteratur*. What remains is the historical side of universal literature, whose durability, development and renewal are attested to by Goethe. In this historical dimension it is also a question of analyzing the problem of otherness, since Goethe considered communication between different countries and cultures as an important characteristic of literary tradition. If the poetic creation of Goethe served, as we alluded to above, as mediator between German literature and foreign literature in the sense of this historical conception of universal literature, then there is no doubt that many themes and forms which have been the object of a literary work do not have their origin solely in the tradition of the *one* but also in the tradition of the *other*. Consequently, we must not consider tradition only in the perspective of the interaction between the past and the present; it must also be seen from the point of view of reciprocal conditioning between the one's identity and otherness. It is the rapport with tradition that requires a strong faculty of detachment from the poet and the critic. If recourse to tradition is to prove worthwhile, a double detachment is absolutely necessary: first, one with regard to tradition that would take into account the requirements of the present; and second, a detachment that would take into account the imperatives of otherness. To consider the *one's* tradition from a point of view that does not discard the possibility that it could seem foreign in present and future contexts is the condition for discovering *otherness* in its own cultural heritage.

We well know that Goethe had a critical position toward

tradition. His genius kept him from a blind belief in its infallibility, and we remember his famous words on this subject:

“The one who is concerned only with the past will finally run the risk of clasping to his heart what has given up the ghost, what is as dried out as a mummy for us. But it is this attachment to what has disappeared that engenders a revolutionary change in which the advances of the new cannot be driven back, cannot be mastered, so that it is detached from everything, it does not want to recognize the qualities of the past, it no longer wants to use its advantages.”⁵⁶

Although Goethe had always insisted on imitating the ancients, he stressed that it was above all a matter of following their example:

“We speak of the study of the ancients. But what does that mean except to turn ourselves toward the real world and try to express it? This is what the ancients did while they lived.”⁵⁷

These thoughts that in their historical context were “revolutionary” in that they were opposed to the romantic tendencies that were turned toward the Middle Ages⁵⁸ have lost nothing of their actuality, but they still had no significance for the problem of otherness. However, this declaration was no longer valid for the new idea concerning the relationship with all tradition that Goethe expressed in his criticism of Friedrich J. Niethammer, a philosopher who had become a high official in the Ministry of the Interior in Bavaria. Under the direction of the Bavarian government, Niethammer had the intention to make a German collection of popular legends: he had first to try to win Goethe’s support for the project, and he sent him his plan, which was strictly nationalistic. Goethe’s reaction was not long in coming. He answered Niethammer by stressing the following thesis:

⁵⁶ Goethe, *Über Kunst und Altertum*, II, 2 (1820). Cf. Reiss, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Eckermann, *op. cit.*, January 29, 1826, p. 158 (*Gespräche*, p. 172).

⁵⁸ On the subject of Goethe and romanticism see Helmut Brackert, “Die ‘Bildungsstufe der Nation’ und der Begriff der Weltliteratur: Ein Beispiel Goethescher Mittelalterrezeption,” in Reiss, *op. cit.* pp. 84-101; Hans Joachim Schrimpf, “Goethes Begriff der Weltliteratur” in *Nationalismus in Germanistik und Dichtung*, Benno von Wiese/Rudolf Henss, eds., Berlin, Erich Schmidt, 1967, pp. 20-217.

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"What has been appropriate (*das Angeeignete*) must be kept in mind along with one's own essence (*das rein Eigene*), whether the former became ours through translation or otherwise."⁵⁹

Goethe found it false as well as dangerous to make the separation between *one's own* and the appropriated with the intention to renounce the second. He found it false, because in that way the multiplicity of tradition was put into question; he found it dangerous because in that way the myth of an identity that was "homogeneous", "pure", "specific" and "free" from all foreign influence was invoked. Such a position was not at all favorable to the intercultural dialog. In his reply to Niethammer Goethe added:

"Of course, the merits of foreign countries must be shown because the collection is also intended for children whose attention must now be drawn toward the merits of foreign countries."⁶⁰

According to Goethe, it was necessary to lead people as early as possible to know and recognize the foreign, the other, in his own specificity. Consequently, it would be easy when one proposed to clarify historically his own tradition to find the other who had already dealt with cultural appropriation. It is thus that Goethe developed that dialectic relationship between self-knowledge and knowledge of the other that so well characterizes his thought. Just as the present moment keeps the poet from falling into a museum or mummifying mentality, so the moment of otherness protects him from a belief as blind as it is deceiving in its "specificity", its "purity" or "exclusiveness".

In this context the idea of otherness in identity acquires a double meaning: it is first a matter of the elements of the *one's* specific traits that have become foreign to him, and it is also a matter of the elements of a different tradition that have entered those traits. Even the idea of self-identity in otherness acquires a double meaning: it involves primarily the elements of the other that have their origins in the *one* and second, the elements of the other that may be appropriated by the *one*. What is apparently not taken into

⁵⁹ HA, XII, p. 286.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

consideration in this scheme—the other, who remains foreign to the one, that is, the particularities that give the other its original and distinctive character—is not abandoned. We have seen that Goethe gives it great attention. That is why he is and remains the cornerstone without which the approach to otherness cannot be built on solid foundations.

After that, we have a better understanding of the difference that separated Goethe from many romantic writers. He reproached them for not using the other as an end but only as a means. On the occasion of the publication of Friedrich Schlegel's *Language and Wisdom of the Indians* Goethe wrote to Reinhard that in the book "the totality of the objects that he (Schlegel) treats is only really used as a means to bring to the public, little by little, certain convictions and present himself with a certain honorable air like the apostle of an old doctrine."⁶¹ In Goethe's opinion, it was a way for Schlegel to "reject with the help of curtains and shutters all possible light from the parish house and create a very somber space so as, afterward, to let in through the small aperture only the necessary light for abracadabra."⁶²

At the moment the other is obscured instead of illuminated, when recourse to the other does not serve the *Aufklärung*, but plays, the game of irrationalism, Goethe sees his idea of a universal literature compromised. He also sees it compromised by the resorting to the old German traditions of the Middle Ages, in which the great romantic currents believed they had been "freed" from Romance influences.

Goethe defended the thesis of the multiple character of tradition, which conflicted with the orientations of romanticism. The difference between their points of view stands out clearly if we consider their position on the subject of the dispute over the *Nibelungen*. While the great tendencies of romanticism sought to reduce the epic of the *Nibelungen* to a purely Germanic or Christian origin, Goethe maintained that in the *Nibelungen* "the fable is in its principal themes completely Nordic and completely

⁶¹ Letter to Reinhard, June 22, 1808, HA *briefe* 4, p. 77.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

pagan, while the development is German, although the usages are already Christian.”⁶³

This dispute with romanticism should not make us believe that Goethe was hostile to the Middle Ages. To prove the contrary, it suffices to point out the place reserved to them in some of his works, such as *Goetz von Berlichingen* or *German Architecture*, in which he was enthusiastic about this period. However, it was the tendencies of nationalist appropriation of the Middle Ages by the romantic movement that Goethe fought energetically. Poetic creation according to him has its origin in a multitude of acquisitions so varied and made up of elements of one and the other, past and present, that it would be vain to try to reduce it to one sole “source,” even if one thought it was the “proper” source.

Another conception of Goethe is interesting in this regard: *the collective being*. In a conversation with Eckermann on February 17, 1832, that is, just before his death, Goethe developed this idea of the collective being. It is so important for the understanding of his sense of otherness that I quote it here at length:

“In the main, we are all collective beings (*kollektive Wesen*)... How little it is in fact and how little for us that in the exact meaning of the term we can consider as our property. We must all receive and learn as much from those who have preceded us as from our contemporaries. The greatest genius would not go far if he depended only on his own means. However, many good men do not want to understand this and spend half their lives groping in the dark with their dreams of originality. I have known artists who boasted of having never followed a teacher and of owing everything to their own genius. The fools! As if that were possible! And as though at each step the world was not imposed on them and in spite of their own foolishness conferred some value on them!... In all modesty, I may speak of myself and say what I think. It is true that during my long existence I have done and carried out more than one thing of which I can boast. But if we want to be honest, what did I really have that was my own, if not the ability and the desire to see, to hear, to discern and to choose, and to animate with a little spirit what I had seen and heard in order to reproduce it later with a certain talent? It is not to my own

⁶³ *Briefe* to Eichstädt, October 31, 1807, HA, *Briefe* 3, p. 58.

wisdom that I owe my work but to thousands of things and persons outside of me who furnished the materials... And I had thus nothing more to do than collect and harvest what others had sowed for me. It is foolish to ask if someone has what he possesses from himself or from others, if he acts through his own means or those of others. *The essential is that one is endowed with a strong desire and that one is clever and persevering enough to carry out what one has seen.* All the rest is of little importance. ”⁶⁴

These words of the writer, whether they seem somewhat exaggerated in their modesty or are interpreted as an inspired idea of the aging poet can only be grasped from the point of view of their important and complex significance in the context of the Goethian notion of universal literature and otherness. In this conceptual framework, they acquire the value of a definitive and unequivocal plea in favor of the other.

IV. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE GOETHIAN NOTION OF OTHERNESS

Our “crisscross reading” of *Weltliteratur* seen in the context of the question of otherness and, inversely, the problem of otherness through universal literature has, I hope, allowed us to develop the two notions following a systematic *enchainement* of *Weltliteratur*. It seems necessary now to conclude this study by a succinct reconstruction of the Goethian notion of otherness.

We may divide Goethe’s thought on the questions and problems of otherness into three points:

- 1) Conditions
- 2) Methods of approach and mediatization
- 3) Goals

1) The knowledge and recognition of cultural otherness, the approach to the other and the dialog with him depend on several conditions. First of all, it is a matter of the conviction that all men are in principle equal, and their literary and artistic creations have value. For Goethe, it is also a matter of the principle “there are, after all, so few countries... that can claim to have an absolute

⁶⁴ Eckermann, *op. cit.* p. 536 *et seq.* (*Gespräche*, p. 767).

originality.”⁶⁵ Finally, it is a matter of the disposition and ability to question oneself and have a critical attitude toward one’s own identity and one’s own tradition. As the critical distance grows, more vast becomes the field of otherness that opens to our knowledge. Goethe exposed all the details of this position in his conception of the collective being. The dialog with the other has as preliminary condition the emancipation of one’s own originality, recognition of the particularity of the other, as well as the safe-guarding of the principle of reciprocity.

2) The method of approach, mediatization and translation of otherness thus depend on the above conditions. Goethe, who assigns a choice place to translation in his idea of universal literature and otherness distinguishes, as we have seen, three ways of approach, mediatization or interpretation of the other: the prosaic, the parodistic and the identifying. He prefers the third mode since in this case he considers it a matter of a crossing over not of the other toward the one but of the one toward the other, a procedure in which the particularity of the latter is jealously preserved. While taking into account the conditions of the receiver of the translation, the interpreter must aspire to approaching the other as closely as possible on the levels of form and substance.

3) Finally, Goethe assigns utmost importance to the goals. In his confrontation with the menacing irrationalist danger of some romantic currents, ageing Goethe found again the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Goethe pursued several goals. One of the first was the intercultural and social function of otherness. More than mutual cultural enrichment, otherness serves to exercise us in social attitudes, such as indulgence and tolerance for the other, in general and particularly toward the foreign. Intercultural solidarity must be accomplished by the direct dialog between writers of all nations, given the phenomena of social, literary and intercultural alienation. Recourse to the other allows Goethe to contribute not only to social education but also to the “esthetic” education of man. It is not what is flattering to the ear and the senses that can help man emancipate himself from his “esthetic” originality but

⁶⁵ HA, XII, p. 286.

that which is not what he is expecting. It is a question of an aspect found in close relation with the hermeneutic function of otherness that inaugurates a procedure of learning and knowledge, relative to the comprehension of the other, on the level of cultural immanence and on that of interculturality. The goal and end of this procedure is to be the emancipation of his own originality. Thus the circle is drawn that, beginning with originality, leads us again toward it.

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