

## **In the Eye of Apollo: World Literature from Goethe to Google<sup>1</sup>**

### *Take me to the Moon, or World Literature in the Space Age*

On December 21, 1968, the Saturn V rocket with crew members, Frank Borman, James A. Lovell and William A. Anders, on the first manned lunar orbit mission, designated “Apollo 8”, was launched from NASA’s John F. Kennedy Space Center. The mission objective was to gather data and prepare for later lunar landing missions that would, the following year, enable the first man, Neil Armstrong, to step on to the Moon and leap into the global imagination before the eyes of an estimated 500 million television viewers worldwide. It took Apollo 8 three days to reach the Moon and it would orbit ten times for twenty hours, while “the crew conducted navigation and photography investigation.”<sup>2</sup>

While the mission certainly provided important scientific and technical data for later missions, its more direct impact and legacy on a global scale would arise from the photographic documentation and the televised eye-witness report obtained by the crew using handheld 70mm Hasselblad and motion picture cameras. Seldom before, according to the mission statement, had photography “played as important a role in a specific spaceflight mission as on Apollo 8”. While the photographic investigations primarily involved scientific analysis of the Moon’s surface and the immediate surroundings of the spacecraft, the mission statement also designated an interest in “phenomena, features and other items of interest selected by the crew in real time”.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Manuscript for lecture given at the University College London Mellon Programme: Interdisciplinary Seminar 2007-2008, *Translations/Transpositions - Migration and non-Mother-tongue Writing*. Chaired by Dr. Federica Mazzara.

<sup>2</sup> [NASA, Apollo 8 Press Kit \(15. Dec. 1968\)](#), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 30.



**Figure 1.** The first photograph of Earthrise taken by a human as he watched the event unfold on December 24, 1968. NASA. Photograph is in the public domain.

The most famous photograph taken onboard the Apollo 8 featured such a secondary “item of interest”. While the mission, understandably, focused on the Moon, it was, as so often in photography, a chance sighting that led one of the crew members to capture a by now iconic snapshot of the Earth rising above the surface of the Moon: “Oh, my God!” He gasped, looking out of one of the module’s windows. “Look at that picture over there! Here’s the Earth coming up. Wow, is that pretty!” And another crew member jokingly replied: “Hey, don’t take that, it’s not scheduled” (*figure 1*).

The first photograph of the Earth as seen by a human from Moon orbit was captured in black and white – during a “window of opportunity”, and almost by chance. The following seconds onboard the Apollo 8, the crew is searching for colour film to capture the Earth rising above the Moon surface again, now more conscious of its icon value and the kind of photographic framing needed. The image was not sought-out and determined in the mission statement as anything but a secondary “item of interest”. In this case, the object was not of particular *scientific* interest, but instead, of an aesthetic sort (“Wow, is that pretty”). The first sighting, out of the window of the spacecraft, had already turned the view of Earth into a “picture”, an icon, before it was actually captured on film (“Look at that picture over there!”). The final result was the famous photograph later entitled “Earthrise”.



**Figure 2.** The iconic “Earthrise” photograph in colour taken from Apollo 8. NASA AS08-14-2383.

The eye-witness report of the Earth turning in space has had an enormous impact on the language and imagery of late-Modern globalisation; though world maps, at least since Ortelius’s Renaissance *Typus orbis Terrarum*, have depicted and imagined the Earth as a unitary, whole and solid body and provided reproductions of “the whole Earth” for centuries that have enabled humans to “communicate and share images of it” (Cosgrove ix).<sup>4</sup>

The profound impact of the Apollo 8 snapshot on not only American or Western but global imagination of the Earth, stems partly from its being captured by everyday technology and its origin in human sensory experience, in real-time: It was seen as such by a human being and represented as any other tourist sighting would have captured more earthbound exotic places.

#### *A Biblical and Geological Lesson*

On Christmas Eve 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 is preparing a live television broadcast to “the whole world,” as Borman expresses it. From the transcripts of the mission communication one gathers that the crew members only discuss what to say and show to the world from the Apollo in the minutes leading up to the famous transmission, but it seems that Borman, at least, had already had something prepared before the

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Denis Cosgrove’s book, *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), for the inspiration to not only the title of the present text, but also to this introduction’s perspectives on “global images” and the Apollonian viewpoint as a framework for the following discussion of the history and present interest in the concept of world literature as “world image.”

**Figure 3.** The crew of Apollo 8 were selected as the 1968 *Time* Men of the Year.

launch. Discussing the upcoming television broadcast on Christmas Eve, the members of the crew are well aware of its significance. Borman says: “Hey, wait. We’ve got to do it right because there will be more people listening to this than ever listened to any other single person in history”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in its time the broadcast was the most watched television programme ever. The Apollo 8 mission was a global media event: There were 1,200 journalists covering the mission, with the BBC coverage being broadcast in 54 countries in 15 different languages. It is estimated that a quarter of the people alive at the time saw the Christmas Eve transmission.

During the live transmission the crew shows footage of the surface of the Moon aiming the handheld camera to the module windows trying to replay, with the movie camera, the photographic shot made earlier of the Earth rising above the surface of the Moon. They describe the Moon’s features and geology. They also take turns describing their personal experiences of seeing the Moon at close range. Borman asks Jim Lovell what he has “thought most about?” “Well, Frank, my thoughts are very similar [to yours]. The vast loneliness up here of the Moon is awe inspiring, and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth. The Earth from here is a grand oasis in the big vastness of space”. And approaching lunar sunrise the crew takes turns reading their [Christmas greeting to the people back on Earth](#):<sup>6</sup>

William Anders: “We are now approaching lunar sunrise; and for all the people on Earth the crew of Apollo 8 has a message we would like to send to

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<sup>5</sup> Communication recorded in [http://history.nasa.gov/alsj/a410/A08\\_PressKit.pdf](http://history.nasa.gov/alsj/a410/A08_PressKit.pdf) (085:15:22).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (086:06:26): Borman (onboard): “Hey, why don’t we start reading that thing, and that would be a good place to end it. Lovell (onboard): “No, we’ve got to go into it very nicely. Why don’t we – as we go into sunset ...”

you. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.’”

Jim Lovell: “And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.”

Frank Borman: “‘And God said, let the waters under the heavens be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good.’ And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you – all of you on the good Earth.”<sup>7</sup>

After the transmission the crew members call for assurance that their transmission went through: “Loud and clear, Apollo 8. And thank you for a very good show,” the Mission Center assures them, “That’s both a biblical and a geological lesson that none of us will forget”.

In today’s global cultural landscape it is doubtful whether this broadcast would have had the same reception; first of all, no one would probably be mesmerised by the sheer mystery of a person speaking to everybody on the planet from space, so habituated are we to satellite television and other wireless earth-spanning communication technologies that we find it strange if we are not able to communicate live with just about anybody anyplace, on earth or beyond; secondly, state employees, such as astronauts, would probably be more careful about the reading material selected for bringing home the message that from space the lonely planet seems a small oasis and the people on it are “riders on the same planet” in a brotherhood of man. A religious text such as Genesis would be perceived, by Christians, Jews as well as other religious or non-religious people, as an attempt to frame an imperial endeavour and show-off technologic, political and economic capability, as the Apollo programme also did, within the framework of a religious discourse. Today’s planetary discourse does not react lightly, with good reason, to imperial ambitions spoken through the discourse of religion. There was protest and lawsuit brought against the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4.** The iconic full view of the Earth from Apollo 17 in 1972. NASA photo AS17-22727

NASA programme in America following the Genesis reading, against Government employees praying publicly in space. It was eventually rejected by the courts, but NASA was from then on cautious about the issues of religion – for instance it was not publicly mentioned that Buzz Aldrin, on Apollo 11, took communion on the surface of the Moon after landing.

Religious political correctness aside, the Apollo photographs and Christmas Eve broadcast made Earthrise into an icon located, as Cosgrove has it, “firmly within Western imaginative tradition and the Apollonian perspective”.<sup>8</sup> In a *New York Times* editorial the day following the broadcast, Archibald MacLeish wrote that:

to see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence in which it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers in that bright loveliness in the eternal cold – brothers who know now that they are truly brothers.<sup>9</sup>

This remaking of man’s self-image was echoed in the *Time*’s heralding of the Apollo 8 crew as “Men of the Year,” pictured against the Earthrise with the caption “Dawn” and the citation: “not merely for the dazzling technology of their achievement, but for the larger view of our planet and the fundamental unity of mankind”. A dazzling image indeed, considering the local and global events that made 1968 into anything but a year of hope and progress for a common humanity. It seemed that the whole world was spinning out of orbit, it was an electrifying and appalling year with the May 68 student riots in France and other places around the earth, the Vietnam war Tet

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<sup>8</sup> Cosgrove, p.259.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Cosgrove, pp.258-59.

offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, civil rights unrest in America, the cold war and the Prague Spring, Biafra, Rivers of blood speech, terror bombings in Germany, etc.

But from space differences on the planet seemed to disappear for a while – especially in the second iconic photograph of the Earth taken from the Apollo 17 in 1972 – the globe is an island on which we are all brothers, and have the same responsibilities towards our common habitat, it seems to suggest (*figure 4*).

### *Apollonian Perspectives*

An imperial viewpoint is poetically captured in the name of the space mission. Apollo is the Greek god of harmony, unity, order, light and the sun; the God of prophesy, the arts and colonisation. The Apollonian eye, detached from the human body, local particularities and revealing no human presence in its gaze, became a favoured icon for environmentalist groups, idealizing the “whole-earth perspective” that everybody on earth have the same responsibilities towards the planet. This blue, Apollonian eye-ball earth became the icon of Earth Day in the 70s and was adopted by the *Friends of the Earth* – showing the globe as an “exceptional home to those prepared to maintain it with care”.<sup>10</sup> The photographs and words, framed and reframed by the Apollo missions, are in the public domain. Here they are susceptible to constant transformation and translation as they circulate the globe, detached from the context in which they were produced and imagined. *Genesis* itself, as well as the mythical Apollo, have by NASA been translated into a new text that no longer pertains to a certain local condition or geography – the figures, texts and the myth are re-appropriated, fused and send tumbling into space, retransmitted in an oddly pre-literary form, verbalized, ritualized, denationalized – and as such they return to Earth and its discourse networks. Here the words and images circulate with new meanings, creating and destabilising discourses as they are translated from one domain or locality into another. As such, this re-translation, re-appropriation, of, at a time, “localised” texts into new localities or global communication networks, is exactly what a new conception of what a World Literature (or media) perspective is attempting to map in the present day globalised condition.

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<sup>10</sup> Examples are taken from Cosgrove, “Contested Global Visions: *One-World, Whole-Earth*, and the Apollo Space Photographs” (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84, 1994: 270-294), where the relevant images are also reproduced.

**Figure 5.** Al Gore in front of cloudy planet.

The Apollonian “whole-earth perspective”, as Denis Cosgrove has termed it, is still re-appropriated today by Greenpeace and other global environmental groups, policy makers and commercial businesses, who are ‘selling’ the Earth or global products and ideas across borders. Most of the world has by now seen Al Gore posing in front of different globes in his travelling lectures and in his movie, addressing issues of global environmental awareness that awarded him and the UN panel on climate change the Nobel prize in 2007.

Within the environmental and global discourses, the borderless globe, as seen from space, recreates the singularity and harmony, the goodness of the creation. Reading from the *Genesis* cosmogonic narrative, the Apollo 8 crew actually framed the world-picture in a way that goes back to medieval and Renaissance cosmographies.<sup>11</sup> Even in Ortelius’s world-map from 1570 we find the discourse of the world-picture working against the differences of mortals and the insignificance of their geographical boundaries. We have to remind ourselves, though, that this world image, captured iconically in the Apollo 8 mission in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is founded in an American world picture of the commonality, unity and freedom of man, and allegorically, in Western and Christian cultures with its double-origin in Athens and Jerusalem, and that the discourse networks changed radically with satellite transmissions and electronic media in the decades around the famous NASA missions . We also have to realise that, simultaneously, globalisation asserts, what the sociologist Ulrich Beck has called, “a universality of difference”, diverging from the

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<sup>11</sup> Cosgrove, p. 258.



“whole-earth discourse” universality of sameness.<sup>12</sup> This “one-world” discourse perceives the globe as networked, a web of connectivity, with hubs and peripheries. If there is such an idea as globalisation, a globalised human condition, or, as will be my interest here for the remainder of this paper, a general World Literature, it must rely on what we could call “the eye of the Apollo” – a perspective, a condition, which is “neither beyond the globe nor rooted in its earth”,<sup>13</sup> and which has been transformed radically in lieu of the discourse networks that have altered communication and our cultures radically in the latter part of the twentieth century.

### *Apollo 8: Globalism and World Literature Perspectives*

The Earthrise photograph is, to me, the Genesis of the complex landscape we today attempt to navigate when we talk of globalisation, with its inherent suggestions for a world spanning idea driven by new technologies, communication circuits, imperialism, market capitalism, nationalisms and competing ideological and religious discourses. It started with this dream of a “whole-earth”, wherein differences between nations and humans seemed un-natural from the Apollonian perspective, and is probably today more pragmatically conceived within a “one-world” perspective that precludes harmonisation, sameness and center-periphery constructions for a differing, networked and complex perspective on the oneness we still imagine when we term our present condition as global.

The eye of the Apollo may at first appear as an imperial gaze that is dislocated from Earth and the differences between cultures and peoples, imposing its harmonizing gaze on the unruly multitudes, but it is also a gaze mediated and imagined in a particular localised context, here, a specific Western, Indo-European American cultural context.

According to the cultural geographer, Denis Cosgrove, “it is from images of the spherical earth that ideas of globalization draw their expressive and political force”.<sup>14</sup> There seems to be an accidental, nevertheless significant, difference between the discursive Genesis of the Earthrise photo’s universal humanity and the photo taken from Apollo 17. The iconic status of the Apollo 17 picture lets us recognise it as the Earth but not in its cartographic particulars; it is a radically decentred view of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*. Trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Cosgrove, p. ix.

<sup>14</sup> Cosgrove, p. 263.

Earth compared to a traditional Western, global image: the landmasses of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans, and the island continent of Antarctica take center stage. Appropriate, according to Cosgrove, “for an image whose burgeoning popularity since 1972 has coincided with a broader political and cultural thrust to imagine and articulate a globe without a privileged centre and subordinated periphery, in which all voices across a decolonised globe, regardless of location, claims equal right to announce their unique place, memory, and vision”.<sup>15</sup>

Though the Earth photographs are inherently American images of the globe (and we may think that a particular American world image has dominated the world from late twentieth-century culture until today) they are in the digital global public domain, they are already globalised American visions, and they do provide a decentred view of the world. As such, the image taken onboard Apollo 17 is also an icon for the postcolonial shift in perspective within the late-twentieth century book market and literary criticism. But it is the reworking of the global image and creation in the Apollo 8 mission that more than anything else is an example of a much wider World Literature perspective in an age of globalisation. Central factors for such is the process of global transmission and circulation of texts powered by electronic media. The transmission process, or the remediation of texts in the global, electronic environment, radically transforming the “original” texts – in this case the Earth and *Genesis*. The crew members aboard the Apollo 8 “pictured” the Earth as an icon that both refers back to an ancient cartographic tradition and was the beginning of a new global discourse, where it is repeatedly re-mixed and re-mediated to fit a variety of purposes. Simultaneously, the Christmas Eve broadcast made use of similar strategies for re-appropriating an already “global” text, *Genesis*, to fit a new perspective and underline a Western perspective on the global aspirations of superpowers engaged in a space race that was more about conquering territories on Earth than on the Moon.

If, as I suggest here, the Apollo space program may be read as a genetic myth of what a World Literature perspective might mean to us today, and that it may provide us with an understanding of how World Literature has been imagined in Modern times, as will be the focus of the following, then we have to stretch our understanding of how we read. It seems that this postmodern myth could have been dreamed up by Thomas Pynchon. The Apollo programme was not really exploring the

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<sup>15</sup> Cosgrove, p. 260.

Moon, but instead designated to create a myth that through technology, networked media and the Old Testament would restore a pre-Babel, global community. The condition of this community of Man was no longer to be determined or limited by national, cultural or linguistic borders, but disrupted instead such spatial and temporal coordinates by launching a myth of creation into space nestled in an astronaut's space suit. From space, looking back at Earth, one of the most widely reprinted, read and translated books – a book of which so many varying and competing translations have brought peoples into wars over plots of land, imagined to be inscribed onto its pages – is given new voices, crackling through inter-planetary radio communication and entering the global imagination through global, American owned, networks of commercial television, filtered through translators, dubbers and subtitlers who let the astronauts speak in all the languages of the world. A seemingly detached viewpoint, showing a globe of sameness will actually be transmitted and received as localised in diverse languages and in different cultures. As David Damrosch writes in *What is World Literature?*, “a literary work manifests differently abroad than it does at home” – and you cannot go further “abroad” than the Moon.

In a sense, literature, in order to have planetary application, has to leave the atmosphere of the earth, it has to travel, to enter the global network of circulation and translation, to come back to us and enter the cosmopolitan, globalised, condition of universal sameness and difference. We as readers have to become, as the astronauts, weightless in the minuscule tin can in the deep nothingness of space; dislocated for a while from Earth we have to bring the books out into space and let them talk back to Earth with all the opportunities and dangers it entails. As Franco Moretti has put it: “The literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system. The question is not really what we should do – the question is how”.<sup>16</sup>

This is not a suggestion for new student abroad programmes or field trips, but instead a call for the awareness that this dislocation might bring us: when we take literature into space, when we dislocate our point of view from literature's cultural location and let it orbit other planets, when we begin to find an interest in how literature has always circulated as world-images through various uses and abuses, along specific trade routes, in the pockets of peddlers, monks, knights, immigrants, poets, travellers and astronauts, when we begin to set our viewpoint free in the only

way we can, using technologies and communication networks that are both localised and globalised at the same time, then a productive perspective on a World Literature will take shape.

### *World Literature Perspectives*

But do we need a World Literature perspective in literary studies? We do not need it, I would answer, it already conditions the way literature, along with other cultural products, forms and shapes what we today constantly hear is the major challenge of our time: globalisation and what follows from this cultural and environmental condition. Globalisation is not something that happens to literature – literature is one of the driving forces of globalisation as it interacts with technologies and communication networks across nations and locations. Belatedly, though, of course, must the critical understanding of that global or planetary literature be, and decisive for the future understanding of the human and imaginative condition is the conceptualisation of global literature and culture formed in critical discourses by professional and amateur readers.

In many ways, at least the American comparative literature community has attempted to respond to the planetary image of the decentred globe iconically captured in the Apollo 17 photograph. The 1993 Bernheimer report on the state of comparative literature offered multiculturalism as a new paradigm to literary studies – a paradigm that saw the need for integrating more non-European and non-Western literatures into the curriculum, and professed a global multicultural harmony-ideology.<sup>17</sup> This was, at the turn of the millennium, found to be an unobtainable ideal by the next report gathered by Haun Saussy. Here, the concept of World Literature offers a way of responding to the impossibility of navigating the vast libraries of a global literature of sameness in a wealth of languages – and the more violent, displacing hegemonic realities of globalisation is found to be the threshold on which a World Literature begins and ends.<sup>18</sup>

Since the late 1990s a few scholars have attempted to respond to the challenges of globalisation to literary studies, not by widening the canon – which was

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<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", in Christopher Prendergast (ed.) *Debating World Literature*. Verso, 2004. p. 148.

<sup>17</sup> See Charles Bernheimer (ed.), *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> See Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.

surely needed, and to some extent accomplished in some areas – but by changing the viewpoint on, what has been institutionalised as, national literatures. A world literature perspective might be an Apollonian vision of the global atlas of the novel, as held by Franco Moretti, where waves of genres and forms wash back and forth over the map of the world forming a complex, centerless map on which a universality of differences dominates; it may be a perspective that finds literary value in the translated and transformed languages of literature, formerly held to be corrupted versions of original, localised and national literatures, languages and cultures – a keystone in Damrosch’s *World Literature* thesis.<sup>19</sup> The central place awarded to translation in *World Literature* is radicalised in Emily Apter’s work where the “translation zone” designates sites that are profoundly in-translation, universally differential and that have an enormous impact on contemporary life around the globe: on “diaspora language communities, print and media, public spheres, institutions of governmentality and language policy-making and theatres of war”.<sup>20</sup>

The Apollonian eye on the world of literature in modern times may also see the literary system through the eyes of Pascale Casanova and find a planetary system wherein diverse languages and cultures are attracted to cultural centers of literary capital, such as Paris, and in the process produces a cosmopolitan reformation of the literatures and cultures of both the center and the periphery.<sup>21</sup> The global perspective on national literatures may also, as in Wai Chee Dimock’s work within American literary studies, approach a national literature from a global and denationalised point of view, with what she terms “a planetary literary system,” a system which she finds itself is a primary agency in undermining nationalism from within – planetary literature has always, according to Dimock, been trans-territorial and as such been a driving force in globalisation.<sup>22</sup>

These various approaches to globalisation in literary studies today, in translation studies, postcolonialism, planetary literary studies, the world republic of letters, the atlas of the novel or other cosmopolitan visions, are, in my reading, versions of the globe as seen from the Apollo: the spherical, networked globe with all its connections and disconnections along trade and traveller’s routes.

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<sup>19</sup> See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* Princeton UP, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*. Princeton UP, 2006. p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M.B. DeBevoise. Harvard UP, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> See Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Princeton UP, 2008.

**Figure 6.** Johan Joseph Schmeller, Goethe seinem Schreiber John diktierend, 1834.

The rest of this paper will take a look at the formation of the concept of world literature from the early nineteenth century to post World War II, it is by no means a new ideal within literary studies that literature is unbounded by national borders. I shall of course not attempt to give an exhaustive presentation of the dynamics and implications of the transformations and life of the concept, but merely draw attention to some of the particularities and correspondences that have produced renewed interest in the conception of a World Literature perspective within especially literary studies. We are, therefore, leaving space and will take short stops in Weimar, Copenhagen and Istanbul before my conclusion will address the de- or re-territorialised global archive of literature taking shape on the World Wide Web and the challenges of communication technologies and digital literature archives to the conception of a World Literature perspective. Bringing the bible into space onboard the Apollo 8 was only the beginning to the digitised literatures that are being sent back and forth across the globe by way of orbiting satellites. Reading *Genesis* was the genesis of Google Books and other digital archives and we are only now beginning to address its challenges to national and world cultures.

#### *Genesis 2: Weimar 1827*

Another Apollonian viewpoint on the world of literature, whose majestic forehead seemed to store as much learning as the servers of the world today, resided in the eccentric capital of Sachsen-Weimar in the body of the Olympian poet, civil servant and polyhistor Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

In 1823 the young aspiring poet, Johann Peter Eckermann, walked from the small village of Winson on the Lühe near Hamburg to Weimar to seek out his idol. Eckermann's pilgrimage towards his "polar star" took two weeks. Instead of furthering the young provincial man's career as an artist, Goethe persuaded him to stay in Weimar and record his master's voice rather than develop his own. Goethe's work, we have to remember, did not only include his numerous literary activities. His time as president of the Duke's Council also made him responsible for the Duchy's road construction, mining, irrigation, the issuing of uniforms, and other technical matters.<sup>23</sup> Goethe was the center of Weimar and in dire need of secretaries.

Eckermann published some of his conversations with Goethe in 1836 as *Gespräche mit Goethe*. Translated in 1839 into English as *Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of His Life*. It is from these conversations that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* was later to be popularised. In January 1827, Eckermann records that Goethe during a dinner conversation had said that he had been reading "many and various things" since he last saw him. Among them a Chinese romance had most of all "occupied and interested" him. A "Chinese romance!" Eckermann replies "that is indeed something quite out of the way." But Goethe is of another opinion, as we might expect if we think of his own *West-östlicher Diwan* from 1819 obviously drawing on inspiration from Persian poetry. He explains to Eckermann that "the Chinamen think, act, and feel almost exactly like us". Chinese literature is both more clear, pure and decorative, citizen-like and dispassionate leading Goethe to compare it to his own *Hermann and Dorothea* and the English Romances of Richardson. In Chinese literature, Goethe continues, is also differences to the well-known European. Among such differences is the fact that "external nature is always associated with the human figures". There is, for instance, "much talk about the Moon, but its light does not alter the landscape".<sup>24</sup>

Probably hoping that he does not have to read all Chinese novels and romances in order to grasp what Goethe finds so relevant for his own work, Eckermann asks, whether it might not just be the case with a few of the works, or just the best ones. "By no means," Goethe replies. "The Chinese have thousands of them,

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<sup>23</sup> See Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Magic Media Mountain: Technology and the *Umbildungsroman*", in Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz (eds.), *Reading Matters: Narrative in the New Media Ecology*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Eckermann, Johann Peter. *Conversations with Goethe In the Last Years of His Life*. Trans. S. M. Fuller. Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Company, 1839, p. 202.

and had already, when our forefathers were still living in the woods”<sup>25</sup> – and he continues:

I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself in every place, and at all times, in hundreds of men ... But, really, we Germans are very likely to make this pedantic mistake, if we do not take heed to look beyond the narrow circle which surrounds us. I therefore gladly make excursions to other countries, and advice everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and each one must strive to hasten its approach. But, while we know how to value what is foreign, we must not fix our attention on anything in particular, as the only pattern and model.<sup>26</sup>

Though national literatures do not form models for the universality of literature, Goethe still finds that the ancient Greeks set a standard. They possess a power of expression beyond any historical, linguistic, cultural and national limits and differences. What Goethe envisions is, therefore, a number of works which belong to a literary domain of their own, situated beyond national boundaries and rooted in universal human values. Great literature or a universal world literature in Goethe’s terms, gives the reader access to that domain no matter where and when it is written.<sup>27</sup> As such, a *Weltliteratur* perspective conforms to Goethe’s lifelong interest in individual *Bildung*.

With his concept of *Weltliteratur*, Goethe in his late seventies, attempts to embrace a movement towards more explicit interchanges of intellectual thought arising, partly, from European journals, not least in his own *Kunst und Altertum*. His own work at this time was reviewed in French periodicals, for instance. He had, furthermore, long enjoyed national fame: his work had appeared in at least seven collected editions, and was now succeeding abroad as well, and found new relations across national boundaries.<sup>28</sup> His concept was designed (though never really elaborated) to meet these cultural dynamics ripe in his time, not only in relation to his own work, but also in a broader context following the French and American revolutions and the writing down of human rights.

Another context was World Literature as a result of “international exchange” and its “ever-increasing rapidity”: “Everywhere we hear and read of the progress of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.203.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.204.

<sup>27</sup> See Svend Erik Larsen, *Tekster uden Grænser*, Århus Universitetsforlag, 2007, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> See Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig, “Changing Fields: The Directions of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*”, in Christopher Prendergast (ed.) *Debating World Literature*. Verso, 2004, p.35.



humanity, of the further prospects of worldly and human conditions,” Goethe wrote.<sup>29</sup> It is, then, not merely his own literary tastes or the awareness of his own work being read outside his own locality that lead Goethe to draw attention to a new world spirit.

From 1827 and onwards, Goethe notes that that the World Literature perspective is provoked by changes in technology, transportation and communication technologies: “the ever increasing rapidity of human interaction”. Much in the same vein as the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* who wrote that: “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature”.<sup>30</sup>

Goethe related the approaching “universal world literature” (*allgemeine Weltliteratur*) not only to the “contemporary, highly turbulent epoch” (*gegenwärtige, höchst bewegte Epoche*) and its “vastly facilitated communications”, but also to the “constantly spreading activities of trade and commerce”. In this Goethe saw the “human spirit gradually attaining the desire to participate in the more or less untrammelled intellectual trade”.<sup>31</sup> Goethe’s conception of an *allgemeine Weltliteratur* is aimed at participating intellectually and culturally in the processes of globalisation, to attempt to grasp the unforeseeable ways in which revolutions in transportation and print media changed the communication between individual national literatures, how mass production and the “devilish” acceleration in literary business also changed literature itself in his own time. One of the key terms appearing over and over again in Goethe’s thoughts on world literature and world culture is “global circulation” (*Weltumlauf*). Global circulation, in Goethe’s sketchy remarks late in life on the approaching world literature and world culture, takes an interest in discussions about the building of the Panama Canal, communication between nations and its technologies. The breaking down of territorial borders that divide people on Earth may be overcome by human ingenuity, by linking the oceans by a canal, in the same way as literature can cross borders and increase universal human understanding.

Goethe’s call for transnationalism is not breaking down the foundations of national literatures, but is instead digging canals that allow for transport of ideas between distant cultures. In 1828 he says that “every literature dissipates within itself

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in Hoesel-Uhlig, p.35.

<sup>30</sup> *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore, in Marx, Vol 50 of *Great Books of the Western World*, 415-434. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, p.421.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Hoesel-Uhlig, p.35.

when it is not reinvigorated through foreign participation”.<sup>32</sup> He even thinks that Germans have a particularly important role to play in the formation of a world literature – a formulation that has a different ring today, when we know that not far from where Goethe was expressing these thoughts of a common humanity that could be reinvigorated by the foreign, the concentration camp Buchenwald swallowed 56.000 Jews, political prisoners, homosexuals, Romani people and prisoners of war from all over Europe, including surviving writers such as Jewish-Hungarian Imre Kertész and Spanish Communist Jorge Semprun, who both lived to tell the terrors of European nationalism gone mad.

However, the programme for a World Literature in Goethean terms is a “hybrid cultural space”, comparable to Rene Wellek’s world literature as “an ideal of the unification of all literatures into one literature where each nation would play its part in universal concert”.<sup>33</sup> But, interestingly, the role of Modern communication networks in the transformation of national literatures is already expressed in Goethe’s very personal ruminations on the foreign; networks that do not create sameness but difference: in China, the Moon simply looks different, and when that fact is realized Western literature will never look at the Moon in the same way.

### *Genesis 3: Copenhagen 1899*

After the 1840s, Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur* was forgotten in the turmoils of European wars only to be resurrected by the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, in his 1899 article “*Verdenslitteratur*”. He was the writer of the then famous work on *Main Currents in the Literature of the Nineteenth Century* (1872-75) and wrote a book on *Émigré Literature*; he had rediscovered Nietzsche, and had in front of him the constant goals of the liberty and the progress of humanity, sharing ideas with the other great Scandinavian author, Henrik Ibsen, as well as with Goethe. He wrote in the German journal *Das Literarische Echo* in 1899:

When Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur*, humanism and the spirit of global citizenship [*Welbürgergeist*] were still thoughts that were generally entertained. During the last decades of the nineteenth century these thoughts have been forced onto the defensive by a gradually stronger and still more heated national sentiment. Contemporary literatures turn increasingly national. I do not hold, though, that the spirit of nationality and of global citizenship are

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<sup>32</sup> Cited in John Pizer, “Goethe’s ‘World Literature’ Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization.” *Comparative Literature* 52 (2000): 213-227.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

mutually exclusive. The world literature of the future will become so much more captivating the more national specificities become apparent and the more it becomes heterogeneous, as long as it maintains a general human aspect. What is written directly for the world will have no value as a work of art.<sup>34</sup>

While to Goethe, the means of communication on a global scale facilitated the knowledge of literatures of foreign countries, the creation of a world market for literature, in Brandes's perspective, implies the risk that the incorporation of concrete specific experience would deteriorate: "Writers have started to write for an unlimited, unspecific public, and the result suffers from these efforts," he wrote. Brandes is here pointing to the late work of Zola, which he compares to Sarah Bernhard's indistinguishable acting whether in Peru or Chicago – a global mass marketed entertainment product of its time. Today, we would probably find such literature in airport book shops. Brandes furthermore emphasises the concrete particulars of the technologies furthering global intellectual progress, present but not dominant, in Goethe's scattered thoughts on a universal world literature. "Brandes reminds us of the progress of science as a global intellectual process", Svend Erik Larsen points out, "that transport, communication, the modern press and translations accelerate the global process. His is not a universal idealism, but "concrete globalized cultural contacts and interactions". His focus moves away from the universal content of world literature beyond national literatures; a literature which would be understandable everywhere may be deprived of all "vitality and power", simply because it is not rooted anywhere.

To Brandes, a world literature perspective is formed inside and not beyond national or local literatures: "The world literature of the future will become so much more captivating the more national specificities become apparent and the more it becomes heterogeneous, as long as it maintains a general human aspect". In this Brandes is close to articulating David Damrosch's yardsticks for a World Literature perspective: "It must be an 'elliptical refraction of national literatures' as the text circulates in the world 'connected to both [local and host] cultures, circumscribed by neither alone'; a 'mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own' and 'writing that gains in translation'. "World literature is thus always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture; hence it is a double refraction".

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<sup>34</sup> Brandes, Georg. "Weltliteratur". *Das literarische Echo* 2 (1899): 1-5.

Here, Damrosch seems to be in accordance with Homi Bhabha's notion of world literature, which, interestingly, like both Goethe and Brandes, envisions world literature as something that is approaching, something that will institute great change, but, between the lines, we may feel that their hope for the intellectual grasp of the progress of modernity and globalism will always be postponed. Bhabha writes,

The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness.' Where once the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest the transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions – may be terrains of world literature.<sup>35</sup>

What Brandes's take on the global, arising from within a national thinking that still forms the limit of turn of the century territoriality, is suggesting, is that it is within the linguistic and textual structures of the literary works themselves from where the world perspective is to be teased out: one cannot write for a global audience, if so all vitality and power is lost. Some works make it outside the confinement of local literatures when their local conditions and their global perspective matches new reading strategies or the more or less accidental championing of their dissemination through translations and literary prizes lifts them from anonymity to world fame, as happened to Imre Kertész *Fateless* (1976) via the 2002 Nobel prize. In this case the recognition was global and not national as the permanent secretary Horace Engdahl recalls being asked by Hungarian journalists when Kertész arrived in Stockholm to receive his prize: "Why don't you give the prize to a real Hungarian instead of a Jew?".<sup>36</sup>

New genres like witness literature and migrant literatures also appear out of obscurity on the global and national literary systems, although often contested, when transnationality and world literature shifts the focus of attention to national and local formations recognised, as Bhabha and others have it, through their projection of "otherness" and border crossings.

#### *Genesis 4: Istanbul*

The last resurrection or Genesis of the concept of World Literature, I shall mention, took place in Istanbul, on the fringe of Europe in an academic exile community

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<sup>35</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. p.17.

around World War II. I am of course referring to Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach who fled the Nazi regime in Germany. In the famous passage from *Mimesis*, a corner stone in the field of comparative literature, in which he describes that circumstances of the book's preparation during the period of his exile in Turkey from 1935 to 1945, Auerbach writes:

I may also mention that the book was written during the war and at Istanbul, where the libraries are not well equipped for European studies. International communications were impeded ... Hence it is possible and even probable that I overlooked things which I ought to have considered ... On the other hand it is quite possible that the book owes its existence to just this lack of a rich and specialized library.<sup>37</sup>

Emily Apter has called attention to “Auerbach’s jaundiced depiction of his loneliness in the wilderness” which really is a “distorted picture of what it was like to live and work there” – in an Istanbul, on the fringe but part of Europe, and with a thriving community of immigrants, not least around the philological circle of Leo Spitzer, whose seminars at the University of Istanbul furthered the interchanges and translations between European and non-European cultures. According to Apter, Auerbach was actually in “pretty good cosmopolitan company during his Istanbul sojourn”.<sup>38</sup> Spitzer, more open than Auerbach to the potential for an enlarged vision of world literature presented by the conditions of their exile, wrote in an essay from 1934 entitled “Learning Turkish” that “any language is human prior to being national: “Turkish, French, and German languages first belong to humanity and then to Turkish, French and German peoples”.<sup>39</sup> Though, never immersing himself in his host nation, Auerbach expressed a similar sentiment: “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation”.<sup>40</sup> Both Spitzer’s linguistic cosmopolitanism and Auerbach’s secular humanism adopt the one-world perspective – in very different ways, and with different personalities and disciplines, they inscribe the migrant, stateless, existence into their critical thinking, which was, undoubtedly, influenced by the horror of European nationalism at the doorstep and contemporary, emerging nationalism and

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<sup>36</sup> Engdahl, Horace. “Canonization and World Literature: the Nobel Experience”, in Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (eds.), *World Literature, World Culture: History, Theory, Analysis*. Aarhus UP, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953.

<sup>38</sup> Apter, p.48.

<sup>39</sup> Leo Spitzer, “Learning Turkish” (1934). Cited from Apter, p.41.

<sup>40</sup> Erich Auerbach, “Philologie der Weltliteratur”, trans. Marie and Edward Said. *Centennial Review* 13 (1969).

language politics in their adopted nation, Turkey. But a refuge in a “universalism of sameness” did not appear to be the answer to European nationalism.

Auerbach asked in 1967 in the essay “Philologie der Weltliteratur,” what the meaning of *Weltliteratur* could be for the twentieth century and the future: “Our earth, the domain of *Weltliteratur*, as it was conceived by Goethe, does not merely refer to what is generally common and human; rather it considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members”.<sup>41</sup> To Goethe, World literature was, so to speak, Babylonian confusion, a multitude of cultures each with its characteristic features. But the historical process, as Auerbach saw it, was about to wipe out these differences: “Human life is becoming standardized,” a “process of imposed uniformity” is undermining the specificity of cultural formations. Life on the planet was becoming modern, along with standardisation as the dominant tendency.<sup>42</sup> The question that Auerbach is raising here is one of the central problems of globalisation and modernisation in the twentieth and this century – if this standardisation should run its full course, “man will have to accustom himself to existence in a standardized world, to a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language. And herewith”, Auerbach writes, “the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed”.

### *World Literature and Google*

One agent more than any other is today trying to hasten the approach of a World Literature. I am, of course, thinking of Google’s vast library build in the sky, Google Books. Is this Alexandrian archive on the Web an expression of Goethe’s dream of a distribution system for literature that turns local literatures into instant world-wide accessible literature replacing the national? or Brandes’ insistence on the primacy of a local horizon with a cosmopolitan perspective provided by the global archive?, or does it in fact confirm Auerbach’s fear of a stagnant standardisation of a world of literature reduced, in the end, to one language, in this case English? Is it at all relevant to hold Google to the measure of World Literature, since all Google does is to scan library holdings and merely provide information in a globally accessible digital archive? If we have learnt anything from Goethe, Brandes, Auerbach and Spitzer, and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> See Peter Madsen, “World Literature and World Thoughts: Brandes/Auerbach”, in Christopher Prendergast (ed.) *Debating World Literature*. Verso, 2004, p. 54-75.

the many recent theorists of the new World Literature paradigm, then we must accept the fact that literature, in this perspective, is always a socialised and material phenomenon, which is written, published, circulated and received in a system that is both local and global at the same time. Furthermore, none of the agents involved in the system of literature is exempt from being influenced by the technologies and media that move the people and goods that form the basis of both local and global literary systems. With this in mind, the new media of Google and a wealth of other online businesses and cultural institutions are radically changing not only the way we publish and read literature, but also the very condition in which literature is written and on which it reflects. The 10 mio. books Google to this day have scanned and for the most part made available to readers world wide (if one has access to the internet) have come to form the new horizon for what practical world literature looks like. Today, it is accessibility and translatability (and not literary quality) that lifts a literary work outside of its national borders as World Literature. The great danger, as I see it is not standardisation, but randomness. Google's technicians scan books in American and British libraries from one end to the other and makes them searchable in different ways according to their copyright status. Copyright issues aside, which still to this day is a highly problematic issue despite century-old international copyright laws, the great challenge of the new digital archives, of which Google is the dominant, is the indiscriminate manner of the digitilisation and the lack of editorial preparation and mediation. The problem is not that a World Literature managed by Google is becoming standardised in literary content, but that it all looks the same and professes a new world library where almost no digital books are presented in the diversity of formats and languages that make up the world of literature. We are in fact faced with the challenge of making digital archives that live up to the networked, social, democratised, diverse and representative literature that should inform our World Literature perspective, so that the ideal and reality of a World Literature does not become a Google Literature.