

Robert Stockhammer

# World literature or Earth literature? Remarks on a distinction

If, as Jean Paul notes in passing in his *Preparatory School for Aesthetics*, “in jest and in earnestness one could set a different poetry on every planet” (Jean Paul 1987: 92), if one could reckon with the existence of Venusian elegies, Martian epics and Saturnian comedies, it follows, among other things, that the entirety of the poetry arising on the Earth could no longer simply be called world literature; we would have to call it Earth literature.

This play of ideas is only in jest insofar as I do not seriously expect the detection of such poetry any time soon, nor am I anticipating a situation in which humans perhaps – as currently planned<sup>1</sup> – settle on Mars starting in 2026 and then presumably start to write poetry there. My play of ideas is also in jest insofar as I do not wish to rename the discussions about *Weltliteratur* that since Goethe, and above all in the last decades under the influence of contemporary globalization processes (nowadays mostly labeled *World Literature*), have grown to comprise entire libraries; there is hardly a scholar of comparative literature or a self-respecting Germanist or Sinologist of cosmopolitan disposition who has not written any programmatic contribution to this topic. Nor is *Earth literature* suited for a title of a future anthology that could compete with those of *World Literature* – the playfully invented term would be better suited to questioning the practice of anthologizing itself.

However, I am quite serious in testing out this term, rather seldom used to date (evidently almost only in science fiction as well as in the sense of “literature on earth radiation”) for its ability to open a different perspective on the literature that arises on this planet. It might seem pedantic to insist, with Alexander von Humboldt, on a “scientific sequestration of world and Earth”, and conclude, for example, that *Weltumseglung* or circumnavigation of the world would be more accurately called “circumnavigation of the Earth” (Humboldt 2004: 61)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.mars-one.com/> (last visit: 04/12/2015).

<sup>2</sup> For further objections to world-composites referring to the Earth (especially Paul Scheerbart’s critique of the term *World War*) see Stockhammer 2014 (Some lines of thought found there are also reproduced here in modified form).

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Humboldt's aim to restrict the meaning of *world* to the whole universe was clearly already unfeasible in his time.

The word *Welt*<sup>3</sup> has throughout its history described population groups, times and spaces – it has assumed social, temporal and spatial functions that are no longer to be factored out of it. Every person is a world, we each live in our own world and if we leave it, it is only to go out into the wider world; even when we leave the world behind it is to land in the world of the convent or the afterlife. This broad spectrum of uses was catalogued by Johannes Erben in 1954 for the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* in twelve meanings (or rather groups of meaning) (Erben/Grimm/Grimm 1955).

Even if we initially restrict ourselves to the aspect of spatial extension, we see quickly how diverse in size these can be. The extension equivalent to the whole earth is just one of these (the fifth in Erben's classification), a mid-sized extension somewhere between the universe as a whole (the seventh), which Humboldt would reduce the word to, and an "All in miniature" (the eighth, such as in "the world of the ant"). Accordingly the word does not have the fixed function of "a geographical term that covers the entire globe" (Longxi 2013: 246). Hence a plea for the inclusion of non-European literature cannot simply rely on an allegedly fixed referential scope of *world*. This can be seen in Goethe's wavering use of the term *Weltliteratur* as the step beyond European literature ("a European, even a general world literature") (Goethe 1989: 79) and then as identical with it: "European, i.e. world literature" (Goethe 1999: 724). This wavering corresponds to a state of use of the word *world* one could call "Eurocentric", although *this* eurocentrism – unlike some forms of habitual eurocentrism, such as in the academic operations of comparative literature – is the result of a conscious construction. This constructed character can be clearly seen in Hegel, who, almost simultaneous to Goethe's remarks on world literature, restricts the *world* as the theater of "world history" to Europe, northern Africa and parts of Asia and explicitly excludes the rest of the Earth (Hegel 1969–1971: 105–132). Hegel's project doesn't simply ignore things that are out there "in the world" – he conveys information about swampy America and its presidents elected for risibly short terms, or the slave trade in Africa – he simply does not ascribe these things to the *world*, but rather only to the *Earth*. As abstruse as this way of proceeding might seem to us today, we can see here, through a kind of double negation, that a *world* that includes *the whole Earth* likewise does not make itself available but rather must first be constructed.

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<sup>3</sup> In the following, the differences between *Welt* and *world* will be regarded as *relatively* neglectable.

Without wishing to ascribe great conceptual coherence to Goethe's rather disparate and strategically accentuated remarks on *Weltliteratur*, nonetheless they can explain the seeming contradiction in the fact that on the one hand he reads a legendary Chinese novel and of course Persian poetry, and on the other hand at least once deliberates whether the referential scope of *Weltliteratur* might be extensionally equivalent with Europe. From the fact that “poetry is the common property of mankind” (Eckermann/Goethe 1999: 224, emphasis added) it does not automatically follow that all poetry will be integrated into the future world literature. Put somewhat differently, using a distinction that is frequently blurred in humanistic recourse to Goethe's remarks: poetry might have a *universal* character transhistorically – the standard English translation of the passage just quoted reads, certainly not entirely falsely, “poetry is the universal possession of mankind” (Longxi 2013: 242); *world literature* only arises in the concrete historical process of *globalization*, and it is a matter of continuous debate whether and to what extent this encompasses the whole Earth<sup>4</sup>. The referential scope of the *world* in “world literature” is for Goethe not any more predetermined than the referential scope of *world* is for Hegel in “world history”. If on Goethe's or Hegel's estimation there is nothing in America or in sub-Saharan Africa that corresponds to a European concept of “history” or “literature”, or if the history or literature of these parts of the globe has not (or not yet) entered into any relation with the history or literature of Europe, then the *world* of this world history or literature will be consistently and demonstrably smaller than the Earth. The criteria for what is to be counted as part of world history and what isn't are relatively clearly defined for Hegel – the bearers of world history can only be fully formed states; the criteria for what counts as world literature and what doesn't are in contrast not clearly defined for Goethe – later conceptions that see world literature as the

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4 This passage is quoted only in its English formulation in Longxi 2013, which offers a characteristic example for the blurring of the distinction between the *universal* and the *global*, in the general tendency of the article but also with an additional philological error that is quite minor in itself. In Eckermann's report of Goethe's remarks, between the reference to “poetry [as] common property of mankind” and the oft-quoted sentence “national literature is now a rather unmeaning term, the epoch of world literature is at hand” (Eckermann/Goethe 1999: 225) there are several remarks of about fifteen lines' length, which Longxi not only omits but does not mark as such. This generates the impression that “world literature” is directly identical with poetry as the “common property of mankind”. However, for Goethe non-German poetry, possibly including non-European poetry as well, is first of all only the material he is sorting through (between these sentences we find the remark “I like to look about me in foreign nations”) to assess whether it can be used for the then-incipient process of construction of world literature.

convening of national literatures have a remarkable structural equivalence with Hegel's scheme.

If we wish to insist, to the contrary, that there is also something outside of Europe, which we could then, in a second step, classify under the European concept of "literature", then it would be more precise to follow Erich Auerbach and to proceed on the basis of "material from six millennia, from all parts of the *Earth*, in perhaps fifty literary languages" (Auerbach 1967: 304, emphasis added). But this material is not yet in and of itself a *world* literature, perhaps not even a world *literature* – which could at best be configured in a process of transports and readings, by readers whose "philosophical home" for Auerbach can no longer be the nation, yet at the same time is not (yet) the world but rather, in Auerbach's very consistent terminology, "the Earth" (Auerbach 1967: 310); the title of Auerbach's article quoted here, "Philology of World Literature", is accordingly to be read as "Philological Construction of World Literature".

This process of a still necessary construction is suppressed from view if we use *world* in unstated synonymy with *Earth*, as is increasingly typical today, not just in everyday use, but also in most debates about *World Literature*<sup>5</sup>. In this way of speaking two different meanings of *world* get carelessly blurred together which presuppose the same extension but have quite different connotations: the "geographical" meaning of world as globe (the fifth in Erben's classification) and the anthropocentric variation of the "sphere of all inhabitants of the Earth" (meaning III.A). This brings with it the assumption, usually not explicitly declared, that the world represents "*a region closed in itself [...] which in its autonomy and independence somehow represents an All in miniature*" (meaning VIII) – to quote Erben's concise structural description, which explains quite succinctly why units of "diverse types" (the words omitted from the previous quotation), including something as small as "the world of the ant", can still be called *world*. Yet whereas these units have to be explicitly specified as such with a compound

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5 In fact there are several indications that the "forgetfulness of the earth" on the part of literary scholars as well as many other academics has increased through history. For an example see below (with regards to Hayot). Another example can be found in Maire and Edward Said's translation of the article of Auerbach's quoted above. Here *Erde* as "our philological home" is translated as *Earth* (Auerbach 1969: 17); however, the translators fail to recognize Auerbach's strict terminology, according to which the "material of the philologist" at first simply comes "from all parts of the Earth", and translate the expression quoted above as "literatures ranging over six thousand years, from all parts of the world" (1969: 8). And for the relatively unusual expression *Erdkultur* (in the equally famous formulation of the "Standardisierung der Erdkultur" or standardization of Earth-culture (1967: 304)) the Salds without any linguistic necessity choose the less unusual-sounding "world-culture" (1969: 7).

noun or adjective phrase, this same cannot be said of *the* world when it is identified with the current habitat of humanity: to say *world* for *Earth* is an anthropomorphism that we have forgotten as such (an anthropomorphism found in the etymology of the word itself, deriving from *wer-alt*, “age of man”, hence an anthropomorphism explicitly declared as such in ancient times). If we follow the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, which explicitly identifies *Welt* as corresponding to Erben’s meaning VII while however adding the notion of “a whole sensefully structured in itself”<sup>6</sup> (Dirks 2004: 407), we almost arrive at a synonymy of *world* and *sense*: “a world is a totality of sense”<sup>7</sup> (Nancy 2002: 34).

It could however be the case that the “material from six millennia, from all parts of the Earth, in perhaps fifty literary languages” does not “make any sense” or at least does not produce *one* sense, does not cohere into a “totality of sense”. This is, rather pointedly formulated, the suspicion of several US-American literary scholars who have criticized *World Literature* in recent years. A title such as *Against World Literature* can only be understood against the background of the institutional context in which this book intervenes. For of course in objecting to *World Literature* Emily Apter is not arguing for a return to national literatures – which might seem suggest itself in light of the Goethian dichotomy on which the debate is still in many places primarily oriented. Rather Apter completely and emphatically shares the interest in a “deprovincialization of the canon” (Apter 2013: 2) under the broader heading of a de-nationalization of literatures. Apter, however, argues against a certain formation of the literary that is increasingly implied above all by the expression *World Literature*: an anthologization and curricularization of texts from all parts of the Earth (Apter 2013: 3), in the course of which these texts, and in the meanwhile even the theories of *World Literature*, are brought together in handy compilations. A good example of this consolidation of the field is the work of David Damrosch, who as author or co-publisher is responsible for *What Is World Literature?*, *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, “Where is World Literature?”, *How to Read World Literature*, “Toward a History of World Literature”, *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* and *World Literature in Theory*. Texts that were not already written in English typically are considered exclusively in English translation, with the implicit assumption of fundamental translatability<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The original reads: “eine in sich sinnvoll gegliederte Ganzheit” (Dirks 2004).

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “un monde est une totalité de sens” (Nancy 2002).

<sup>8</sup> *What is World Literature?* is explicitly exempt from this criticism; there Damrosch works either with original texts from several European languages or (in the case of Chinese) with various translations and a discussion of their differences with at least an occasional recourse to the original.

The literary epistemology premised here, hence the methodological premises that go along with such a project, are made particularly clear in Franco Moretti's proposal to master large volumes of literary texts spanning the whole Earth with a "distant reading", through the classification into a set of typified characteristics. Texts are transformed into data-sets, into structured arrays with searchable parameters, which can then be statistically assessed such that the results (to use the field of geodata as an example) could be represented in maps, whether of the spatial conditions of their formation or of their theaters of action.

Against this mono-linguality and the associated notion of universal parameters Emily Apter insists upon a "Politics of Untranslatability" (the sub-title of her book). This politics of untranslatability is, we should note, no essentialist politics, no hypostatizing of radical otherness; Apter opens her earlier book *The Translation Zone* with twenty theses, the first of which reads "Nothing is translatable", the last of which "Everything is translatable" (Apter 2006: xi f.). This tension between two equally correct and equally false theses also runs through her only apparently paradoxical attempt to publish Barbara Cassin's *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* in English translation – a philosophical dictionary in French of lemmas from the most various languages, which incidentally contains neither *monde* nor *world*, but *Welt* (Cassin 2014). Untranslatability is for Apter the decidedly linguistic constitution of the incommensurable, which thwarts any attempt to level off the world. Such moments of untranslatability, of unlocalizability, of that which does not fit any parameters or paraphrase, which are constitutive of the literary, can only be encountered in the mode of a close reading. The incommensurable is not a definable point in an already fixed network of coordinates, but rather a "point of departure" (Auerbach 1967: 306) from which lines can be drawn to other points, not according to generalizable laws and *within* the philological procedure itself.

If we begin by tentatively calling the "material" encountered by the earthly philologist *Earth* literature, from which *world* literature has yet to be constructed, this tension can be connected not least of all to a famous essay of Martin Heidegger's that identifies the work of art as the theater of a "battle between world and earth" (Heidegger 1977: 63)<sup>9</sup>. The work of art brings "the setting up [*Aufstellen*] of a world" into relation to the "setting forth [*Herstellen*] of the earth" (Heidegger 1977: 34) – whereby the setting forth is to be understood as "bringing out into the open" (Heidegger 1977: 33) or, a bit more soberly, as a "placing before someone". This relation is as antagonistic as it is complementary: "In setting up a

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<sup>9</sup> A thorough engagement with the essay, written in 1935/36, should not ignore its problematic aspects, such as the reference to a "historical people" (p. 63).

world, the work sets forth the earth” (Heidegger 1977: 32). Heidegger emphasizes however that with *earth* he means neither the material nor the planet (Heidegger 1977: 28), but rather the “essentially self-secluded” (Heidegger 1977: 33, whereby he claims to be offering a translation of *phýsis* on 28). Of course both senses of the word *earth* also resonate here, precisely in their tension to *world* as well. *Earth* however does not ground another totality here (as a certain notion of the planet would suggest), but rather is seen as the “massive and weighty” (Heidegger 1977: 32) that “rises up through [*durchragt*]” the wholeness of the *world* (Heidegger 1977: 35). This “battle between world and earth” can be understood in the categories of language, for Heidegger, since it is carried out in “the work of language” above all (Heidegger 1977: 29). And this in turn exposes a process that plays out within language itself, insofar as language is conceived as poetic and poetry as the theater of the battle conducted within language itself (Heidegger 1977: 62). In semiotic terms: language sets up sense (world) and sets forth not-sense (earth); it has an intention toward sense, towards universal translatability; but its own materiality, its untranslatability, its incommensurability, its not-sense continuously “rises up through” it or undermines it.

This not-sense is often omitted in the name of the *world*. The recent book of Eric Hayot’s is symptomatic of this; he narrows down the discussions about *Weltliteratur* (and *World Literature*) with the interesting proposal that literature composes such “worlds” – we might think of formulations like “the world of Stifter’s *Nachsommer*”. This does not answer the important question of how literature mediates world as an “All in miniature” (VIII in Erben’s classification) with world as the “sphere of all inhabitants of the earth” (III. A.), but it does raise the question at least. However, Hayot had already excluded earth (and the Earth): in a passage of several pages’ length where he draws a connection to Heidegger’s “Work of Art” essay, Hayot mentions only in passing that *world* cannot be separated from its antagonist *earth*, and concentrates entirely on the former (Hayot 2012: 23–26)<sup>10</sup>.

The most important exception to this forgetfulness of the earth (or Earth) in literary studies is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who – skeptical of conceptions of World literature like Apter, and also like Apter in the interest of a range of objects going far beyond Europe and North America – brought the figure of the planetary into the discussion of the formations of the literary<sup>11</sup>. “Planetary literature”

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<sup>10</sup> There is only one sentence on the “battle” between both (on p. 23); the index lists twenty references to *world* but has no entry on *earth* (Hayot 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Besides the polemic quoted below, *Death of a Discipline*, see also many articles – including several responding to Wai Chee Dimock – that have now been collected in revised form in Spivak 2012.

can at least at the moment be relatively unambiguously translated as “Earth literature”. However “the planetary” does not, for Spivak, only or even primarily describe something large (as in the phrase “of planetary dimensions”), but something quite small: the “space-ship Earth” (to use Buckminster Fuller’s metaphor), one heavenly body among others, which, we should note, does not describe a perfect circle around the sun but rather an ellipse (Hamilton 2014: 1–16)<sup>12</sup>. This perspective on an “airport Earth” (Sloterdijk 2006: 42) is taken up frequently not just in science fiction and space travel but in the long tradition of *pluralité des mondes* stories – a tradition which German-language writers like Jean Paul and Johann Peter Hebel (among several others) have also taken part in. Spivak stands in this tradition – though she does not state this explicitly – when she evokes the largely dark space this heavenly body transverses: through an other that is neither similar to “us” (the human inhabitants) nor our dialectical negation:

If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. [...] what is above and beyond our reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous. (Spivak 2003: 73)

Spivak explicitly proposes the planetary as a counter-figure to the global: “I propose the planet to overwrite the globe”. She conceives the global as essentially a “gridwork of electronic capital”, as an “abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes”, as something that today is produced by computers and appears on them: “The globe is on our computer. No one lives there”. Spivak opposes the picture of the Earth that appears in electronically generated maps on the screens of airplanes with the one she reassures herself of with a look out the airplane window (Spivak 2003: 72).

However, here the Earth – unlike for Heidegger – is used as a figure of the whole, the holistic character of which however is no more self-evident than that of the world. Once we concede that the globe is just an “abstract ball”, and concede further that in contrast there are concrete spots on the Earth on which people live on those occasions when they are not living in their computer, the question remains, for whom and under what conditions the Earth exists as a “concrete ball”. As long as we are not viewing the Earth from space (or imagining it, or looking at a globe, or a photograph of it or, again with electronic support,

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<sup>12</sup> Kepler’s proposal that the orbit of the planets describes an ellipse, thus an “imperfect” geometric figure, famously met with great resistance by his contemporaries (including Galileo Galilei), since it did not seem compatible with their assumptions about a well-ordered cosmos (cf. Galilei 1980: 251–252).

at *Google Earth*), it is not an object of immediate self-evidence one could refer to with a deictic gesture. Not only is Spivak's reassuring glance out the plane at the Earth dependent on contingencies such as whether she has booked a window seat or not and whether the sky is cloudy – in the best case one sees, for a start, just some particular, in Spivak's example a region of Anatolia, that does not allow for any simply inference from the part to the whole.

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In contrast Heidegger's "battle between world and earth" can be understood as a tension between an intention towards wholeness and the resistance of the particular. If there could be an exemplary case of the particular, if this were not a contradiction in itself, I would choose the toponym of a Mexican peninsula. According to an anecdote dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which is disputed but at least well wrought, the name of this peninsula comes from the answer its inhabitants gave to the Spanish-speaking conquistadores when they landed and asked what it was called – to which these are alleged to have answered in Maya, if it could be called an answer – "Ma c'ubah than". In English roughly: "We don't understand your words" (Todorov 1985: 121).

If we assume that the toponym *Yucatán* is the result of this mangling of an answer<sup>13</sup>, it preserves an incomprehension, of course in such a manner that this incomprehension remains incomprehended as such – otherwise the Spanish would hardly have decided on this toponym. Against Spanish as a world language (which was explicitly conceived as such since Nebrija's grammar published in 1492), significances from a non-world language that today cannot even be halfway reconstructed continue to assert themselves. Since then a crux, to use a metaphor from edition philology, has been sitting in the text of the conquerors, namely in their maps – something incomprehensible that cannot be conjectured despite all hermeneutic efforts<sup>14</sup>.

Often, literature intensively engages with such moments of the incomprehensible. Confrontations between colonizers and the colonized, between the "North" and the "South" are without a doubt a particularly important field of

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<sup>13</sup> There are quite diverse hypotheses on the emergence of the toponym (for an overview see [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toponimia\\_de\\_Yucat%C3%A1n](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toponimia_de_Yucat%C3%A1n), accessed: 04.12.2015), all of which at least agree that the inhabitants did not understand the question and that the Spanish did not understand that their "answer" was no answer.

<sup>14</sup> See the anthology by Bohnenkamp et al. 2010. That the crux is marked today with the same signs marking death and the dead is – in light of the numbers of deaths in the course of the Spanish conquest of South and Central America – which can also be read in Todorov's *Die Eroberung Amerikas* (see p. 161), an intended association.

such engagements. Accordingly, it is necessary to include texts that present these engagements from non-European perspectives. But it is not enough to just integrate them into the existing grid of World literature. When fictional narrative texts from the territory of modern-day Nigeria are classified without further ado as novels, as Nigerian novels – in order to show that the production of novels rose in various nations with similar trajectories, but with some temporal delays – the European categories of genre and nation remain untouched (Moretti 2007: 6)<sup>15</sup>. Even if the comparative study proceeding in this manner no longer “essentializ[es] the cultural roots of national identities” – as an older tradition of comparative studies did, in only apparent contradiction to its international orientation (Hamilton 2014: 4) – it still remains indebted to a methodological nationalism which is only conditionally suited to the situation today. Rather the objects coming into consideration for the first time, non-European as well as European, must always be taken at the same time as the occasion to review the organizing categories that *World Literature* (or *Comparative Literature*) works with<sup>16</sup>.

And conversely the engagements with the question of (in-)translatability are of course not restricted to the contact between colonizers and colonized. We might recall an encounter with a structural similarity to the Yucatán episode, which however plays out in the difference between two closely related idioms. This encounter occurs in the *Rheinländischer Hausfreund*, a “new calendar” – which could be said to take a planetary perspective in several senses, that would however go unnoticed if one only knew its most famous anecdotes.

Johann Peter Hebel opened the calendar with “Reflections on the Universe” or, more literally translated, “Reflections on the World-Edifice” (*Betrachtungen über das Weltgebäude*) in all the years for which he was decisively or solely responsible for it. These quasi-planetary texts, which recurred year after year with few changes, offer basic astronomical knowledge about the Earth and sun, the moon, planets, fixed stars and comets. The Earth occurs twice here, as the non-disjunctive list of topics already hints: once as “our place of residence”, (Hebel 2010: 85) the only place known so far on which reflections on the universe occur; another time it is approached as a station on the planetary journey from

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**15** Based on Griswold 2006. She does briefly discuss why she does not include Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* and what definition of *Nigerian Novel* she is assuming. However, these questions, quite volatile for the constructional mechanisms of national literature, are assumed to be already answered in the further statistical evaluation. For a similar criticism of Moretti’s model of a unidirectional transport of literary genres from the “center” to the “periphery” see Warwick Research Collective 2015: 55–56.

**16** The most important contribution to this question (and one that is not discussed very much in postcolonial studies) is still in my view Godzich 1994.

the sun to Uranus and proves, to the surprise of the travelers, to be “our Earth itself”. More than making other planets more familiar to us by populating them with other creatures, Hebel makes “our Earth itself” more unfamiliar. We have hardly arrived at Venus before Hebel’s space traveler looks back at “the Earth”:

“Look there”, he would say to the first acquaintance he makes, look at that lovely star, that’s where I came from, and my father and mother still live there. My mother is someone born so and so. It must be a wonderful pleasure to see the Earth under the stars of the heavens and see it wandering entirely as itself. (Hebel 2010: 411)

When the Earthling returns to his “place of residence”, he no longer sees this as a whole. Even on journeys of a relatively small distance a “misunderstanding” can easily arise (as three of these anecdotes are explicitly headed). When, in another famous anecdote, a man from the Southern German village of Duttlingen has traveled to Amsterdam, he takes the thrice-repeated information *Kannitverstan* in response to his thrice-repeated question, for the name of a man who got rich in East Indies trade, built a large house for himself, and then was carried to his grave (Hebel 2010: 162–164). In translating the Maya expression *Yucatán* into a Germanic idiom with *Kannitverstan* (“cannot-understand”), Hebel makes the reader understand that the man from Duttlingen does not understand that his questions are not understood – in contrast to the Maya expression which is not even understood as not understood. Whereas the Earthling fluently converses with the Venusian, the translation between speakers of two Germanic idioms proves quite difficult. Hebel’s stories count on these confusions of close/far relations, because the cosmos can no longer be imagined as a formation of concentric circles in which the familiarity lessens in proportion to the distance from the central point; newer definitions of globalization emphasize precisely this decoupling of close and far from local distances<sup>17</sup>. Interplanetary communication and intra-planetary “misunderstanding” are two aspects of the same dynamic.

For the 67 poems in his only volume consisting entirely of anagram poems (Pastior 2008: 207–283)<sup>18</sup>, Oskar Pastior used many titles of Johann Peter Hebel’s texts as material. The longest of these anagram poems by number of lines plays through one with the smallest number of letters: that of *Kannitverstan*, the transposition of which tends to seem more Norwegian than Dutch (e.g. “tankvarintens / stanitverkann / knirtannavest / stennknarativ” (Pastior 2008: 259)).

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<sup>17</sup> See for example the oft-quoted definition of globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 2009: 64).

<sup>18</sup> Pastior of course used the same procedure for other poems, but not for another entire volume.

In the case of the poem *ALLGEMEINE BETRACHTUNG UEBER DAS WELT-GEBAEUDE* (“General Reflection on the World-Edifice”) the anagrammatical method rests on the Kabbalistic assumption that the universe arose through the manipulation of letters by its Creator – an assumption for which the ambiguity of the Greek *stoicheion* or Latin *elementum* (meaning both “atom” and “letter”) paved the way:

ALLGEMEINE BETRACHTUNG UEBER DAS WELTGEBAEUDE

Unter dem Galactaeer gebeugt – du ein halbes Webel  
am Ball des Achtel Gebube. Wenige, ruede Untertage.  
Auch wenig Labsal am Berge der gedeuteten Beutel.  
Am Rauch bestellt dein Ab-Auge Duebel gegen Werte.  
Eingebleute Strauchelwale, Magenbaeder, Budget,  
durch Basteleien am Tage gebuegelte Wunder-Albe.  
Weil Tagnaechte am Gebaeude, und Sterbegebruell,  
geben sich Brut, Webe, Maut elegantere Geduld-Aale.  
Eingeschaltet beben Wuermelbude, Dualaggregate,  
Multischallgegenden, Wege der Taube ueber Ata Be.  
Eigelbe Meuchelwabe das – entgegen der Tabulatur  
(Pastior 2008: 248).

Bowed under the galacteer – you a half-turn  
On the ball of a cubit of fools. Few and rude sub-days.  
And little balm on the hill of the interpreted bag.  
On the smoke your off-eye orders pegs against values.  
Stumble-whales hammered in, stomach baths, budget,  
With day-time bricolages bagelled wonder-imps.  
Because day-nights on the edifice, and dying roaring,  
Brood, tissue, tolls give themselves more elegant eels of patience.  
Switched on, worming-digs tremor, dual-aggregates,  
Multi-sound neighborhoods, ways of the dove over Ata Be  
A yolkly murderous honey-comb it is – against the tabulature.

However, what Pastior puts into question is precisely the generality of the reflection, and thus at the same time the well-ordered nature of that which is contemplated. The universe is now entirely subject to “arbitrariness” in a doubled sense: the arbitrariness of the circumstance that Hebel’s title (after conversion of the umlauts) consists of 41 letters, but also the decisions of the arbiter pushing around Scrabble tiles, who from an unimaginably large number of possibilities (roughly  $2,134 \times 10^{39}$ ) selects just eleven, which, on the periphery of German, make just a little sense. The “edifice” remains, but nothing of the “world”: what remains in this “bricolage” is rather the Earth, with all its “stumble-whales” and “worming-digs”, an association of “multi-noise neighborhoods” where sounds are heard that cannot longer be noted in any “tabulature”, in any score or table.

These sounds that can be registered in a codified writing system (that belong to “literature” in the broadest sense) never quite stop making sense; even in the “stennknarativ” it is impossible not to recognize any sense. Yet they hardly cohere into a “totality of sense”: The interpreter will find only “little balm on the hill of the interpreted bag”.

It is not for nothing that elsewhere – and incidentally long before the most recent debates in the US – Pastior had expressed skepticism towards those models of world literature that seek to administer a universal with all its purported indissoluble commonalities and allegedly secondary differences: “And that magnanimous concept of ‘world literature’ goes down the drain: discontinuous spaces, disintegrating presents in acceleration – not a pretty picture” (Pastior 1994: 104).

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