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‘National Literatures’?

When we are doing literary scholarship, we almost automatically move within the frame of the concept of “national literatures.” This notion is, at least to a certain extent, in contradiction to the theoretical assumption at the basis of the research project that organized this conference: namely, that literary artifacts originate in a withdrawal of material and a subsequent synthetization of material floating in a universal virtual network of cultural items.¹ But where does this notion originate, and what conclusions may – or should – we derive from the context of its emergence?

The Greeks of the classical period (like many or, perhaps, all ancient civilizations) did not care about the question to what extent their great texts were essentially “Greek” – for the simple reason that they did not deem the literary production on the part of other tribes or communities worth the effort of considering them. To put it in current terms, they were strict communitarians; universalism was a concept so far removed from their intellectual framework that they did not even compare their culture to that of the “others,” the *bárbaroi*.² – As a first point concerning the entire debate at issue here, this observation yields the insight that the emergence of a concept like “national literatures” presupposes universalism as its background. Only if humans consider other humans as in principle equal does the question of how to define one’s “own” culture with regard to the cultural products of the “others” become a relevant point.³ – It is precisely this latter feature which is absent from

1 For details see my book *The Cultural Net: Early Modern Drama as a Paradigm*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018; the above deliberations are taken from the manuscript of that publication.

2 Is it necessary to make explicit that this generalizing assessment is (like all generalizing statements within the humanities) relative, that is, that it needs to be understood in relation to our modern Western situation? Since ancient Greeks maintained close economic relations with limitrophic tribes and empires, and also engaged them in military activities as early as archaic times, there was, consequently, a certain knowledge about the barbarian cultures (in contrast, for example, to the relative ignorance of the “other” in traditional China, and also to the absolute ignorance in this respect conditioned by geological factors [communities living on islands far removed from other islands (Australia); small communities living scattered in vast territories difficult to traverse (Brazil)]). But as can be inferred from emblematic literary figures – Medea, for instance – there was nothing that could compare to the relations of exchange on an equal level and the ensuing mutual esteem that are characteristic of cultural relations in the West from with the Middle Ages onwards.

3 The above point may also be of a certain relevance with regard to the other early high civilization, China – a community that preserved its communitarian attitude of self-centeredness much longer than Greece (which, as part of the Roman Empire, adopted universalism in

the system of a classical school of thought that has been very influential in Western modernity, and which is frequently seen as a precursor of modern universalism: the Sceptics. Their tolerance of the “views” (manners, social codes, artworks) of any imaginable other tribe is not based on the assumption of equality; it emanates rather from a less aggressive interpretation of the concept of barbarism than the one to be found in Aristotle (who deemed it legitimate to treat barbarians in just the same way as wild beasts).⁴ For the Sceptics, the “others” and their culture are without any importance. It is indifference and disinterest which characterizes their attitude towards foreign cultures. Since alien communities are consigned to (total) dis-consideration, there is no need to theorize what one’s own culture may be in contrast to that of the “barbarians.” – According to current clichés, Greek culture and its self-conception underwent a radical change in the period when the various tribes were (violently) unified and then made to spread in warfare into regions hardly known to them before. Hellenism is, on the one hand, a period of cultural imperialism, which, on the other, goes hand in hand with a partial integration of cultural patterns of the subjugated into a “new” and more comprehensive Greek culture. Still, the processes occurring in this period did not provoke reflection upon what is or was Greek (vs. non-Greek). The civilizational gap between the conquered territories and the Greek mother-land was so great that the encounter with the “others” did not pique Greek self-reflection’s pre-existing self-sufficiency. Just as was the case in later times – in the period of the Western penetration into sub-Saharan Africa for example – no need for self-reflection or self-problematization emerged; the difference was cast as hierarchical, and, in addition, as categorical; as long as they did not adopt Greek culture, the conquered remained the *bárbaroi* as theorized by Aristotle: intermediate beings between animals and “real” humans, meaning Greeks. – In addition to the abovementioned feature, tribal self-consciousness (“nationalism”) seems to have a second prerequisite: the presence of various tribes of an approximately comparable civilizational level within a territory that is physically – as well as

the fourth century CE), in fact up to the period when it was forced to “open” itself by military intervention on the part of the Western powers. Within traditional Chinese culture, there is not the slightest interest in “foreign” art works and, consequently, no need to reflect what the (dichotomously conceived) “essence” of one’s “own,” Chinese art is.

⁴ See Plutarch’s summary of Aristotle’s advice in this respect to his pupil Alexander (*De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute* I 6). There is much controversy regarding the authenticity of the passage, but such discussions seem somewhat superfluous. In his authorized works, Aristotle equates passim *bárbaroi* and *douloi* (slaves, who were most frequently of “barbarian” provenance); the juridical status of the latter was to be objects, instruments, without any human dignity or rights (see *Politics* 1252a 30 ff., and 1253b 30 ff.).

conceptually – manageable under a given standard of technological development.

Things are at first sight different, though ultimately the same, with the Romans. The Romans adopted Greek culture and literature as their own after conquering the peninsula – partly translating or emulating in Latin the basic texts, partly preserving them in their original formulation. They chose the path of self-Hellenization. There was a “strong” concept of Rome as a power and as regards its mission, but there was no specific concept of an autochthonous cultural identity linked to it.⁵ One might speculate about the reasons for this quasi-absence of a *cultural* “national” identity. As occurred in Late Antiquity (when the barbaric conquerors of the empire adopted Roman culture), the difference in terms of civilizational level may have appeared so immense that the idea of casting a Roman cultural identity in contrast to Greek culture may have seemed senseless; and the inverse relation in terms of physical power may have facilitated acceptance of the narcissistic injury that accompanied the adoption of a cultural model that was not the Romans’ own. – This feature of the absence of a “national” cultural identity was reinforced when Rome spread its rule over the entire Mediterranean world, integrating innumerable tribes and peculiar traditions into its empire; it was given another strong impulse through the reception of Stoicism by parts of the population and their adoption of its universalizing implications; it became definitive when the empire finally embraced, in the fourth century, the first universalistic religion ever, Christianity – thus converting the universalizing claims and speculations proffered by the Stoics into a divinely revealed truth, that is, an incontestable view.

According to a widespread belief, the situation radically changed about 1000 years later, namely with Dante’s theorizing of “volgare” – that is, of the variant of classical Latin that had become the language of daily communication in Tuscany – as an instrument that is (at least on the level Dante calls “volgare illustre”) no less dignified than Latin as language for literary texts. As is well known, Dante even wrote a treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia*, concerning his postulate; but it is quite telling that he wrote it in Latin.⁶ Dante’s views have, finally, little in common with what we currently understand by the term

5 The central text establishing the rising empire’s self-conception with regard to its “origins,” Virgil’s *Aeneid*, presents Rome as a product not of autochthony, but of transfer.

6 In anticipation of my argument above, I should stress that the treatise is written for people writing and discussing literary texts, that is, the educated only, whereas Dante’s most important text, the *Commedia* (1307–1321), is a didactic text, that is, it is conceived for general divulgation.

“national literature.”⁷ The dichotomy he discusses is not that of Latin vs. Italian; it is the dichotomy of “grammatica” vs. “vulgaris sermo” – that is, the standardized language of script⁸ vs. the flexible and non-standardized language of oral communication. It was not Dante himself, but another of the “tre corone,” namely Boccaccio, who made explicit the reasons for this claim to an equal linguistic dignity: the knowledge of “grammatica” was limited to a very restricted circle of educated people (less than 1% of the population), whereas the “volgare,” in oral presentation at least, was accessible to everyone.⁹ There was no ambition involved to assert a particular Italian national identity, which did not exist at the time;¹⁰ the question at issue is that of an extremely limited vs. a general (potential) audience.

7 On this point see Dante’s explicit rejection of every sort of “nationalism” or claims to the supremacy of one tribe over another, as resulting from a lack of reason and from the state of being uncultured (“Nam quicumque tam obscene rationis est ut locum sue nationis delitiosissimum credat esse sub sole, hic etiam pre cunctis proprium vulgare licetur, idest maternam locutionem, et per consequens credit ipsum fuisse illud quod fuit Ade. Nos autem, cui mundus est patria velut piscibus equor, quanquam Sarnum biberimus ante dentes et Florentia adeo diligamus ut, quia dileximus, exilium patiamur iniuste, rationi magis quam sensui spatulas nostri iudicii podiamus.” / “For whoever is so misguided as to think that the place of his birth is the most delightful spot under the sun may also believe that his own language, his mother-tongue, that is, is pre-eminent among all others; and, as a result, he may believe that his language was also Adam’s. To me, however, the whole world is a homeland, like the sea to fish; though I drank from the Arno before my teeth grew, and love Florence so much that, because I loved her, I suffer exile unjustly, I will weight the balance of my judgement more with reason than with sentiment.” (*De vulgari eloquentia*, Liber primus, VI, 2–3).

8 Etymologically, *grammatica* derives from Greek *gramma*, ‘letter.’ Grammars or grammar books, in the modern sense of the term, are a collection of rules applicable to the written version of the language, whose limits may be transgressed (and are indeed transgressed) in oral communication.

9 I am referring to the preface of the *Decameron* where Boccaccio gives expression to the idea that his collection is written in view of a primarily female audience and, for this reason, makes use of the *volgare* instead of the *grammatica*.

10 I should like to recall, that as concerns politics Dante was a partisan of the idea of the Holy Roman Empire, and hence expected the emperor to settle the situation of civil war in Italy to which Dante had fallen victim. – In order not to get lost in details, I leave it to my readers to extrapolate how I would respond to less important objections to my above arguments (I will be addressing the more important ones, however). I shall just give one example relevant to the above postulate: there is, of course, a piece like Petrarch’s famous *canzone* “Italia mia.” When nineteenth-century Italians were fighting the Spaniards, the French, and the Austrians in order to accede to the state of political nation, it is not astonishing at all that this poem was read along Herderian lines, that is, as testimony to the fact that “Italians” had been longing for national unity as early as the Middle Ages (Dante’s abovementioned ideas thus being neglected, however). Reading Petrarch’s poem without any nationalistic emphasis, the text turns out to be anything but a dichotomous commitment; its essence is nostalgia, the

I am not sure that the situation changed substantially in the centuries we usually call the Renaissance or the Early Modern Age. The “grammaticalization” of the vernaculars – meaning their standardization, which started with Antonio de Nebrija’s grammar of Castilian Spanish (1492), and which was continued in the work done by the Académie française – did indeed have implications for a concept that links cultural products mediated by language to political units. Language standardization was one important aspect in the establishment of what we call the modern state, that is, political organizations governed by rules and norms universally applicable in a certain, given territory. Yet it was not the assumption of “blood bonds” between its inhabitants that formed the basis of these territories. As may be inferred from the history of Spain in the age of the “Reyes católicos,” or from that of the fragmented German principalities of that age, the rationale of early modern state-building was dynastic constellations. The concept of the nation, meaning people united not only politically – that is, by bonds or constraints of power – but also by bonds of birth, by natural bonds,¹¹ did not exist in that period; the link between soil, blood, and culture became a widely accepted, quasi-natural concept only in later times.

It may at first sight seem astonishing that the idea as such was not developed in the most pervasively homogenized state of the time, that is, France. The concept of *Volkskultur* is linked to the name of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Yet if we consider the idea that not only fiction, but also the modeling of “realities,” may – to a large extent – obey the imperative of compensation, it is not difficult to devise reasons why the concept of nation as a unitary culture was first developed in the German-speaking territories. There was no political unit called “Germany” at the time, and there was no prospect of creating such a unit (the modern German state was founded only around a century later by Bismarck). The concept of a “cultural nation” may have been the only way to confer unity upon a fragmented territory which seemed somewhat belated in its political development in comparison to the other important European communities (England, France, Spain).

longing for a period past and for the *topoi* where this period of the speaker’s life took place; nostalgia, however, is a universal feeling; it emanates from our incapacity to revivify the past in ways other than by remembering. Memory is always and by necessity impregnated by nostalgia, by the feeling of loss.

11 The Latin noun *natio*, from which our modern term “nation” stems in terms of etymology, derives from the verb *nasci*, meaning “to be born.”

Herder's theorizing of culture, and in particular of culture as language, that is, literature,¹² formed the basis of the Romantic concept of "national culture" throughout Europe. Whereas this approach to culture was relegated to the background in the age of avantgardism, the emergence of "new" nations after the end of colonialism revitalized it in a most remarkable way. As happened in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the process of nation-building was accompanied by a discourse aimed at delimiting what is one's own from that which belongs to others; or, to put it in current terminology, it was accompanied by an identity discourse.

Vernaculars are indeed different – this is a fact. As such, however, they are not sufficient to substantiate the postulate of identity. The long-lasting practice of vernacular plurilingualism, widespread amongst the nobility and the educated parts of the middle class, may have resulted in the impression that language alone could be an all too frail basis for postulating a cultural "identity" in a substantialist fashion. Herder's concept of *Volksliteratur* ('national literature') seemed suitable to supplement the lack. According to Herderian conceptualization, popular culture, and literature especially, is not the creation of singular geniuses; it is the collective creation of the common people, amongst whom it first emerged. By narrating and re-narrating the stories or "songs" again and again for thousands of years before the texts were put in writing in the way known to us, these texts became – according to Herder – the direct expression of the *Volksseele* (literally: 'national soul,' in the sense of national character), that is, of the entire mental cast of the people concerned. The texts were thus conceived as no less "rooted" than the people, meaning the common people (and not the highly mobile nobility and intellectual class) who were, in times before the liberation of the third estate, "rooted," just like trees and plants.

The – at first sight striking – evidence of this conceptualization seems to be further confirmed by the fact that there are features of human culture directly contingent upon the conditions that obtain in a specific habitat. The architecture of houses as well as dresses and dress-styles, nutrition, etc., are indeed

¹² Specialists on Herder's work will not be satisfied by the following portrayal of his positions; but my argument does not address specialists. The concession I would be ready to make is that Herder's argumentation is self-contradictory with regard to many problems (as I shall point out in the course of this paper). But the "racist" component that I will be foregrounding is undeniably a most prominent element of his entire thinking. In addition, I should stress that it is not my intention to give an adequate and balanced precis of Herder's theorizing in its entirety, nor to offer speculations regarding the question what he might "really" have thought. When it comes to the *reception* of Herder's ideas, that is, to their resonance, the point here stressed seems indeed to be by far the most relevant one.

dependent on climate and on geological factors (mountains, plains, the shore, etc.). Since literary texts were apparently different in different regions – the indicator of difference being the difference in language – it seemed self-evident to transpose this concept of the rootedness of cultural practices onto literary texts, with popular texts given first place, and so to arrive at the well-known and still virulent notion of *Volksliteratur* as an expression of *Volksseele*.¹³

One might add a detail of German cultural history touched upon in passing above: the entire theorizing of Herder had one aim, which shines through on almost every page of his tracts. German eighteenth-century culture was under a strong influence from France. Noblemen, as well as intellectuals, mainly communicated in French. German seventeenth-century – that is, baroque – literature was conceived of as “barbaric”; it is indeed somewhat odd, linguistically, as well as conceptually. The treasures of medieval Middle High German literature were largely unknown at the time. Herder is one of those people – such as exist in all tribes and at all times, including the present – who, for whatever reason, were opposed to this early vogue of “globalization,” that is, the absorption of cultural entities performing less well by those that perform better. He was a communitarian. In order to stake his claim that German culture is worthy of being valorized, he could not do other than postulate that there is an “essential” difference between French *civilisation* on the one hand, and an “authentic” German *Kultur* on the other.

It is striking, however, to see the innumerable logical twists that this highly learned man is obliged to make in order to give his rather bizarre – but influential – conceptualization the semblance of argumentative coherence. The most illustrative example of these hardly believable logical leaps and gaps may be

¹³ As I shall stress in the following, the resonance of Herder’s ideas in the Latin world was less important than within the Germanic and Slavic territories; but resonance there was, in particular in the first half of the nineteenth century with its cult of *couleur locale*. On the level of theory, Herder’s ideas were an inspiration for the concepts of a cultural theorist as influential as Hippolyte Taine, who propagated the parameters of *race, milieu et moment* as determinant factors for all cultural production. And even in the twentieth century there are influences from Herderian concepts in French culture. As an example, I shall quote a passage from Guillaume Apollinaire against the backdrop of which my above polemics are formulated: “Furthermore, poets must always express a milieu, a nation; and artists, just as poets, just as philosophers, form a social estate which belongs doubtless to all humanity, but as the expression of a race, of one given environment. Art will only cease being national the day that the whole universe, living in the same climate, in houses built in the same style, speaks the same language with the same accent, that is to say never.” (“The New Spirit and the Poets” [1918]. *Selected Writings*, translated by Roger Shattuck, New York: New Directions, 1971, p. 229.)

his portrait of English literature.¹⁴ The English tradition is presented as *Germanic*, and so as the expression of a *Geist* that is parallel if not identical to that of the Germans residing on the continent. The assumption is “substantiated” by way of a brief recapitulation of the political history of the British Isles, which gives prominence to the numerous invasions by Scandinavian tribes. There is not much room for the Celtic part of the English tradition in this narrative. Yet, above all, there is no room for a capital event like the conquest of 1066. It is simply not mentioned by Herder. From that date onward, English language and culture have been a mix of Celtic, Germanic, and Latin (French) elements – the latter feature linking all subsequent English culture to the entirety of the Greco-Roman heritage and its Mesopotamian, Egyptian (etc.) antecedents.

Herder’s blindness in this respect also encompasses his eulogy of Shakespeare as a Teutonic genius who supposedly gave expression to the *Volksgeist* of all Germanic tribes. Not a word is said about Shakespeare’s drawing from Latin, Italian, Spanish, and Greek sources. Herder’s readers are given the impression that Shakespeare’s dramas mainly consisted of appearances by ghosts, witches, and other related strands apt to refute the superficiality of French rational *civilisation* in the name of a Germanic *Kultur* – whose attribute would be its being linked to dimensions of a “higher” or “deeper” truth not accessible by plain reason.

On a more general level, the argumentative weakness of Herder’s tracts becomes apparent in a recurrent – and rather amazing – feature. On the one hand, the author relentlessly stresses that “authentic” culture is bound to the space and to the “race” inhabiting the space in question. If that was the case, we would have “national cultures” as diverse as the spaces on this globe (temperate, cold, hot climatic regions; coastal, maritime spaces, plains, deserts, mountains, etc., etc.); but Herder himself again and again “detects” – with a quasi-childlike joy and enthusiasm – that all these different cultures bear far-reaching commonalities if one goes back far enough in time. The “pristine” products of the different national cultures are analogous, if not identical. In congruence with the findings of emerging evolutionary biology, Herder advocates the thesis of the species’ monogenesis.¹⁵ In formulations to be found

14 See the two essays “Shakespear” (1773) and “Von der Ähnlichkeit der mittleren englischen und deutschen Dichtkunst”; one should also read “Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel ueber Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker” (1773); quotations are from the standard edition (*Sämmtliche Werke*, edited by Bernhard Suphan, 32 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1877–1909, vol. 5, pp. 159–257 and vol. 9, pp. 522–535); translations are mine.

15 The following arguments are most clearly expressed in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), in: *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 5, pp. 475–593, par. 7/8, 12/13 and 16/17.

some decades later in myriad texts by Romantic writers, he praises the “patriarch’s tent” as the first and best model of human congregation. The “values,” cultural as well as societal, that developed out of this “ground” are

wisdom instead of science, piety instead of knowledge, the love of parents, spouses, children instead of pleasantries and debauchery. Life well-ordered, the rule by divine right of a dynasty – the model for all civil order and its institutions – in all this mankind takes the simplest, but also the most profound delight. [...] The human spirit received the first forms of wisdom and virtue with a simplicity, strength, and majesty that [...] has no equal, no equal at all in our philosophical, cold, European world. And just because we are so incapable of understanding this anymore, of feeling it, let alone taking delight in it, we mock, we deny, and we misconstrue!

And he ends his diatribe (addressing his contemporary educated readers) by apostrophizing “your philosophical deism, your aesthetic virtue [...] your universal love of all peoples” as mere foolishness.¹⁶ – Herder does not discuss explicitly what factor vitiated this early literature of “direct” expression of the people’s *Seele*; but it is evident what he had in mind (perhaps even unconsciously): it is rationality, refinement, progress – in brief: civilization – that has brought about the detrimental move away from literature as the expression of the *Volksseele*.

Herder is a (proto-)Romantic – but a naïve Romantic. He posits as “true” and “essential” what more enlightened thinkers of that age, such as Schiller, would apostrophize as a (legitimate) longing for a past that is past, which may (legitimately) be re-created by way of works of art, though under the condition that these works preserve and manifest the artificial character of the re-creation. This is the essence of Schiller’s concept of the *Sentimentalisches* as opposed to the *Naïves*,¹⁷ meaning by this latter the “authentic” vestiges of pristine human culture. – It remains an open question, however, whether such a “naïve” approach to the conceptualizing of the world ever existed. It may be that mediation – in other words: the introduction of language and reflection – put an end to all such “naïveté” grounded in “immediateness” (*Unvermittelt-heit*), which would thus be an attribute not of the human, but of the animal world.

I should like to make one additional point with regard to Herder’s theorizing, and to the innumerable theories, up to and including postcolonialism, that are more or less direct continuators of these ideas. As already mentioned in passing, it is not without reason that concepts about literary texts and rooted-

¹⁶ Par. 18/19.

¹⁷ See *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795).

ness first came up in a German context; nor does it seem astonishing that they were enthusiastically received in northern and eastern Europe, nor that they later found avid recipients in Latin America,¹⁸ and in the entire (former) Third World and amongst its intellectuals. The resonance of such ideas in the strongholds of Occidental culture (France, Italy, Spain, England, in later times also in the USA) was always rather limited. The reason is a very simple one. It would be completely meaningless to claim that French (Italian, Spanish, etc.) literary culture was the expression of the *Geist* or *Seele* of tribes residing in these territories from time immemorial, for two different – but intertwined – reasons. The people living in these countries cannot be unaware that their ancestors have not been “rooted” in the soil for thousands and thousands of years; that they are rather the descendants of a somewhat wild mix of locals (Celtic), Roman conquerors (meaning: people from the Mediterranean in a very broad sense of the term), and Scandinavian conquerors of the Roman Empire (Goths, Normans). Secondly, they also cannot be unaware that their language, as well as their entire culture – and including literary texts – is to a very large extent the result not of “rootedness,”¹⁹ but rather of transfer (*translatio imperii*,

18 It is perhaps no surprise to note that – amongst others, including the most famous Brazilian novelist to date, Machado de Assis – it was Jorge Luis Borges who polemicized, imbued by irony in his typical way, against the widespread ideas of a peculiar Latin American (or even: Argentine, Mexican, Brazilian) literature, which came up in the age of Latin American “nation building”: “The idea that Argentine literature must abound in differential traits and in Argentine color seems to me to be a mistake. [...] Furthermore, I don’t know if it needs to be said that the idea that a literature must define itself by the differential traits of the country that produces it is a relatively new one, and the idea that writers must seek out subjects local to their country is also new and arbitrary. [...] The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as a foreign import.” (“The Argentine Writer and Tradition.” *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger, translated by Esther Allen. New York: Penguin, 2000, pp. 421–427).

19 Let me note in passing that the most important French precursor of Romanticism, Rousseau, bases his description of primordial sedentary communities, no less tainted by nostalgia than Herder’s, not on the assumption of family (“blood”) bonds between the members, but on the concept of contract (*contrat social*). This said, there is – as I shall briefly explain in the following – a strong influence from Herder’s ideas in the two or three decades of “acute” Romanticism, in authors like Chateaubriand and Lamartine. – One has to add a special remark concerning (vernacular) literary studies as a discipline taught in the universities: this is an “invention” of the early nineteenth century. It simply did not exist previously, as literary studies treated the classical texts (Greek, Latin) only. Readers not familiar with the situation may find amazing what is, indeed, a fact: French literary studies were first established in Germany, in the newly founded, Humboldtian-style university of Bonn, by Friedrich Diez, the first professor ever appointed for the study of Romance languages and literatures (1830). It is not very difficult to imagine that literary studies at early nineteenth-century German universities were practiced along Herderian lines. And there is, indeed, one section of Post-Classical, European

going hand in hand with a *translatio studii*). In the Latin parts of Europe (including England), culture is evidently a product of the working of network-like structures, and of their constant – and finally uncontrollable – ramifications.

The difference, I would argue, from the situation in regions like the Germanic lands, eastern Europe, and those parts of the former Third World that were not totally absorbed into Western culture during the process of colonization,²⁰ does not consist in a difference in the situation itself; it is the *consciousness* of the situation that differs. The fact that “tribes,” as well as “tribal cultures,” are not something stable or “rooted,” but rather the result of constant processes of exchange of genes and memes, cannot remain unknown in eras

literature that ideally fits the Herderian parameters, namely Medieval Literature. Consequently, modern (nineteenth-century) literary studies were in their origin almost exclusively medievalist. As Middle High German texts are to a large extent based on French models, the first literary scholars in Germany studied not only their “own,” but also the Medieval French texts as well – which were largely unknown in their country of origin at that time, with the exception of troubadour lyric. This section of the French literary patrimony had been re-discovered already by François-Juste-Marie Raynouard (*Choix de poésies originales des troubadours* [1816–1821]), who was deeply influenced by Herderian concepts; his endeavors were carried on by Claude Fauriel, the first professor ever at the Sorbonne to hold a chair for “littératures étrangères” (1830). Fauriel had absorbed the basic concepts of German Romanticism as a close acquaintance of Mme de Staël, the author of the famous book *De l’Allemagne* (1810), which is seen as the first manifestation of “Romantic” ideas in the French language. Scholars like Gaston Paris, who had studied with Diez, began systematically to establish French literary studies, emulating the “German” way, that is, with an accent on medievalism. In 1835, Francisque Michel, a young scholar inspired by these new ideas, traveled to England. In the Bodleian Library he found the manuscript of the *Song of Roland* and thus “created” what has since then been the French “national” epic. Gaston Paris and his followers absorbed the Herderian ideas about “rootedness,” although, as I say above, these do not make much sense in a French cultural context (this is, by the way, the reason why the very first “Herderian” medievalist in France, Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi [an amateur scholar, much better known as an economist] had excluded French literature from his *De la littérature du midi de l’Europe* [1813]: it is all too obviously influenced by classical [Latin] models and thus does not fit the Herderian parameters). Herderian concepts were extremely influential up into the twentieth century and go on resonating in French literary studies. It was another decisive step, leading directly to what literary studies still are in French universities up to the present, when pupils of these medievalists transposed the concept of “national literature” into more recent periods (see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. “*Un souffle d’Allemagne ayant passé: Friedrich Diez, Gaston Paris, and the Genesis of National Philologies.*” *Romance Philology*, no. 40, 1986/1987, pp. 1–37).

20 As for Latin America, where this total absorption did happen, the enthusiastic reception of Herderian ideas is linked to a massive revalorization of the Pre-Colombian, that is, Indian heritage. Similar to what happened in eighteenth-century Germany, but on a much more frail basis (since there is not much left from Pre-Colombian times), the rediscovery of the “autochthonous” tradition is part of the attempt at emancipation from the culture of the colonial “oppressor.”

when the documentation of the past has become a routine practice. The French (Italians, Spanish) simply *know* from written evidence what their history has been, from roughly the first centuries before the Common Era onward; and they cannot deny what they and everyone else knows, however strong their longing for “rootedness” may be. In these countries, Romanticism (except for very brief periods) has always remained a mind-frame of the uncultured, the peripheral, and the non-intellectual parts of the population. In the Germanic territories, the past is known only from the age of Charlemagne onward; as for eastern Europe, the threshold of documentation lies in even later times. Since substantial written records of the past are lacking, central and eastern European nations have a tendency to *construct* a past, building their construals on the basis of their longing for certainty and stability in a world where these do not exist, where “substance” is nothing but a phantasm produced by the imagination. The political and ideological instability of many of the central and eastern European nations (and in addition: of Third World nations²¹) is, in part at least, closely linked to the fact that their historical belatedness favors attitudes concerning self-reflection that come close to a loss of reality.

There may be objections to the conceptualization of literary traditions that is implicitly hinted at above – objections that emanate from a text corpus that lies outside the temporal frame of our project, but is of particularly high importance for all (Western) literature of the more recent past, namely the nineteenth-century European novel, and especially texts we usually subsume under the heading of realism: that is, novels by Dickens, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Fontane, to mention just a few well-known authors. Reading these novels and studying them²² may (indeed) convey to the reader the impression

21 A nation and culture as great as India first became Westernized by physical force, but later adopted Western ideals (equality, democracy) on its own volition; with certain qualifications (“people’s democracy” instead of Westminster-style democracy) this description applies as well to another of the great nations and cultures in global history, China. When present-day Chinese party-officials make it their task to reassert a “Chinese identity” by fending off detrimental “Western influence,” they are not aware of the extent to which they are (unconsciously) reproducing and thus falling prey to a basic concept of Western Romanticism. It remains to pray to the gods that Chinese leaders will become conscious of this constellation before they give in to the temptation to start nineteenth-century-European-style tribal wars. – Why does India seem to perform better on the stage of global politics? In contrast to China, India never knew the situation of physical predominance of one ethnic community (in China: the Han); religiously, linguistically, in terms of mores, India is a culture of myriad facets. To claim an Indian or Indic identity in terms of dichotomies (“we” vs. “the others”) is much less favored by the realities than in other parts of the world, including the European nation states.

22 Starting with my doctoral dissertation, I published a lot, and continuously, on European nineteenth-century novels and on the theoretical issues involved in the notion of realism (*Balzac und der ‘Effet de réel’*. *Ästhetik der Wirklichkeitsdarstellung*. Amsterdam: Grüner, 1986;

of “feeling” or “sensing” the essence of “Frenchness” or of “Prussianness” – that is, of the specificity of what life in Paris or in the remote *province* was like at the times of Charles X or of Louis Philippe, or what it was like in Prussia during the era of Bismarck. Considering this mighty strand of literary realism – a tradition that has been declared obsolete many times, while it goes on flourishing, in particular in North America, but also experiences most impressive “renaissances,” or even “resurrections” in Europe again and again, usually right after being declared definitively “dead” a couple of years before – is it sensible to hold that a category like “national literatures” is misconceived right from the start?

The question is evidently linked to the difference of genre, and in particular to the device of description, especially the description of places – that is, to literary topography. Balzac’s famous portrayal of the *quartier latin* which culminates in the description of the *pension Vauquer* where the young Rastignac will spend his first two years in the capital and where he decides to do everything and anything to leave behind definitively such petty-bourgeois misery for the rest of his life; Flaubert’s description of the city of Rouen when Emma Bovary first sees it and is fascinated by this modern “Babylon” and hence ready to behave as people in such cities do (“Cela se fait à Paris,”²³ is Léon’s argument that convinces her to get on the coach in which their first sexual encounter takes place); or Fontane’s description of the winter landscape on the shores of the Baltic sea, the description of which – by conveying an atmosphere of oppressive provinciality and of “nothing will ever happen here” – makes it all the more plausible that Effi Briest would succumb to the sophisticated seduction techniques of von Crampas (the first adulterous encounter takes place inside a sleigh when the Briests and a number of other people ride home after a very boring New Year’s reception in a village nearby²⁴) – all of these and a number of other famous descriptions seem to be inextricably linked to certain specific places which we are used to taking as

Zum italienischen Roman des 19. Jahrhunderts. Foscolo, Manzoni, Verga, D’Annunzio. Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002; “Das Ende von Emma Bovary.” *Geschichte und Text in der Literatur Frankreichs, der Romania und der Literaturwissenschaft. Festschrift Rita Schober zum 80. Geburtstag*, edited by Hans Otto Dill, Berlin: Trafo, 2000, pp. 71–93; “Mimesis und Botschaft bei Flaubert.” *Romanistisches Jahrbuch*, vol. 54, 2004, pp. 180–212; “Considérations sur *Salammô*.” *MLN*, vol. 125, 2010, pp. 731–782; “Fiacre et grenier. Quelques remarques sur *Madame Bovary* et *Effi Briest*.” *La lecture insistante: autour de Jean Bollack*, edited by Christoph König and Heinz Wisman, Paris: Michel, 2011, pp. 255–284).

²³ The quotes are from the *troisième partie, chapitre I*.

²⁴ See chap. 19.

emblematic, as places concentrating the “essence” of specific national cultures in a specific period.

In response, I should first like to point out the trivial consideration that we do not have such descriptions in drama, or in poetry. In the case of drama, we typically get some information concerning time and place, but these indications almost always remain at a very elementary level. At the beginning of *Hamlet*, we are told that the castle where the action is taking place is located in Denmark; but there is nothing particularly Danish about the place or the people who live there.²⁵ The same holds true for the “Polish” setting of Calderón’s *La vida es sueño*, or the Spanish setting of Corneille’s *Cid*, to say nothing of the “Trézène” and Athens of Racine’s *Phèdre*. And even if the setting is from the same period as the process of writing it down, and if the place is located in a region where the language in which the play is written is the “official” language (as is the case with Shakespeare’s histories, or, in a later period, Ibsen’s and Strindberg’s dramas), one would not read or see these plays as instances of a specific “Britishness” or a specific “Scandinavianness.”²⁶ – The only relevant difference between such plays and narrative texts written in the same languages is that, in one case, there is topographical description, whereas in the other there is none or close to none. In a theoretical perspective this might – at first sight – lead to the assumption that there are “national literatures” on the one hand (the novel, particularly the realist novel), and more or less trans-national or non-national literatures on the other (drama, poetry). If put in a nutshell in this way, the view just described exposes, so to speak, the

²⁵ It is well known that the drama does discuss (though not very frequently) the question “what is Danish?” The most detailed answer to the question given in Shakespeare’s text is, as is known just as well, that they would be heavy drinkers (I. 4. 16–18); given the present-day statistics on alcohol consumption in European countries in general, which seem to describe deeply rooted habits, one is inclined to say that if national character is based on nothing else, there is no such national character (at least not in Shakespeare’s play).

²⁶ See, on this point, once again the already mentioned polemics by Machado de Assis and Borges against the Herderian/Romantic concept of literature: “I shall [...] ask if *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar* and *Romeo and Juliet* have anything to do with the history of England or the British territory, and if, nevertheless, Shakespeare is not, as well as a universal genius, an essentially English poet.” (“Notícia da atual literatura brasileira. Instinto de nacionalidade” [1873]. Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis. *Obra completa*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1962, vol. 3, pp. 801–809; my translation). “I think that Racine would not have begun to understand anyone who would deny him his right to the title of French poet for having sought out Greek and Latin subjects. I think Shakespeare would have been astonished if anyone had tried to limit him to English subjects, and if anyone had told him that, as an Englishman, he had no right to write *Hamlet*, with its Scandinavian subject matter, or *Macbeth*, on a Scottish theme.” (Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” p. 423).

extent to which it is meaningless. Yet it must be said that what I have just formulated describes the tacit and unreflected basis of current studies in the field of literary history. The propagation of Herder's concepts was fueled by the "rise of the novel" to the status of dominant genre that has occurred since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

This brings me back to my general assumption that the concept of "national literature" is generated by the non-problematized (over-)interpretation of the bond that literary texts of any kind by necessity maintain to the extra-literary "reality" from which they originate. The primary bond is language, which is a given for any literary text. If we leave aside experiments such as Esperanto, every literary text is written in a specific language that originates from one specific community.²⁷ The second feature that links fictional texts to factual realities – while nurturing the illusion described above – is, indeed, topography. Since "places" (cities, mountains, lakes [think of the wonderful description of Lake Como at the beginning of Manzoni's *Promessi sposi!*]), and landscapes are "realities," a literary text that marks the fictional topography by giving it the name of an existing place is, more or less inevitably, conceived by recipients as being "organically" linked to this specific place. The more detailed the description is and the more "real" items (famous churches, well-known street-names, topographical characteristics of any kind in the case of landscape descriptions) it contains, the more the recipients are inclined to see the entire *story* as being linked to this specific place, and so as being emblematic of its specificity – that is, of its being *substantially* different from stories that could have happened in other places during the same period.

Let me come back to two famous novels mentioned above: what, in essence, is the difference between *Madame Bovary* and *Effi Briest*? There is, of course, a huge difference; Fontane's most famous novel is not just a re-writing of Flaubert's text. There is a difference in "atmosphere," as one might say. The somewhat "over-heated" and hyper-active temperament of Flaubert's heroine – culminating in her most dramatically "staged" suicide – is countered by the reserved and subdued way of talking and acting of Fontane's most prominent female figure. Even so, the basic action: a woman more or less lured into a marriage of convenience to a man she hardly knows, the incongruence of the couple's characters, needs, and desires, the relative stupidity of the (benevolent) husband, who does not realize that his wife is unhappy, the frustrated

²⁷ The intricate question of the relationship between (a specific) language and (a specific) literary text requires a frame that would far exceed the limits of this paper. The forthcoming book, from which the above deliberations are taken, contains a detailed discussion of the problem.

wife's falling prey to an experienced seducer, the gloomy ending with the heroine's premature death, the lasting incomprehension as regards the entire constellation on the mourning widower's part – all this is basically parallel. Differences in detail are more or less linked to the difference in social class. But the classes as such – petty bourgeois on the one hand, the nobility serving as high-ranking state officers on the other – are not at all specific. Consequently, it would be relatively easy to identify all the features from Fontane's text for which there is no direct equivalent in Flaubert's text in other realistic novels from the French tradition that are set in a social sphere comparable to *Effi Briest*; in particular, I would think of Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*.

I would argue that the integration of extra-textual, "real" material into a literary text bestows upon recipients the *illusion* that the link is not unidirectional; that it, rather, operates in both directions. Since the action of *Madame Bovary* is set in nineteenth-century Normandy, we believe that this action is typical of the provincial France of that age. Yet seen logically, the operation just apostrophized is a reverse. In the narrative sequence mentioned above, it is not the city of Rouen that is of any importance; it is Rouen as a paradigm of the 'big city,' which is utilized to render plausible Emma's actions, which are not at all specifically French; unhappy marriages seem to be a rather universal phenomenon; the same holds true with respect to Fontane's description of the desolate Pomeranian coast; and in Balzac's *Père Goriot*, the portrait of the miserable Paris on the one hand, the splendid Paris on the other, have the function of motivating what the entire text is about: ambition ("parvenir! Parvenir à tout prix"²⁸) – an impulse that is, at least according to the account in the Hebrew Bible, the most fundamental and universal characteristic of humans.

Still, doesn't the argument expounded here reduce literary texts to a collection of motifs? In some way it does indeed. The main difference from existing framings of what literary texts (and cultural products in general) are, is that my approach rejects the view that there would be *substantive* intermediate levels between what I call the material floating in the net and the actual, singular work. The latter is specific in any case: otherwise it is nothing but an instance of trivial literature, whose mark is pervasive standardization. Flaubert's text is, indeed, different from Fontane's. Yet what is questioned here is the assumption that the difference consists mainly of being a typically "French" version of the story of a woman in an unhappy marriage on the one hand, and a typically "German"/"Prussian" version on the other. The basic difference is one of individual ingenuity. All the other differences, as I argue here, regarding extra-

²⁸ I quote from the edition of the text to be found in vol. 2 of the *Comédie humaine*, edited by Marcel Bouteron. Paris: Gallimard, 1971 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 935.

textual “real” material (the reference to Catholic religious practices and officials in Flaubert, to Protestant ones in Fontane; the reference to *sous-préfets* in Flaubert, to *Landräte* in Fontane; the reference to the endlessly stretching meadows in Flaubert, to the endless sea in Fontane, etc., etc.) are necessary components of texts of this genre and from the century in question; but their specificity is irrelevant for the problem of what makes the texts works of art. This irrelevance is underpinned by the fact that readers totally unfamiliar with the “real stuff” integrated into the respective texts (people who have never traveled to Normandy, or who have never had the chance to experience the Prussian territories known as *ostelbisch*²⁹) read them with great delight – and with no less delight, it seems, than people from the “national culture” from which the texts originate; this evaluation may be, I might say in parentheses, the point that differentiates works of “world literature” from all the rest of literary production.³⁰

29 Do I need to stress that for a West German of my generation (I was born in 1952), this latter constellation did, indeed, apply for all of my readings of Fontane’s novel that occurred before the reunification of Germany (1990)? Although I never experienced the regions “described” in these texts before the age of maturity, my impression as a young person (a very naïve view, as I would now say) was that the rendering of the landscape in Fontane was perfectly matched to the “realities,” and that the personages and their interaction were “typically” Bismarckian-Prussian.

30 In respect of this see my “Some Remarks on World Literature.” *Approaches to World Literature*, edited by Joachim Küpper, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013, pp. 167–175.

