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Chamisso, Chamisso Authors, and Globalization

THE TERM *CHAMISSO AUTHORS* IN WHAT follows means writers—like Adelbert von Chamisso—who wrote their literary works in German even though it was not their native language. This situation can be regarded from various perspectives. First, even though their reasons for choosing German as their literary language vary greatly, all Chamisso authors have renounced the convenience of writing in their mother tongue and shouldered the burdens of an acquired second or even third language. They have chosen thereby a more laborious path that must always slow the creative process.

Adelbert von Chamisso's life history shows as much.[1] Son of a count and born in his ancestors' castle in Champagne, Charles Louis Adelaïde Chamisso de Boncourt began life without any literary expectations. The French Revolution drove him in early youth to Germany, where, after initial poetic efforts in French, he soon took German as his literary language. So, with "Peter Schlemihl" and his poems, he became a German poet, indeed a classic of German literature.

But just a moment. This author's literary life did not run altogether smoothly and effortlessly. Did he really achieve the total linguistic competence in his chosen literary language one might expect from a classic author? Not entirely. We know, for example, from numerous contemporary sources that he spoke German throughout his life with a distinct French accent. He never learned to count and calculate correctly in German. And stylistic studies have indicated that Chamisso not infrequently subjected his German prose to the stricter rules of French syntax, a phenomenon unusual in a German classic.

Since Chamisso was a German author of foreign origin—let us say, a Chamisso author—his bilingualism exposed him to constant attack and challenge. A certain "foreignness" must always have been mixed into his linguistic routine; indeed, that is surely the source of the peculiar linguistic charm that constitutes the aesthetic distinction of his writing. In this context I need make only the briefest reminder that some literary critics, particularly the Russian formalists, included a certain degree of alienation (*ostranenie*) among the elementary requirements of "poeticity." That principle has its simple basis in the laws of language acquisition. In contrast to the first language, which, as we often say, "is absorbed with one's mother's milk," each additional language we learn as a

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foreign tongue must pay tribute to linguistic consciousness, promoting complicated layerings of consciousness and thereby an often healthy slowing of the creative process. I call this slowing healthy because it gives the literary language a greater opportunity to participate in thought and not dissolve into the routines of everyday usage. Therefore, if Chamisso authors sometimes still sound foreign even after many years in a German-speaking environment, they are perhaps somewhat closer to the spirit of literature than many native authors, who must consciously produce their alienation.

A comparable picture emerges if content and theme are also considered, as they too seldom are in currently dominant literary theories. We must first acknowledge that Chamisso authors live with the permanent handicap (unlike native writers) of having passed their childhood and youth in a milieu that speaks a different language. Consequently, they lack a certain depth of experience in their German that people used to try to capture with the word *temper*. To their benefit, however, they are specially endowed with a deepened experience of otherness and foreignness, often branded into them at a painful cost. When they introduce this experience into their writing, many Chamisso authors can rip us further out of our routines than we normally expect native authors to do. The sum of the estrangements and alienations communicated in their writing can perhaps be expressed by the term *world*, so long as this concept is understood not just extensionally as the expanse of earth but also intensionally as a certain helpful broadening of our anthropological constitution.

Let us first test these reflections against the life and works of Adelbert von Chamisso. This Chamisso author, if I may continue to use the term, brought, as a Frenchman, his specific foreignness with him to Germany. What that meant can best be appraised today from the widely read book *De l'Allemagne* (1813), in which the Frenchwoman Germaine de Staël described the land beyond the Rhine as the foreign land par excellence. Chamisso's immortal story of Peter Schlemihl, the man who sold his shadow, can thus be read as a parable of foreignness, since the protagonist (according to Thomas Mann's penetrating exegesis of the text) is an unfortunate who has lost, along with his shadow, all his bourgeois "solidity." But significantly, even though this hero or antihero remains homeless and, despite all efforts, never recovers his frivolously wasted shadow, nevertheless he is able to lead a new and interesting life of traveling all over the world with his magic seven-league boots and of investigating foreign parts as a scientist and "fieldworker."

Adelbert von Chamisso had no sooner established his literary fame with this tale in 1814 than he gave the conclusion of his story distinct biographical weight by embarking as a scientist on a Russian vessel for a multiyear voyage in the Pacific. Henceforth the author of "Peter Schlemihl" stands also as a scientific connoisseur of the strangest and most foreign things conceivable to a European of the day. Is it legitimate to call Chamisso, with such a curriculum vitae, a forerunner of globalization?

To answer this question with some precision, we should remember that Chamisso's German-language literary texts compose only a small part of his publications. Most of his published writings are scientific treatises in Latin or in French, still the preferred languages of publication for European scholars at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The distinct prestige of Latin and French reflects a historical—indeed, even a world-historical—phenomenon, which I would like to call the *protoglobalization* of Europe, or perhaps its Mediterranization. This refers to the spread of the Roman Empire, starting from the city of Rome, that for a long period of history organized the *orbis terrarum* around the Mediterranean into a "world" empire. This *imperium romanum* constituted a political, social, and military unit but in no sense an ethnic one, and it was held together primarily through the cultural

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bond of the Latin language, which in due course divided into the Romance languages. And from the High Middle Ages on, it was joined by a highly simplified working idiom, mainly used in commerce with the Byzantine and Muslim-Arab cultural territories and called in Venetian Italian *lingua franca*. The expression originally means "the language of the Franks, the language of Westerners"—it has nothing to do with "frank and free."[2]

Since the age of the great discoverers and world travelers, the "scouts" of European colonialism, this protoglobalization of the Mediterranean has retreated in its political and economic importance as it has been ever more obviously overtaken by the "great" globalization, which encompasses the entire earth. Alongside the Latin nations of Spain, Portugal, and France, the English and the Dutch and, somewhat later, the Germans braved the oceans to bring sought-after "colonial goods" back to Europe.[a] Countless varieties of pidgin arose around the world from diverse linguistic bases as simplified languages of commerce; significantly, the most likely hypothesis derives *pidgin* from the English word *business*. At the same time, on a more elevated level of language use, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English were promoted to the incontestable rank of "world languages." If German ever reached this status, it was only in the late nineteenth century—after Chamisso—and only in the sciences, and even there only for a few generations.

At first the world of colonial globality did not form a cultural unity. But even after the former European colonies were decolonized in the second half of the twentieth century, they found themselves exposed to an open or creeping Westernization, mediated above all by the languages of the colonialists. Now the most widespread lingua franca, English, understood through a false etymology as the language of "free" economy and unhindered capitalist circulation of goods, achieved commensurate high regard in the "world marketplace."

This was the historical context in which, around the turn of the eighteenth century, Germany, too, became *weltbewußt* [world-conscious]. The term demands more precise description, since multiple concepts from the European intellectual tradition lie hidden behind the word *world*. Philosophy, to begin with, has preferred the expression *universal* ever since the scholastic disputes about universals and the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Leibniz's "characteristica universalis" belongs to this historical context, as does Bossuet's "Discours sur l'histoire universelle" and Friedrich Schlegel's Romantic "universal poetry." With variations from one European language to another, derivatives of the Latin *globus* and *mundus* have inserted themselves into this semantic complex, most recently in contemporary political and economic language as *globalization* (in French mostly *mondialisation*). The Germanic languages, which operate more readily with compounds, most often form the corresponding concepts with the prefix *Welt-*, so that a French *exposition universelle* becomes *world's fair* in English and *Weltausstellung* in German.[3]

The weighty compounds with *Welt-* have accumulated in German since about the turn of the nineteenth century, as the historian Alexander Demandt has described in detail in a study in historical semantics—from *Weltall* [universe] to *Weltzeit* [world time] and including between *A* and *Z* such momentous concepts as *Weltgeschichte*, *Welthandel*, *Weltordnung*, and *Weltkrieg* [world history, world commerce, world order, world war]. Hegel with *Weltgeist* [world spirit], Marx with *Weltherrschaft* [world domination], Heine with *Weltrevolution* [world revolution], and Thomas Mann with *Weltzivilisation* [world civilization] are the German protagonists of this suggestive "world" semantics.[4] The European languages now compete naturally and more than ever for the honorary title of "world language," without needing to do homage to a "universal language" of philosophical provenance.

From this "global" background a bold new formation with *Welt-* emerged in the small

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German town of Weimar, where most people still hardly dared to think in terms of a nation-state: *Weltliteratur* [world literature]. It is attributable to no less a figure than Goethe, who coined it in 1827, when he was almost eighty. His idea has subsequently been celebrated worldwide as an act of genius, since literature as Goethe will have it is not to be limited by national borders.[5]

Let us scrutinize the most telling testimony in its biographical context. In the first half of his long life, culminating in his Italian journey, Goethe was content with the classical tradition of universality of old Europe—or, let us say, with the spiritual territory of "protoglobalization"—but in the second half of his life he let his spirit roam ever more freely through the "whole" world, stimulated to do so in many respects by the Parisian newspaper *Le globe*. A large step in this direction was the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), with which Goethe discovered the Orient for himself. Around the same time his work on the second part of *Faust* expanded it ever more decisively into the boundless distance. His daily reading at this time fitted the same pattern; as his conversations with Eckermann document, it reflected with increasing clarity a global desire for knowledge that consciously crossed the threshold between the old-European protoglobalization and the new worldwide globalization. Thus, in 1827, shortly before formulating the idea of world literature, he read a Chinese novel and Serbian poems alongside French and Italian authors, with enthusiasm for both. In this connection Goethe ultimately said to Eckermann on 31 January, "National literature doesn't mean much anymore; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must now work to hasten its arrival." *Weltliteratur* appears some twenty additional times in Goethe's late works, always with positive connotations. Because of this emphasis it can properly be considered Goethe's vocabulary, even if it has not escaped the minute observation of philologists that Wieland and August Wilhelm Schlegel preceded Goethe in invoking world literature. Only with Goethe's emphatic certification did the word begin its triumphal progress through the world.

Weltliteratur: how helpfully has this bold term influenced the history of literature? Is it helpful at all? Karl Marx answered this question in his fashion, in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). There, in a context that already reads like a critique of present-day globalization, he writes:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations. . . . In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature.[b]

In this passage we see how Karl Marx, with a prophetic linguistic gesture, regarded even the emergence of world literature as a significant step on the highway of world history, which would lead to world revolution in the foreseeable future.

Let us now consider, as an only limited contrast to Marx, the unimpeachable testimony of a man who admired Goethe greatly his entire life. I mean Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), the respected Romanist and historian of ideas who as a Jewish professor spent the blackest years of German history in Turkish exile. He is famous

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outside his specialty chiefly for his book *Mimesis*, in which he pursues in historical-critical terms the conditions under which various kinds of reality can become literature. Now, however, we will examine an essay that appeared in 1952 under the title "Philologie der Weltliteratur" [Philology of World Literature]. Here Auerbach directly refers to Goethe's position, with an undertone of serious concern. He begins thus:

> It is time to ask ourselves what meaning the term world literature, in Goethe's sense, may still have for the present and to the foreseeable future. Our earth, which is the world of world literature, is shrinking and losing its multiplicity. . . . For a thousand reasons known to all, the life of men across the whole planet is growing more uniform. The process of superimposition that started from Europe keeps spreading and is undermining all individual traditions. (301)[6]

Now that is, for Auerbach, a "very un-Goethean" perspective. From this, in his words, "so powerful, impetuously swift and poorly prepared process" it is to be feared, he thinks, "that on a uniformly organized earth soon only a single literary culture, indeed in a comparatively short time only a few literary languages, perhaps only one, will remain." And thereby—so Auerbach concludes his prospect on the future of our culture—"the idea of world literature would be simultaneously realized and destroyed."

With Karl Marx's and Erich Auerbach's clear-sighted formulations in mind, let us now approach the present epoch, as represented in a special topic in *PMLA* entitled "Globalizing Literary Studies" and devoted to globalization. In this 2001 publication we find an essay on this theme by the American literary critic Robert Eric Livingston, prefaced—ironically—by two epigraphs. The first we already know; it is, in English translation, Goethe's praise of world literature. The second comes from an advertising slogan for an American telecommunications company from the 31 January 1999 *New York Times*. It reads, "1,729 languages. 196 cultures. 143 religions. One phone." The advertisement in which the slogan appears leaves no doubt that more is at issue than a brand of telephone. Rather, it is taken as self-evident that communication with global relevance occurs in one language only: English. The contributions assembled in this issue of *PMLA* display the same assumption. They argue—fairly, to be sure—for and against globalization, but it seems beyond question for all authors, both "hyperglobalists" and their opponents, that the entire discourse of globalization is to be conducted in English. One need only inspect the bibliographic references cited in the contributions to this collection. Of a total of 687 titles cited, seven are in Spanish, five in French, two in Italian, and one each in Russian and German. All the remaining 671 titles are cited in English, including, as mentioned, the Goethe quotation on world literature. Hence, even among authors who remain comparatively skeptical about globalization, multilingualism has been for all intents and purposes abolished, and English appears as the quintessential language of globality—as Erich Auerbach foresaw half a century earlier.

With this observation, however, only part of the globalization problem has been described. Several other issues lie hidden in this terrain and must be brought separately to light. Particularly in the Anglo-American linguistic sphere, the literary aspects of globalization are intimately connected to the question of the canon. There have been vigorous battles over the canon since the seventies in the United States, with repercussions in other anglophone countries. The controversy, which was originally internal to the United States but soon encompassed the cultural life of the entire globe, turns on whether an alternative canon, able to unmask and invalidate all received judgments about literary quality as Eurocentric prejudices, should be erected in opposition to the "Western"—that is, heavily European—canon. Classical, European-oriented literature has since then been under a latent, often virulent suspicion and under pressure to

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justify itself in relation to a quite differently conceived countercanon that takes equal account of all continents (don't forget Africa). The advocates of the countercanon now collect literary documents from all over the world that articulate a final and definitive phase of decolonization. "The empire writes back" is their oft-quoted slogan. It derives from Salman Rushdie. The sentence cannot easily be translated into German (see Gunn 17). "Writing back" does not just mean writing in response, as one answers a letter by writing back. Rather, the verb *to write back* is modeled on *to strike back*, as a blow in response. It is to be understood in a militant and quasi-military sense as a kind of "vengeance with the pen." It implies a literary-cultural counteroffensive by the ex-colonial peripheries with the aim of shaming, at least in literary terms, the once politically and today still culturally dominant centers and of contesting their classic-canonic claims to legitimacy.

The wars over the canon were reignited to full blaze by Harold Bloom's much-discussed book *The Western Canon* (1994), a profession of unreserved belief in twenty-six named classics of the "Western"—that is, European-oriented—canon, with Shakespeare, "who invented us," at its head.[7] Nor is Goethe's name missing from this catalog of authors of the first rank. Nevertheless, it is striking that of the twenty-six canonical authors no fewer than thirteen, or exactly half, belong to the Anglo-American linguistic space. To be sure, it is of imposing magnitude on this planet and, as the globalization debate has proceeded, has come to be conceived as the global-canonic cultural space pure and simple. In all fairness, we can in fact register a noticeable increase, indeed a veritable explosion, of literary production in those parts of the world whose culture was shaped by the British Empire and that have therefore remained anglophone. I name, for instance—beginning with the predecessor Rabindranath Tagore (Bengal)—such authors as Derek Walcott (West Indies), Nadine Gordimer (South Africa), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Salman Rushdie (India), and V. S. Naipaul (Trinidad), many of whose works complement Bloom's canon if not in a "Western" sense then at least in a "Western language" one. In the above-mentioned issue of *PMLA* Paul Jay terms the authors in this group "cosmopolitan writers" and celebrates them as forerunners of a true world literature (33). Insofar as these authors come from former colonial territories, the evidence of their anglophone writing has permitted a persistent connection between the debate about the "Western canon" and the political-cultural discourse of postcolonialism; it is no longer easy to distinguish sharply between world literature and Western literature. Many Chamisso authors have experienced this in their own way, when—perhaps under the auspices of the Goethe Institute—they have been generously invited to American universities and then have immediately had to answer questions about how to situate their work within postcolonial discourse.

But now let us consider the conditions of globalization in an even more encompassing sense. The globalization of our lives is first off a matter of the economy and its technological underpinnings.[8] Commerce and industry can easily demonstrate on-screen the indisputable advantages of a worldwide economy, not only for capitalists but for the entire population, at least in the industrialized countries. The accuracy of this calculation will not be subjected to scrutiny here. I limit myself to the question of what consequences economic globalization has for language, literature, and culture. Notice first that globalization is only superficially a spatial concept. The first premise of global thinking is that today, through technical means, the spatial conditions of our planet (distances, impassable conditions, etc.) are conquerable without extraordinary efforts, so that space has been eliminated as a factor in the realm of media communications and, except for an admittedly irreducible remnant, in commerce, since almost all localities on the globe are now readily accessible (in the worst case, from the air).

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Consequently, the greatest barriers to globalization at present are not spatial thresholds but temporal ones, from biologically relevant time zones to historical thresholds. These last derive from the necessary coexistence on the earth's restricted space of many people and societies that live mentally in different centuries and now have to get along with one another globally, so to speak. So the concepts of center or core and periphery or diaspora, which have become so frequent in the discourse of globalization, must be understood primarily in a temporal sense. Centers, wherever they are found on the globe, are therefore dense networks with high rates of innovation; peripheries, by contrast, are recognizable from their attenuated networks and slow or very slow processes of change. In the superficial view of "global players," these temporal barriers are obscured, of course, by the ubiquitous and impressive simultaneity of telecommunications and are hence scarcely recognized as problems.

In literary culture, global temporal thresholds first become concrete as linguistic thresholds. Even in one's own language the development and conservation of a sophisticated literary language demand time-consuming care and attention. The temporal bar is raised substantially when a foreign language is to be acquired as a literary language. That project consumes years. And if all the linguistic prerequisites are to be successfully satisfied, then writing a book, even with the help of a personal computer, remains a slow and laborious business that takes as long today as in the days of Saint Augustine and the prophet Muḥammad. No literary production can keep step with the subsonic and supersonic speeds of air transport, let alone with the simultaneous translations of electronic media, regardless of whether it is printed in the old-fashioned way or scanned and placed on the Internet. With Thomas Mann, we may call this state the "objective dignity of deliberation."

But this dignity has its cost. All writers who lack the good fortune of having grown up in a genuinely anglophone or a postcolonially anglophone land know it. It is a given that they will have a hard time with world literature. If, for instance, they have been driven from central or eastern Europe to Germany, they must come to terms with German as a "subglobal" language, which of course drastically curtails their prospects for entry into world literature. And yet they are precisely the ones we particularly welcome as Chamisso authors, since their books spread "world" more than those of many indigenous authors. Or have they simply chosen wrong in settling on German for their literary language, far removed from English—the language of world literature—and its prevailing discourses? If I am not mistaken, all nonanglophone authors pay this price, in the hard currency of lived time, for the label *world literature*, and so too do all Chamisso authors.

Might not Goethe have hesitated to defend the cause of world literature so emphatically if he had foreseen that his generous support would lead to such counterproductive consequences at the hands of the globalists and hyperglobalists? Can we be sure that his *West-östlicher Divan*, if it had to win its place in the sun of globality today, would reach the promised land of world literature? And what other treasures from his pen would remain behind?

Under the rather "un-Goethean" conditions prevailing today in the global book and media markets, the question arises whether we present-day cosmopolitans have not perhaps had a false hint from Weimar in Goethe's championing of world literature. How can we cash in this Goethe coinage globally? What is at stake for humanists? Who wins from it, and who loses? And further: why do we need a world literature if the world finds expression in literature much better intensionally than extensionally? And so far as extension goes, why should it not suffice to have many different subglobal literatures on this planet, not so much divided as articulated by linguistic thresholds, overlapping only at the edges, so that their interesting correspondences and their even more interesting noncorrespondences

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are left initially to literary world travelers, professional comparatists, and resourceful scouts? Having all kinds of global plurality seems to me to produce, if not better world literature on this globe, then at least a better literature world, even if this world does not fit without remainder into economic calculations. So I set my hopes more than ever on books that are written, not necessarily against the world market, but at least at a tangent to the globalized marketplace, and in all events with dignity and with artfully prolonged reflection on the world.

Notes

[1] For more on Chamisso from the current perspective, see my essays "Chamissos Gedächtnis" and "Lieux et nonlieux."

[2] Kahane and Kahane. See also my essay "Deutsch."

[3] "[T]he terminological shift from *universal* to *global* . . ." (Livingston 153).

[4] Demandt 526–27. The Heine quotation appears in his "Lutetia," under the date 12 July 1842.

[5] The term *Weltliteratur* first appears in Goethe's writings in a diary entry of 15 January 1827. There is an extensive literature on this concept in Goethe, of which only a few citations will be given here: Strich; Schrimpf; Schaefer; *Weltliteratur*; Lange; Barry (with additional bibliography).

[6] See also Schmeling, Schmitz-Emans, and Walstra and the extensive review by Schulz-Buschhaus that furthers the discussion with respect to Auerbach.

[7] Bloom 40. For a European perspective critical of the canon, see Antonelli.

[8] For Immanuel Wallerstein, globalization is "an overwhelmingly economic phenomenon" (Jay 34).

Translators' Notes

[a] The German word is *Kolonialwaren*. Just as until the last century *groceries* referred chiefly to coffee, spices, tobacco, and other goods shipped by the gross from abroad, so *Kolonialwaren* has become the ordinary German word for groceries.

[b] Translation taken from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959) 10–11.

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